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***Attitudes to Reading and Writing  
and their Links with Social Mobility  
1914–2014  
An Evidence Review***

**Commissioned by *Booktrust***

**Final Report**

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## Executive Summary

This review has drawn on a range of literature, archive material, family interviews and data gathered using social media to explore attitudes to reading and writing and their links with social mobility from 1914 to the present day. It identifies the many ways in which families read for pleasure and identifies ways in which Booktrust's activity might be developed.

### The review covers:

- Changing conceptions of literacy in the UK from 1914 to the present day
- The impact of reading and writing on social mobility during this period
- Ways in which the teaching of literacy has changed in the last hundred years
- The impact of changes in society and of digital technologies on reading and writing
- The experiences of men and women around reading and writing, and the impact of gender influences on social mobility
- Issues of inclusion, and new arrivals<sup>1</sup> to the UK in relation to literacy

### The review concludes that

- Whilst there is little evidence to suggest a direct link between positive attitudes towards literacy and social mobility, there are strong indicators of the importance of reading, writing and 'literacy' in contributing to positive social mobility.
- We need to understand the need for social change and how educational intervention can support this.
- Research strongly indicates that social class is one of the greatest predictors of academic achievement – and it remains very difficult to move from one social bracket into another.
- There is significant evidence that some people are less included in schools and society as a whole, particularly when their home language is perceived as low status and when they are economically disadvantaged.
- We must continue to understand and challenge social conventions that prevent individuals from accessing social mobility on the grounds of gender.
- Reading and writing are essential to achievement, yet literacy alone is not, and cannot be, responsible for social change.

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<sup>1</sup> 'New arrivals' is the current generic term applying to those people coming into the UK to live for a variety of reasons, including asylum seekers, refugees, economic migrants, and new EU citizens.

- Research has shown how families can support their children at home; this needs to be further embedded in practice in order that more parents can help their children to enhance their literacy and their socio-cultural capital.
- The early years are crucial in fostering a love of reading for enjoyment, which runs in parallel with eagerness to learn to read and *self-confidence* in the *ability* to read from an early age.
- As we move further into the 21st century there is an urgent need not only to *recognise* the impact of digital technology, but to actively strive to understand how advancement in media and electronic text are changing constructions of literacy, text and notions of what it means to read and write today, and in the future.

### **The review highlights the following:**

- Reading and writing are now part of wider 'literacy' practices incorporating digital technologies unheard of in 1914.
- Being able to read and write puts individuals in a position where they are more likely to be included in communities and society more widely. Those new to communities, with different literacy practices and different languages, can experience exclusion and social injustices.
- Being a reader does not in itself carry a promise of greater positive social mobility, yet it seems that, without a capacity to read and write and engage in literacy practices necessary to understand and challenge power, social mobility is less likely.
- The home and family are crucial in the development of reading and writing, particularly in terms of reading for pleasure. Whilst we found no direct correlation between parents' reading practices and the literacy of their children, it seems to be the case that reading for pleasure 'rubs off' in the home.
- Whilst boys' achievement in literacy has been a concern in recent times, for most of the period under study it has been women's opportunities to learn to read and write that should give most cause for concern. Whilst working to promote positive attitudes in boys towards reading for pleasure, girls' and women's reading and writing should not be neglected in the future.
- Clear links are identified between success in employment choice and reading and writing abilities, and limited ability to read and write remains a concern of employers and government to this day.
- Whilst governments have focused primarily on children's literacy and the teaching of reading and writing (and later 'literacy') in schools, there remains a need for adult literacy education initiatives to support those adults who do not succeed in schools.
- Oral cultures as they relate to reading and writing have a crucial place. 'Literacy' is socially constructed and we must remember that issues of

'illiteracy' and social difficulty need to be considered in relation to when and where they occur.

- Different 'modes' of expression have always been used for reading and writing, and new technologies have increased the 'modes' and possibilities available.
- Some adults still struggle with literacy, although significantly fewer than in 1914. While this review has mainly focused on the relationships between positive attitudes to literacy and social mobility, it is important to also be aware that negative attitudes to or experiences of literacy can inhibit life choices.

**We make the following recommendations to Booktrust:**

- It will be important for Booktrust to continue to consider how new arrivals in the UK who bring different languages and literacy practices to communities can be included in a socially just society. Additionally, Booktrust's work should seek new ways to work within communities where many languages are spoken.
- Without doubt, families can support early reading development. Booktrust has had success in involving parents in reading for pleasure with their children. It may wish to consider reviewing its current programmes as a whole to identify and highlight successful approaches to enhancing home engagement in literacy.
- New technologies are now strongly impacting on, and shaping, literacy practices for all ages. In the future, Booktrust may wish to consider the development of story 'apps' to maximise the availability of technology in terms of reading for pleasure using smart phones, tablets and laptop technologies.
- Stereotypical constructions of women and men in books and magazines have had an impact on opportunities for social mobility. This suggests a continued need to encourage skills of critical engagement with literature in order to challenge accepted discourses and social conventions.
- Given the connections between academic success and social mobility, it would appear that, although there is no explicitly identifiable linkage between the social mobility of new arrivals to the UK and their literacy, the combination of multiple factors (undervalued home language, low economic status, lack of strength in the community) can lead to underachievement. Booktrust may wish to consider further how its programmes reach into communities with records of low social mobility.

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# 1. Introduction

The year 2014 marks the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War One, and sees the digitization by the National Archives of writings from the time.<sup>2</sup> In addition, diaries, wills and letters from some 230,000 British soldiers describing life on the frontline have now been digitized.<sup>3</sup> The personal handwritten notes from the trenches a hundred years ago will be publicly available to browse through digital technologies which did not exist in 1914. The move from reading and writing of such personal texts using pen and paper to new digital technologies of communication is clearly seen in the digitization of these century-old writings, a shift which spans the time frame of this evidence review.

The review aims to inform the wider work of Booktrust through a historical consideration of the dynamic relationship between attitudes to reading and writing, on the one hand, and social mobility, on the other. Focusing on England and UK perspectives, we consider the lived realities of trends and habits in reading and writing from the beginning of the period to the present day, including their shifting nature as the use of text has expanded to include digital technologies and new multimodal literacy practices (Kress 2010). We have drawn upon a range of primary and secondary historical sources, complemented by a small empirical study of our own involving interviews and data obtained through social media, to learn from and feature the voices of stakeholders past and present. Everyone, it can be argued, has a stake in literacy (such as economists, anthropologists, educationalists, politicians, employers), so we have had to delimit the extent of our review.

We seek here to tell a story or, rather, a number of stories about how reading and writing have evolved into 'literacy', and how communication using written text has evolved over time, highlighting shifting attitudes to reading and writing and their impact on social mobility. It is important to root the changes we see around us today with regard to what it is to read and write, and the tools and technologies we use to do so, in a historical perspective on literacy. Such developments will undoubtedly continue into the future as changing uses of the different modes and their functions become more embedded in everyday literacy and communication practices in the context of wider socio-cultural change.

We are also mindful of the importance of oral expression to the development of human communication and the inseparable nature of 'speech' with 'reading' and 'writing', and with this the types of 'capital' associated with literacy. The purpose of reading, for example – for pleasure, for learning and for other social practices – has a bearing on the cultural capital associated with it. Likewise a text, such as a book, a comic, a newspaper, or a website, is associated with a sense of 'taste', 'class' or 'worth'.

This review meanders back and forth to consider how attitudes to reading and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-subject/firstworldwar.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-war-heroes-wills-released>

writing impact on people's lives.

## 1.1 Aims

The three key aims of this report are:

- i. to review existing evidence about attitudes to reading and writing over the last hundred years, drawing links with evidence about socio-economic status so as to present a historically based argument about the relationship between reading/writing (and eventually 'literacy') and social mobility.*
- ii. to explore the role of the family in the development of attitudes towards literacy.*
- iii. to locate the review in the context of Booktrust's ethos and record of achievement, and so anticipate ways in which these may be maximised in future activity.*

## 1.2 Objectives

To meet these aims, this report has two complementary elements:

- i. A study of the evidence of literacy, socio-economic status and social mobility in the last hundred years** (including articles, policy reports, archival data and secondary analysis of existing data sets)
- ii. An empirical enquiry into literacy learning across generations of families** (comprising intergenerational and life history interviews, and evidence gathered through social media).

## 1.3 Research questions

This study was guided by six inter-related research questions:

- i. How have conceptions of literacy in the UK changed during the last century?
- ii. How has literacy impacted on social mobility over the last hundred years?
- iii. To what extent has the teaching of literacy shifted between home and school over the last hundred years?
- iv. What have been the impacts of societal and technological changes on literacy?
- v. To what extent has literacy influenced social mobility in relation to gender?
- vi. How has literacy impacted on the social mobility of new arrivals to England in the last hundred years?



## 1.4 Working definitions of key terms

Before we set out how we approached the review and the methodology for the study, we should define some key terms. Here we briefly set out what we mean by literacy (marking the move in the last century from 'reading' and 'writing' to 'literacy'). We include in this a brief discussion of 'family literacy', 'digital literacy' and 'multimodality' because family literacy practices are a central concern of this review and in recent times digital technologies have greatly influenced these practices. We end this introductory section with an overview of what we understand by the term 'social mobility'.

### 1.4.1 Literacy, family literacy, digital literacy and multimodality

According to UNESCO, few would argue that literacy is unimportant:

*A good quality basic education equips pupils with literacy skills for life and further learning; literate parents are more likely to send their children to school; literate people are better able to access continuing education opportunities; and literate societies are better geared to meet pressing development challenges. (2006: 5)*

For the purposes of this report we adopt UNESCO's (2006) definition of literacy as the '*ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts*'. Such an understanding comprehends early twentieth-century practices as well as twenty-first century ones. UNESCO's helpful five-point definition of literacy reaches into many elements of this review. It defines *literacy as*

- *a right still denied to nearly a fifth of the world's adult population*
- *essential to achieving each of the Education For All goals*
- *a societal and an individual phenomenon, with attention needed to both dimensions*
- *crucial for economic, social and political participation and development, especially in today's knowledge societies*
- *key to enhancing human capabilities, with wide-ranging benefits including critical thinking, improved health and family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, children's education, poverty reduction and active citizenship. (2006: 17)*

UNESCO's additional observation that '*literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society*' is a distinctly modern conception and one which requires us to examine emerging philosophies and purposes of education more broadly. For Hannon,

*Literacy is the ability to use written language to derive and convey meaning. In the teaching of literacy one generation equips the next with a powerful cultural tool. Written language enables members of a culture to*

*communicate without meeting: to express and explore their experience; to store information, ideas and knowledge; to extend their memory and thinking. (1995: 27)*

Most importantly, this conception reaches to the heart of attitudes to reading and writing. Beyond these definitions, which include levels of literacy skill which enable people to function in their personal and working lives, we also attach the idea of literacy as social practice (Barton and Hamilton 1998).

Literacy practices shape the way we relate to and interact with the written word and are interwoven with our identity and practices. A key interest of this review is the way they impact on *quality of life* since a person has more pleasure if there are no barriers to choice and access to reading material.

### *Family literacy*

Hannon et al. (2005) stress the importance of family literacy that *acknowledges and makes use of learners' family relationships and engagement in family literacy practices*. Wasik and Van Horn put it like this:

*The intergenerational transfer of literacy has intrigued educators, researchers and policy makers. And served as a fundamental rationale for family literacy programmes. Children who come into the world without language learn one of thousands of languages, depending upon the family into which they are born. Not only does the family determine the child's early language, but a family's culture, beliefs, and traditions also influence the way children use words for discourse (Heath 1983). Their family's literacy levels also influence whether children develop strong language skills and literacy at home, having many print materials available and modelling the use of reading, writing and math in daily life. (2012: 3)*

Family literacy intervention has been advocated as a means of reducing inequalities in children's literacy development at school entry. Our own understanding of family literacy, however, embraces the *everyday literacy events* that take place (some unselfconsciously) in families as well as the systematic and usually funded programmes specifically designed to support and maximise those literacy practices. We know that family literacy can make a difference to attitudes and achievement in literacy (Nutbrown et al. 2005; Brooks et al. 2012).

Aside from family literacy *programmes* which recognise the family dimension in individuals' learning, *literacy practices within families* are also key in children's developing awareness and enjoyment of reading and writing. Taylor (1983) appears to have been the first to use the term 'family literacy' in the United States where she showed how young children's early literacy practices were shaped by parents' and other family members' uses of written language. Many studies have sought to understand existing family literacy practices across different social classes and ethnic groups within society. These constitute a rich archive of the variety of language and literacy practices in families (Heath 1983; Teale 1986; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines 1988; Hannon and James 1990; Baker et al. 1994;

Moss 1994; Purcell-Gates 1995; McNaughton 1995; Voss 1996; Weinberger 1996; Gregory 1996; Cairney and Ruge 1998; Barton and Hamilton 1998; Hirst 1998).

In this review we consider evidence of family involvement and encouragement of children's literacy and instances of shared experiences of intergenerational family literacy. These have ranged from collective family reading of the Bible (in the earliest part of the period under study) to more recent examples which include shared searching for information and game-playing on the internet.

### *Digital literacy and multimodality*

All forms of communication are multimodal, including oral communication, written, and digital (Finnegan 2002). Whilst fast-developing technologies have led to a particular emphasis on multimodal practices, written communication has long been multimodal, such as in its use of graphic, spatial and pictorial elements, the typographical conventions of verse and prose, and in the material dimension to written communications and the differences between them as objects (Finnegan 2002).

Developments in digital technologies have influenced literacy practices and, with that, led to changes in multimodal communication practices. Bazerman (2004) asserts that '*literacy has always developed hand in hand with the technologies*', and the present technology explosion is having a clear impact on literacy in the home and in society more widely.

#### 1.4.2 Social mobility

In a recent speech focusing on '*Living standards, working poverty and social mobility*',<sup>4</sup> Labour MP and former Secretary of State for Health (1999–2003), Alan Milburn, said:

*It is part of Britain's DNA that everyone should have a fair chance in life. Yet too often demography is destiny in our country. Being born poor often leads to a lifetime of poverty. Poor schools ease people into poor jobs. Disadvantage and advantage cascade down the generations. Over decades we have become a wealthier society but we have struggled to become a fairer one.*

Articulating what is commonly understood to be meant by the term 'social mobility', he continued:

*The global financial crisis has brought these concerns to the fore. In its wake a new public consensus has begun to emerge that unearned wealth for a few at the top, growing insecurity for many in the middle, and stalled life chances for those at the bottom is not a viable social proposition for Britain. As birth not worth has become more a determinant of life chances,*

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Milburn, Speech to the Resolution Foundation, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/living-standards-working-poverty-and-social-mobility>

*higher social mobility – reducing the extent to which a person’s class or income is dependent on the class or income of their parents – has become the new holy grail of public policy...*

*The extent to which social mobility is facilitated through national policies (of education, health, employment, and so on) is dependent upon the values of government and whether upward social mobility is seen as an issue for individuals or for the state. Until recent years Social Mobility would have meant moving towards betterment of one form or another in society, however, in recent times and due to the global economic downturn, social mobility can now mean moving from a ‘good’ position to a less favourable socio economic position – regardless of one’s literateness or profession.*

According to Gee (2004), language practices in the home are not principally concerned with skills but rather to provide the child with values, attitudes, motivations, ways of interacting, and perspectives, all of which construct the primary identity that a child picks up through early socialization. So, a child becomes ‘*a person like us*’ (Gee 2004: 23), in other words a member of a particular family belonging to a particular social group. Gee (2004) further explains that ‘*people like us*’ do and value ‘*things like this*’ which involves specific types of language. This has important implications for advocates of social mobility, in that the notion that ‘*people like us*’ do and value ‘*things like this*’ can mean that for some children the ‘*things they do*’ are extensive and wide ranging; for others they are limited due to reasons of poverty, ill-health and social capital. The challenge, then, is how to provide opportunities for children to develop ‘*values, attitudes, motivations and ways of interacting and perspectives*’ which lead ultimately to enhanced life chances.

Having set out the definitions of key terms that recur throughout this review, we will now turn to the methodological approaches that we developed.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Scoping of the study and approaches to identifying and reviewing evidence

This report has two complementary elements: one theoretical and one empirical. The empirical dimension was designed to generate original data against which the theoretical element could be interrogated and exemplified. Thus the first part of the study is complemented by a small empirical enquiry, conducted through intergenerational and life history interviews and questions posed via social media. The focus was on literacy learning across generations of families, and especially the relationship between attitudes to literacy and social mobility. We have drawn on both elements of the study to fulfil our stated aims and objectives and answer the six research questions.

#### 2.1.1 Defining the limits of the review

This project called for a historiography of literacy for, whilst current meanings and practices of literacy are readily understood, the methodologies which have been used to define them – and the pedagogies which have been thus generated – have changed radically since the emergence of ‘Enlightenment’ values. A starting-point for us is therefore that literacy and social mobility are of necessity co-implicated in the development of a political economy of literacy that inevitably drew on notions of social justice and of the distribution of wealth. Christine Lagarde, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, spoke in February 2014 of *income inequality*:

*Demographics and degradation of the environment are two major long-term trends—disparity of income is the third. This is really an old issue that has come to the fore once again. We are all keenly aware that income inequality has been rising in most countries. Seven out of ten people in the world today live in countries where inequality has increased over the past three decades. (Lagarde 2014)*

Lagarde argues that, because of the establishment of the UN World Bank in 1944,

*We have seen unprecedented economic and financial stability over the past seven decades. We have seen diseases eradicated, conflict diminished, child mortality reduced, life expectancy increased, and hundreds of millions lifted out of poverty.*

Her argument is that, as more people prosper, ‘*they will demand higher living standards, greater freedom, dignity, and justice*’. Lagarde asks ‘*Why should they settle for less?*’

The connection between social mobility and economic prosperity has to be acknowledged. Our focus on reading and writing has to be situated in a socio-political context where other factors are at play and they too will have an impact on individual lives and circumstances.

### 2.1.2 Sources of data

A key focus in this report is *attitudes* to reading and writing, and we have drawn on two main sources of data: first, the scholarship and policy literature, and second, accounts of individuals' and families' lives.

#### *The literature*

Our sources of literature included:

- A systematic search of the academic and 'grey' literature on reading, writing, attitudes and social mobility
- Legislation and other policy documentation.

Whilst there appears at present to be very little existing material in the precise context of *attitudes* to literacy, some data has usefully been imported from studies of attitudes to students with learning difficulties (Clough and Lindsay 1991), aspects of migrant educational performance (Coard 1971), and lower achievement in reading of pupils living in poorer circumstances (Jerrim 2013). Although some policy documents do not directly yield insight into *constructions* of literacy, cultural and other documentation show the values and priorities which lie behind the particular formulation of a policy within a specific socio-political context. An explicitly literacy-related example is the work of the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (1987) and related organisations. Older examples are no less obvious: the 1944 Education Act, for example (McCullough 1997), or the raising of the school-leaving age from 13 in 1880 to 18 by 2015. Indeed, several major pieces of social and educational policy-making contain more or less embedded conceptions of literacy, social justice and social mobility.

#### *Accounts of reading in the lives of individuals and families*

Life history methodology brings together biography and sociology (Bertaux 1999) so that individual lives can be both richly expressed and critically located within specific socio-political contexts (Goodson and Sikes 2001). We have drawn on three sources containing accounts of reading in individual lives, past and present:

- The accounts of contributors to the **Mass Observation Archive** which include attempts to capture views of reading for pleasure and attitudes to home reading
- **Intergenerational family interviews** which have enabled us to illustrate uses of, and attitudes to, literacy as insights into the times
- Responses to **questions posted on the social networking** website Facebook about reading for pleasure.

These last two have enabled the creation of new contemporary accounts which sit alongside the historical perspectives from the Mass Observation Archive accounts.



### *Mass Observation Archive (MOA) data*

Mass Observation was a social survey begun in 1937 by Tom Harrisson, Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings as a result of their mutual interest in documenting the everyday life of ordinary people in Britain. Information was gathered through a national panel of volunteers who kept diaries of their own lives and responded to Mass Observation questionnaires, known as 'directives', on particular topics. There were also paid investigators who wrote down their observations on specific aspects of everyday life and interviewed members of the public.

The original project ran from 1937 to the early 1950s, the resulting archive of materials coming to the University of Sussex in 1970. Eleven years later, a new panel of volunteer correspondents was established. This second phase of Mass Observation continues to the present day, with around five hundred correspondents currently taking part. They contribute information to the archive in response to directives consisting of open-ended questions on two or three themes, including topical ones, sent out by post or email three times a year.

The methods of Mass Observation thus rely on reading and writing, often, though not always, in a very private context. Since the identity of correspondents is protected, they are able to express their views openly and to include highly personal information.

Others before us have used this data to study literacy (e.g. Sheridan, Street and Bloome 2000). Research for this review focused on the data collected from 1981 onwards as the data contributed included coverage of attitudes to literacy from the early twentieth century to the present day. Our approach was to sample the data from a range of directives with relevance to the themes emerging in the review. These included 'Viewing and Reading' (Spring 1983), 'Growing up' (Spring 1993), 'Mothers and Literacy in the Early 1900s' (Autumn/Winter 1995), 'The Public Library' (Summer 1999), 'Childhood Reading: Comics and Magazines' (Autumn 2003), and 'School, Teachers and Pupils' (Summer 2012). We found a wealth of information, including many accounts of reading for pleasure and of the impact reading and writing has had on family life and wellbeing.

The directives on which we have drawn here are noted at the end of this report together with a thumbnail biographical sketch of the correspondents from whom we have quoted.

Excerpts from MOA correspondents are highlighted in green text, and are attributed to the correspondent's MOA number.

### *Intergenerational family interviews*

Within the limitations of the study we sought to interview families from a range of backgrounds and heritages. Families were located in different parts of England from the South West to West Yorkshire. We have used the interviews later in the report to develop 'rich' illustrations of the historical family literacy/social mobility

interface, including discussion of literacy at home (for example, reading together), writing to distant family members, the use of new technologies in literacy practices, and first/second language issues faced by family members. We carried out nine intergenerational family interviews which were rich and illuminating, providing interesting accounts of attitudes towards reading for pleasure at home.

To preserve anonymity we do not use family names in this report and only use first names of participants where specific permission was given. In some cases we have used pseudonyms. We introduce the families here so as to give a sense of the range of those interviewed in terms of backgrounds, experience and geographical location. They are not necessarily a representative sample, but their experiences serve to indicate how families enjoy reading and the influences across generations both of those whose older family members arrived in the UK at some point in their lives, and those who would regard themselves as indigenous.

*Family 1:* The interviewees were the grandmother and mother of a four-year-old girl who attends a privately run playgroup/nursery in an urban, multicultural setting in West Yorkshire. The grandmother emigrated with her parents to the UK from India at the age of seven, and remains more comfortable speaking Gujarati. The mother is the third of four daughters and is bilingual in English and Gujarati. Her daughter has an older sister aged seven and both girls prefer English to Gujarati. In both mother and daughter, seeing their older siblings reading appears to have had an impact on their own attitudes towards reading.

*Family 2:* The grandmother and mother were interviewed together. The grandmother came to the UK from India in 1965, aged five. Her parents, in turn, could not read or write in English and had limited literacy skills in Gujarati. The grandmother became a teacher and her daughter – the mother – received part of her education in India. Her son, aged three-and-a-half, attends a privately run nursery in an urban, multicultural setting in West Yorkshire. His grandmother only speaks Gujarati to him but his mother usually reads English-language books to him.

*Family 3:* We interviewed the mother only. She explained that English was the main language in her household, which included her parents and three sisters, although Urdu was also spoken. Her mother came from Pakistan as a girl. Similar to Family 1, watching older siblings read forms part of her experience, and she remembers reading at roughly age 3. Her three children are five, four and three years old, attend (or attended) a privately run nursery in an urban, multicultural setting in West Yorkshire. They regularly visit a library together. While she still reads to her three-year-old, she states that ‘the other two can read now’ so they read independently.



*Family 4:* We interviewed three generations, grandmother, mother and son (aged nearly three). The grandmother was born in the UK and explains that she grew up with English as a first language. She only started 'hanging out' with the Gujarati-speaking families at an older age. She explains that she is a voracious reader and originally got into reading to escape an unhappy marriage. Later, as a single mother of five children, the library was a regular place to go, as it was a cheap and convenient place to visit. She has five children and five grandchildren who have attended (or attend) playgroup in an urban, multicultural setting in West Yorkshire. She sees reading as a life skill which she has actively tried to pass on to her children and grandchildren, although she herself never had to read for work, as she got married straight out of school so did not go into paid employment. The son has an older, five-year-old brother, who is not particularly interested in reading.

*Family 5:* We interviewed a father 'Alan' who was unemployed due to disability. He, his partner and four children (a girl aged 13, and three boys aged 11, 8 and 4) all enjoy reading. They live in the Midlands. Estranged from his own parents, Alan is determined to make the most of enjoying his own children and spending time with them. Reading, he explained, is an important family activity which they all enjoy.

*Family 6:* We interviewed four women – sisters Janie (82) and Gracie (80), and Gracie's daughter, Mary (51), and Gracie's granddaughter, Alexia (22). They all live near each other in a market town on the south coast of England. Their interview told a story of movement across three generations, from the older women who left school at 14 and hated reading to the third generation who were the first to go to university and enjoyed all kinds of texts, including digital books.

*Family 7:* Esther is a single parent of Caribbean descent living on the outskirts of London. She works as a teacher and has two children, a son aged four and a daughter aged seven. Her own mother is also a teacher, having trained 'late' once her daughter had gone to school. They all participated in the interview and Ruth's father joined for a short while before leaving for work on the Underground.

*Family 8:* Archie (aged four), his mother and father, and his grandfather were interviewed via Skype. They lived in the far south of England where Archie attended a recently opened 'beach school' part-time and his father owned a fishing boat (following in his own father's footsteps).

*Family 9:* Jo is a woman in her early thirties. She and her older brother were adopted at a very young stage into a reading family. Jo is deaf, and has used a hearing aid all her life. Some of her reading experiences are the direct result of her hearing loss. Her

grandfathers were a bricklayer and travelling salesman respectively. Her parents did not go to university but her father trained as an architectural technician and remained in this profession all his life. Jo and her brother were the first in the family to go to university and Jo recently completed her PhD.

Extracts from the intergenerational family interviews are highlighted in red text.

### *Responses to questions concerning reading for pleasure, gathered through Facebook*

We augmented our interviews with data gathered by posting questions on the social media site Facebook. Two questions were posted to a potential readership of approximately 900 people, spanning the full range of socio-economic backgrounds, with an approximate gender split of 75% female, and ages ranging from 12-70+. These also yielded a range of interesting responses and further insights into reading in individuals' and families' lives. The questions were:

*Which book has had the most impact on your life – and why?  
What are your earliest memories related to reading?*

We received 21 responses to these, all from women aged from their late twenties to late forties.

The questions were followed up with a second round of questions in order to shed some recent light on issues identified in the literature review. We asked:

*Why do you read?  
Have your reasons for reading changed since you were a child?  
What were your reasons for reading then?*

We received 19 responses to these questions (2 from men and 17 from women, aged between early thirties and early fifties).

Extracts from these social media responses are highlighted in brown text.

### 2.1.2 Approach to analysis

Our analysis sought to discover attitudes *to*, and hence conceptions *of*, literacy and social mobility over the last hundred years or so, a period spanning two world wars, extensive expansion in state education, varying economic conditions, and significant changes to the population of England due to mobility across Europe, immigration, and the influx of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

In order to address our original aims and objectives we adopted a simple analytic framework, taken from a complex of overlapping and frequently cognate conceptions. The framework is organised around eight themes:

- i. Reading, writing and 'literacy'
- ii. Social justice and inclusion
- iii. Social mobility
- iv. The home and family
- v. Gender and literacy
- vi. Employment
- vii. Adult literacy initiatives
- viii. 'Illiteracy' and social difficulty

The two sources of data were analysed using these eight themes and then related to our aims, objectives and research questions.

### 3. Findings: Attitudes to reading and writing and links with social mobility 1914–2014

A key aim of this study was to review existing evidence about attitudes to reading and writing over the last century, drawing links with evidence about socio-economic status so as to present a historically based argument about the relationship between reading/writing (and eventually 'literacy') and social mobility. Within this, a further aim was specifically to explore the role of the family in the development of attitudes towards literacy.

There are many facets to this task, so we begin with a brief overview of developing attitudes to reading so as to give a broad historical policy context for the period and issues under discussion. Following this we set out findings from our review of existing evidence about attitudes to reading and writing over the last century, and the role of the family within this, based around the eight key themes identified above.

#### 3.1 Attitudes to reading: A brief overview

Learning to read and write has always been a key part of the UK education system. Major educational legislation since 1870 (the Forster Act) can variously be seen to support the development of reading and later 'literacy'. The Elementary Education Acts of 1880 and 1891, the Voluntary Schools Act of 1897, and the Balfour and Fisher Acts of 1902 and 1918, all had at their heart a desire that children should learn to read (and later write). Whilst these policies do not in themselves reveal the *attitudes*, which are the interest of this review, they do provide a general sketch of the context of literacy issues of modern mass compulsory education in the UK. Such acts disclose both the values and socio-economic priorities of their times, and thus point to the quotidian circumstances (of schooling, for example) which informed an attitude towards reading and writing ability in the UK. Little is said in these early Education Acts about reading for pleasure, and for some children it was a painful chore where failure was accompanied with physical punishment and shame.

The notion of literacy and 'being literate' has, throughout history, been laden with beliefs and values that do not appear to exist in other aspects of educational activity such as numeracy. For example, historian David Vincent notes:

*[Nineteenth-century] reformers and administrators bequeathed to historians a wealth of figures about what was held to be literacy, although ironically with very few about prevailing standards of numeracy. (2000: 5)*

Reading is often said to have the power to change lives, paralleled with a belief that individuals have a responsibility to *become* literate in order to benefit from this power. Clearly there is no single notion of 'literacy' or of 'being literate' and we remain conscious of the existence of multiple literacies throughout history and in the present day. 'Literacy' does not mean the same thing to everyone and varies across contexts. It is important to consider literacy in relation to access, attainment and social mobility, in terms of 'types' of literacy experiences, and in

terms of individual, societal and political conceptions of literacy in the formation of social advantage and disadvantage.

These are important yet relatively unexplored questions, yet such exploration focuses attention on *attitudes* towards literacy, rather than simply focusing on literacy attainment (as measured by tests and examinations). A wealth of literature highlights a strong correlation between *attitude* and *attainment* in reading (Cipielewski and Stanovich 1992; Cox and Guthrie 2001; Petscher 2010). For example, young people who report reading for enjoyment also do better in reading tests than their peers who do not enjoy reading (Blunsdon et al. 2003; OECD 2010). As Mullis et al. conclude:

*Research indicates that positive attitudes and high achievement in reading go hand in hand. That is, students who like reading have higher achievement, but the relationship is bidirectional, with attitudes and achievement mutually influencing each other. (2012: 203)*

The following contribution to the Mass Observation Archive illustrates a mother's attitude to literacy:

*When my brother was born in 1921, my mother suffered a severe illness, which necessitated her being hospitalised for over a year. I was sent to my father's family to be cared for and was never sent to school, so when my mother returned home I was eight years old and could not read or write...My mother was horror-struck! She quickly took me to school and explained the position to the headmistress...Within six months I was reading and what a treasure chest she opened up for me.' (B36, female)*

The contrast between reading for pleasure and learning to read at school (through a set reading scheme) was highlighted by our Facebook respondents. When we asked what people's earliest memories were of reading, the responses (all from self-proclaimed lovers of books) mainly focus on the process of enjoying books together. These 'happy' early readers tie their narratives to people, and the memories of reading connect with the memories of loved ones. The memories are multi-sensory, describing attributes of people as well as the stories themselves, focusing on the act of reading as a way of being together and enjoying together:

*[My earliest memories of reading are] Winnie the Pooh and The House at Pooh Corner. My father had a wonderfully deep voice and would read to me every night. I still own the book he read from. (Debs, mid forties)*

*My earliest memories are sitting with my Nanna and reading poetry books. One of the poems was called 'The clock upon the stairs'. By the time I started school I was already way ahead of the other children. I loved my Nan and I loved reading. (Karen, late thirties)*

*I have a lot of memories of sitting on my mum's knee and her reading to me, with me following the words with my finger. I also remember going to*

*the library in the afternoons after nursery which was always a huge treat!*  
(Sharon, early forties)

For these 'engaged' early readers, reading is very much a family pastime, not a chore or a tick-box exercise. Enjoying books together is a way of *being* together. In contrast, learning to read via reading schemes leaves much less of an impact:

*My earliest memories of reading were my reading scheme 'The Radiant Way' but I don't remember much about it - it was a means to an end.*  
(Jenny)

*Earliest memory was 'This is Janet, this is John' zzzz.* (Anna)

Even the language used in describing these more imposed and formulaic encounters with literature differs from the rich descriptions of family time – as Jenny says, '*a means to an end*'. Several respondents mentioned the *Janet and John* reading books, always dismissively, always as either a hoop to jump through, or as a stepping-stone towards what several people called 'proper' books.

One of the few male respondents to our Facebook questions was more outspoken:

*I remember being quite annoyed at having to read the Janet and John books. I didn't particularly enjoy them, but I wasn't allowed to read anything else until I'd been through all of the various boxes. And I couldn't move through the various boxes until I'd read them with the teacher, who of course had 30 children to read with. Very frustrating.* (John)

Levy's (2009) study provides strong evidence to suggest that the dominant use of reading schemes in schools today remains both frustrating and in fact detrimental for some children. Levy reports that results from her study suggest that reading schemes '*do little to promote enjoyment and meaningful engagement with texts, as most of the children... seemed to view the scheme as merely a vehicle to teach the mechanics of decoding skill*' (2009: 37). As the reading scheme was allowed to define children's status as a reader, this perception had particular consequences for the children who were struggling to progress through the scheme. As the children perceived that the purpose of the scheme was to attain the eventual goal of being 'on chapter books', many did not consider themselves to be 'readers' until this goal had been achieved. For this reason, the positioning of the stages within the scheme seemed to reinforce negative self-perceptions, as the scheme identified certain children to be 'non-readers'. Ladybird books, however, founded in 1867, have proved to be a much-loved part of the book collection of most readers.

To return to the Facebook data, when asked which book had the most impact on their lives, responses varied greatly in both the type of book and the time of life when readers encountered it. In some cases, it was the awareness of what a

book could be. One Facebook respondent recalled reading *Jennie* by Paul Gallico:

*I was 9 when I read it and it was the first novel I'd ever read. (Before that it was Ladybird books and Jackie annuals.) I remember being amazed by the vividness of the characters and settings. It spurred me to really leap into reading 'proper' books!*

In other cases, respondents were older, and the impact was of a different kind, particularly when readers recognised themselves in the characters, felt affirmation in some way, and recognised that, whatever their situation, they were not alone. Books cited as having an impact for the quality of their writing and/or their 'magic' include *Wuthering Heights*, *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, with the main 'impact' age range lying between early teens and early twenties.

What is worth remembering here is that all respondents were readers – they talk fondly of trips to the library, of buying and owning books, of reading together with parents from a young age. These readers were on the best possible path to find books that would speak to them. They had read extensively over years, enabling them to develop opinions on styles, authors, and genres. The pool of resources they could draw from was extensive. Similar to Wells' (1986) measurements of 'literacy events' (see section 3.2.3), these respondents had the quantity of literacy encounters to enable them to find a book that was truly special to them.

What is clear through reading through the responses from people who consider themselves to be readers is that they cannot imagine life any other way. Another Facebook respondent, John, explains what his personal life would be like without reading:

*And in terms of my personal life I'd be bereft. No more books, no more Twitter... I wouldn't know what to do. My daughter [8] and I have spoken about this and she sums it up nicely, I think. We were discussing a child we knew who hadn't yet learned to read and she said, 'But, but... what do they do?'*

Similarly to John's daughter, when Tom, who is six years old and already an avid reader, is asked what his life would be like without books, his answer comes quickly and unequivocally: '*Miserable!*' Catelyn, in answering the question '*why do you read?*' responds, '*Why do I breathe?*'

People might read for a variety of reasons, choosing a variety of books, but reading is a part of all of their lives to such an extent that a life without books is difficult for them to imagine. For them, books are part of the family fabric, and form a basis for communication and shared experience, as well as shared enjoyment. Books for some of our Facebook respondents also provide an opportunity to withdraw from the world and to inform themselves. Later in life, the cycle begins anew.



These examples show the important and deep pleasure of reading, by choice, at home and sharing that experience with other family members. In a national context where the focus in school literacy is primarily on raising achievement, this report attempts to understand the relationship between *attitudes towards reading and writing* and the extent to which these attitudes have had an impact on social mobility over the past century, and in particular the role of the family in developing positive attitudes to literacy. We now turn to exploring how definitions of literacy have evolved over time in order to provide a sense of the changing context over the time span covered in this report as a whole.

## 3.2 Key themes

### 3.2.1 Reading, writing and 'literacy'

The idea of 'literacy' can at first appear to be a relatively straightforward concept; it is commonly defined as 'the ability to read and write'. This sort of simple definition is widely accepted in the current English education system and much of modern society. Yet, even if we hold off from considering present-day constructions of literacy, which acknowledge the role of technological and digital advancement (Merchant 2007; Lankshear and Knobel 2003), it would be naïve to complete this review with the assumption that literacy can be viewed as simply 'the reading and writing of language'.

Scholars continue to debate the extent to which consideration of oral expression should contribute towards a definition of literacy. For example, Eric Havelock (1976) makes a strong argument that as human beings have used speech for far longer than the graphics of alphabetic literacy, oracy should take precedence within any definition:

*The biological-historical fact is that homo sapiens is a species which uses oral speech manufactured by the mouth, to communicate. This is his definition. He is not, by definition, a reader or a writer...The habit of using written symbols to represent such speech is just a useful trick which has existed over too short a time to have been built into our genes. (Havelock 1976: 12)*

Galbraith (1997) argues that history teaches human beings to be cautious about making such distinctions because as recently as in late nineteenth century Britain *'there was no clean break between orality and literacy, but instead a mix of the two within individual life cycles and in families and communities'* (Galbraith 1997: 3). The link between orality and literacy is clearly discernible from our social media responses, where self-proclaimed 'keen readers' describe the enjoyment they gained from reading together. One Facebook respondent, now herself a mother, is keen to carry on the tradition she grew up with:

*Now I read aloud to my daughter more than reading quietly to myself...because it's helping her language development (her vocabulary at 22 months is ENORMOUS), it's fun to put on different voices and vary my delivery for dramatic effect (I've always had a yearning to perform), and because she's absolutely addicted to books and constantly clamours to be*



*read to. I don't have much time to read \*for me\* these days, but I take such joy in her developing love of books. (Kate, mid thirties)*

Kate, above, is very much aware of the advantages reading will give her daughter, but in describing their reading together, it becomes obvious that she enjoys it just as much as her daughter does, and the importance of talking and reading is clear.

Vincent notes that, by the late nineteenth century, the pace of change in literacy had picked up throughout Europe, giving an example of the reciprocity of reading and writing exchanges between family members:

*As Europe prepared for war, most of the potential combatants had ensured that their recruits would be able to read the instructions on their weapons and write back to their families. (2000: 10)*

Likewise, in other cultures writing is not related to the oral but rather the visual mode (Yamada-Rice 2013). Therefore, it is important to be aware that systems of reading and writing may vary around the world, and this carries implications for understanding home literacies in the multicultural context of the UK today.

There is a danger of creating an 'oral-literate' binary here, whereas UNESCO states:

*Earlier notions of a 'great divide' between oral and literate societies have given way to the concept of a 'continuum' of communication modes in different societies and an ongoing dynamic interaction between various media (Finnegan 1988). Within a single society, a variety of modes of 'orality' and 'literacy' exist. Even the practices of individuals in their use of these modes may vary from situation to situation. (2006: 149)*

In a close examination of the historical development of literacy, Graff asserts his growing belief that literacy is '*profoundly misunderstood*' (1987: 17). He argues that many discussions about literacy flounder because '*they slight any effort to formulate consistent and realistic definitions of literacy, have little appreciation of the conceptual complications that the subject of literacy presents, and ignore – often grossly – the vital role of socio-historical context*' (1987: 17).

Thus, we need to remain mindful of the complexities of definition and of their relation to lived realities. Our exploration of the connections between attitudes towards literacy and social mobility over the last century or so highlights the need to recognise from the outset that terms such as 'literacy', 'orality', 'reading' and 'writing' must be viewed from the perspective of the social, political and economic context across time and space. This is not easy to conceptualise but is essential if we are to understand the issues at the heart of this study. Graff clarifies the need to reconstruct the contexts of literacy, including

*how, when, where, why and to whom literacy was transmitted; the meanings that were assigned to it; the uses to which it was put; the demands placed on literate abilities; the degrees to which those demands*

*were met; the changing extent of social restrictedness in the distribution and diffusion of literacy; and the real and symbolic differences that emanated from the social condition of literacy among the population.*  
(1987: 23)

This suggests that it is not realistic, or even desirable to approach our review with a single, undisputed and accepted definition of the term *literacy*; rather, one of the objectives for this study is to explore how definitions of literacy have been conceptualised and developed during this period in history. In turn this will help us to understand how attitudes towards literacy have related to social structures, access to power and social mobility.

It is important to acknowledge two related assumptions that impact upon the ways in which literacy has been perceived and defined. **Firstly, that concepts of literacy acquisition are often regarded as synonymous with concepts of education and schooling.** Etymologically there is a link between literacy in the sense of being 'lettered'/able to read and write, and having access to education through 'literature', and hence being 'literate' in the broader sense of 'learned'. This neatly illustrates the cultural capital long associated with the written text in our own culture.

Olsen (1975: 149) argues that the '*currency of schools is words*' and that schools are themselves '*shaped up for the requirements of literacy*'. Olsen goes on to state that literate people, such as educators, tend to place an unrealistic value on the role of literacy in society, stating that literacy '*is overvalued because of the very structure of formal schooling*' (149). Olsen is here suggesting that it is a mistake to assume that the '*values and pleasure*' of literacy are so great that all individuals will want to at least seek a high level of literacy through the medium of education. For Graff (1987: 18) this misconception is further recognised by Elasser and John-Steiner (1997: 361) who speak of the widely held belief that '*education in and of itself can transform both people's sense of power and the existing social and economic hierarchies*'. They go on to claim, however, that this view is naïve because '*educational intervention without social change is, in fact, ineffective*'.

All this goes to say that much of the more recent literature on literacy, and the acquisition of literacy as a skill, assumes that being literate is almost the same as being educated. **A second assumption is that the literacy skills acquired through education are in themselves agents of change.** This is in part due to the fact that over the years literacy levels have been measured by formal assessments such as '*Scholastic Aptitude Tests, undergraduate composition abilities, Armed Forces Qualifying tests, and random written or textual evidence*' (Graff 1987: 18). Graff goes on to argue that such measures say little about how people *actually* read and write and are therefore a poor source from which to create definitions and draw conclusions about literacy. Similarly Nutbrown (1997) demonstrated the inadequacy of measures of early literacy development as they related to the everyday print experiences of three-to-five-year-old children.

Graff cautions against the temptation to assign '*consequences*', '*implications*' or '*concomitants*' to the acquisition of literacy, arguing that literacy in itself is simply

*'a learned or acquired skill'* and must therefore be viewed as a *'basis or foundation'* rather than *'an end or conclusion'* in its own right (1987: 19). Likewise Nutbrown (1997) argues that it is important to understand the purposes of assessment before measures are used for a range of purposes for which they were not designed. Graff recognises that what follows from a *foundation* is possibly of greater concern whilst Nutbrown argues that understanding the literacy capabilities of young children should be the basis for future development in a social context, namely the home: *'literacy processes and outcomes cannot be divorced from the range of social contexts in which they occur'* (1997: 27). Our review is less concerned with documenting how *abilities* in reading and writing have led to social movement, but rather with understanding how *attitudes* towards reading and writing have impacted on people's lives.

Having identified and discussed the emergence over time of written communication practices from 'reading' and 'writing' to 'literacy' in all its forms, we now consider these issues as they relate to social justice and inclusion.

### 3.2.2 Social justice and inclusion

Whilst there is something of a taken-for-granted view that improved levels of literacy will inevitably lead to greater social mobility, thus strengthening social justice and extending inclusion within education and society, some recent commentators have taken issue with this truism. Perhaps because of the current depressed economy in England and its subsequent effect on employment, some recent studies have identified *reduced* impact of education on social mobility (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007; Savage and Tampubolon 2006). Brockliss and Sheldon (2012) argue from their wide-scale international survey that, with the exception of the US, greater social mobility is *not* a motive for mass education, because 'élite' and 'state' education remain separate.

Interestingly, studies using the British birth cohort studies of 1958 and 1970 focusing on intergenerational class mobility do not reveal a decline in mobility rates (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010: 211). However, it is argued that social mobility is

*constituted by processes, shared by many peoples and communities across the world today, that involve sometimes significant shifts in individuals' spatial and social locations. Behind this search can be found a multiplicity of aims and aspirations: improved livelihood choices, economic stability or prosperity, enhanced social status, or security from political turmoil, to name a few.* (Froerer and Portisch 2012: 333)

For all this, there remains a hegemonic if uncritical view of the good of social mobility. In 2005, the then Secretary of State for Education Ruth Kelly suggested that social mobility was central to a 'just society', one where 'success' depends not on individuals' backgrounds but on 'their ability and efforts'. She declared her role as being to secure an education system which could 'boost mobility' (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007: 526), and implicit in this is a policy direction towards a just society. Most recently the current Secretary of State for Education

Michael Gove has presided over a review of the National Curriculum in a bid to raise standards and increased educational achievement including standards of literacy – to increase likelihood of employability. The extent to which such a policy direction will make for greater *inclusion* in education and in society is yet to be seen.

There is a fruitful educational tradition of *literacy and empowerment*. Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996) addresses who and what education is for, and whose group interests are promoted. He argues that traditional pedagogical practice is a means to 'fill' the learners with information and knowledge that serves to maintain the *status quo* of structural inequalities and unjust hierarchies of power. Educationalists have developed this approach (Giroux 1997; Lankshear and McClaren 1992; Lankshear 1993; Shor 1992, 1993; Duckworth 2013), challenging prescriptive approaches to curriculum design which do not take into account the history or background and needs of learners. These non-critical curricula place dominance on an instrumental approach, ignoring the political, social, and economic factors that have conspired to marginalise the learners and the communities they live in.

Freire (2006) proposed 'culture circles', discussion groups in which educators and learners engage in dialectic engagement for consciousness-raising, liberation, empowerment and transformation. *Education for liberation* provides a forum open to the empowerment of learners, teachers, and the community, while also providing opportunities for the development of those skills and competencies necessary to achieve social justice and equality, without which empowerment would be impossible. Duckworth (2013) shows how literacy is historically located and socially embedded in relations of power which challenge traditional models of symbolic domination that serve to legitimise and reproduce structural inequalities.

Whilst social justice and inclusion were not mentioned explicitly in the data gathered via Facebook, some responses showed how books opened a way to understand 'how the other half lives', and/or to explore different realities and learn from them. Asked about which books had influenced her, Hattie said:

*To Kill a Mocking Bird 'O' level read, It impressed upon me to get in someone's shoes and walk around in them. I know it's a bit of a cliché but it's true. (Hattie)*

She continued:

*Earliest memories of reading is being in my parents bed and ill, reading The Famous Five, which taught me things were much more exciting for children who didn't live in a small northern mining village. (Hattie)*

Books also served, in some ways, as therapy, helping to overcome personal tragedy. One Facebook respondent, who was abused as a child, wrote about the book that had most impact on her life:

*The bone people - Keri Hulme*  
*Taught me that all child abuse is a tragedy, but that forgiveness happens*  
*for everyone, and even deep loss can be a healing act.*

The capacity of books to help us see *the world as others see it* is highlighted in these examples. Greater empathy with the lives others lead can support enhanced inclusion and a greater understanding of social justice.

We are mindful in 2014 of the continued existence of inequalities, with many 'minority' groups being excluded by virtue of their literacy or language status. This includes those familiar issues of social class, 'race', ethnicity and gender, and is further complicated by the difficulties faced by new immigrants and travellers whose cultural capital is often not valued or understood in the communities where they seek to settle. The history of migration into (and out of) the UK predates the period covered by this review by several thousand years. In the last hundred years, however, it has escalated because of the influences of global events (two world wars, decolonisation, ethnic tensions in many parts of the world, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the European Union, amongst others). Most recently the concept of 'superdiversity' (Vertovec 2007) has emerged, characterised by 'a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade' (2007: 1024). These migratory patterns have led to a highly complex linguistic landscape in the UK which began largely in urban areas but which now permeates most parts of the country. In 2000, a survey carried out in London revealed that over 300 languages were spoken by children in London schools (Baker and Eversley 2000).

In common with other Anglophone countries, such as the USA and Australia, the predominant direction of educational and literacy policy in the UK has been to focus on literacy in English and to discount literacies brought from homes in which other languages are used (Cruikshank 2004). For much of the last hundred years, an assimilationist approach has been adopted in UK schools, with newly arrived children being either left to 'sink or swim', little or no attention being paid to providing English language support, or with children being withdrawn from parts of the curriculum to receive specialist support in English as a Second (later Additional) Language (ESL/EAL) (Lamb 1999). Such approaches paid little attention to the children's home languages which were considered to be an obstacle to English language development. In contrast, in the 1970s and 1980s some schools and local authorities introduced language awareness and community languages into the curriculum, inspired by the Bullock Report which argued that '*no child should be expected to cast off the language and culture of the home as he [sic] crosses the school threshold*' (DES 1975). However, with the introduction of the National Curriculum as part of the Education Reform Act of 1988, most of this innovation was lost.

Following the publication of the Nuffield Report in 2000 (Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000), which called for a national languages policy to enhance the linguistic capacity of the UK, a number of developments were introduced by the

Labour government which contributed to the recognition of community languages as an asset to the nation rather than a problem. The development of a Languages Strategy for England (DfES 2002) was significant for language learning, not least because it led to new forms of accreditation for a wide range of languages (Asset Languages and the 14–19 Diploma in Languages and International Communication), diversification of the languages curriculum and the language teaching profession (for example, through the commissioning of research to develop a World Languages Strategy), and partnerships between mainstream and supplementary schools (the Our Languages project). At the same time, a shift in EAL support led to the requirement for all trainee teachers to develop knowledge and skills in this area, enabling new arrivals to be integrated into classrooms rather than withdrawn from them. The ten-year period from 2000, therefore, marked a significant shift in policy, with multilingual literacies being perceived as a resource in themselves, but also as a support for the development of literacy in English. More recently, however, the shift has been reversed, with coalition government policy focusing again on English, reversing much of the previous policy, and thus limiting the potential for greater inclusion and community cohesion through the enhancement and valuing of the many community languages spoken in the UK.

Having considered literacy in relation to social justice and inclusion we now turn to aspects of literacy and social mobility.

### 3.2.3 Social mobility

Until recently individuals have typically moved ‘up’ the socio-economic ladder, gaining better jobs and life prospects, with education being a key factor in such upward social movement. The recent economic climate has seen some change in this pattern with some highly qualified people finding themselves without jobs and with reduced income. Thus educational achievement is not necessarily any longer to be directly correlated with enhanced social or economic status (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007; Savage and Tampubolon 2006). Considering reading success as *the* determining factor of social mobility would result in a dangerous oversimplification of the complex determinants that influence our society. In this section we briefly consider some of the other factors which influence social mobility. As a contributor to the Mass Observation Archive wrote:

*I do not agree that illiterate mothers raise illiterate children. My own grandmother was illiterate but when my mother attended school she was encouraged to learn everything that she could. In the evening and when she was off school she would read to my grandmother each day, the daily papers, books, anything at all that my grandmother wanted to know about. My mother passed an examination to become a teacher's help and it was suggested that she should train to become a teacher, but unfortunately this was not to be as her wages were needed to help the family. (A1733, female)*



Social mobility is dependent on a large number of factors which need to be taken into account both individually and in relation to one another. Factors may be divided into *those that are present at birth* (parental income, geographical location, disability, ethnicity), *those that may occur later in life* (caring responsibilities, access to schooling, parental involvement in education), and *those inherent to the individual* (personal motivation, stamina). There is no sure 'recipe' for success, nor do any of the factors inescapably predetermine social mobility – they may, however, position one person at an advantage over another, simply due to access to resources and experiences (Nunn et al. 2007).

A number of recent studies by the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) provide indicators as to the place of reading and writing in relation to social mobility (for example, Bynner and Parsons 1997, 2003, 2008; Bynner et al. 2001, 2006; Barton et al. 2006; the Basic Skills Agency (BSA); Parsons and Bynner 1997, 2002, 2005; Parsons 2002; Bynner and Steedman 1995; the Scottish Executive 2001). The 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 Cohort Study (BCS70) also show the place of literacy in adult lives. Participants of the 1970 British Cohort Study comprised 16,567 babies born in Great Britain in the period 5–11 April 1970 who were surveyed again in 1975, 1980, 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2000. Some 11,000 of the original cohort are still involved. Bynner and Parsons traced participants' lives from birth to expose their circumstances, history and experiences, and uncover contributing factors behind poor skills in adulthood and their consequences for life chances and adults functioning in society. These analyses identified a wide range of social and economic issues, and help us to understand social and economic change and trends. In terms of adult literacy, Bynner and Parsons' work shows the interconnection of reading ability with other factors such as health and well-being, work, gender and family structures.

The 1970 British Cohort Study showed a strong link between poor basic skills and disadvantaged life courses when participants were aged 34 (Bynner and Parsons 2006), with a disturbing picture of limited life chances, quality of life and social inclusion. Those with low levels of employment were associated with lack of qualifications, poor employment experience and prospects, poor material and financial circumstances, poor health prospects, and lack of social and political participation. These were particularly noticeable for adults whose literacy skills were low. Data show that the journey of disadvantage can begin in the early years of life characterised by poor family circumstances, limited educational achievement and low aspirations, a view taken in more recent calls for early intervention (Field 2010). Duckworth (2013) challenges the notion that the lives of adults with low levels of literacy (and therefore presumably low levels of reading for pleasure) are determined by poverty and exclusion, highlighting how effective support in the private and public domain of their lives (home, the community, school, college and the workplace) can help them to secure a more positive future.

In their longitudinal study of 1958 and 1970 British Cohort Studies, Bynner and Parsons (2005) found the following:

*Substantial differences in life chances, quality of life and social inclusion were evident between individual adults at or below entry 2 compared with others at higher levels of literacy and numeracy competence. Entry 2 skills were associated with lack of qualifications, poor labour market experiences and prospects, poor material and financial circumstances, poor health prospects and little social and political participation.* (Bynner and Parsons 2005: 33)

Improvement in reading skills for men was linked to increased home ownership and better employment prospects, a clear indicator of impact on social mobility. As well as reducing their level of income, unemployment can also effectively exclude people from important social networks which may impact negatively on their sense of self-esteem (Field 2008). Bynner and Parsons also demonstrated a rise in community engagement and political interest where people had more reading success. Women were found to have experienced similar socio-economic benefits as their reading improved. In relation to mental health and well-being the members of the birth cohort who had improved prospects were also less likely to show symptoms of depression, report long-term health related problems, or articulate feelings of disillusionment such as having no agency over their lives (Bynner and Parsons 2006).

Most recently, the Millennium Cohort Study in the UK has, in particular, provided a fruitful data set for research into socio-economic background and its influence on education (see, for example, Kelly et al. 2011; Hartas 2011; Goodman et al. 2011). The interim report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility (2012) identifies 'books at home' and 'literacy' as two of some fifty factors 'at play'. However, the report also states that '*the point of greatest leverage for social mobility is what happens between ages 0 and 3, primarily in the home*' (2012: 10). This was identified by Wells (1986) who measured 'literacy events', such as encounters with text, mark-making, and being read to, experienced by very young children. By the time they start school, some children have had literally hundreds of such events whereas others have had very few (some having none). Such a gap cannot be filled by schools alone, hence Hannon's call for parental involvement in literacy development at pre-school level (Hannon 1996), and Booktrust's programmes to involve families in reading which we shall discuss further in section 4.2.4.

Schütz, Ursprung and Wößmann (2008), using data from the 1990s, found that links between family background and high achievement is stronger in the UK than in most developed countries. Jerrim (2012) investigated the association between socio-economic background and children's reading skills at the age of 15 years, noting that the achievement gap in reading has been reduced to the level of similar countries, and attributing this to higher levels of government funding for literacy education in the early twenty-first century.

In the UK, the most extensive funding of literacy teaching was the National Literacy Strategy which introduced the National Literacy Hour in schools. Machin and McNally (2008), evaluating the initiative from an economic perspective, concluded that the enhanced educational attainment provided significant benefit in relation to the £12.5 million cost of the initiative, although both public media



and research have commented on the shortcomings of the strategy (BBC 1999; Jolliffe 2004; Garner 2013). The National Literacy Strategy promoted selected texts and stressed a prescribed set of literacy skills. Because certain 'forms' of literacy are privileged we could say that positive social mobility is partly a case of 'obtaining' and using those particular 'forms' of literacy, and this relates also to the language(s) in which that literacy is acquired and practised.

We can see that bi- and plurilingual<sup>5</sup> learners' literacy development has been subjected to shifting and contradictory perspectives on their language needs. Linguistic communities themselves tend to be positive towards language maintenance and support, fearing language loss and intergenerational conflict, whilst recognising that literacy in English is essential for study and employment (Lamb 2001). As the plurilingual mother in one of our intergenerational family literacy interviews said:

*It is important – it's important – English. And my children – I encourage them to speak English. We go to the library on Fridays and we choose books and I read with them in English. He's shy with his home language when we go out – so out – he speaks English and his Mother tongue – Gujerati – here (at home). I support his English and his speaks mother tongue – mother tongue here. At home, and with his grandmother.*

This position reflects not only an understanding that an individual can use a range of languages without conflict, but also that their overall literacy development can benefit from this linguistic capacity, a position evidenced by number of researchers. In a study of a Gujerati- and Urdu-speaking community in north-east London, Sneddon (2000) explored children's experiences in three-generational families, in school and in the community. She found that support for oral and literacy development depended on language and context but that, by the age of eleven, children were performing above the average of monolingual English-speaking children of a similar background whilst also speaking fluently a dialect of Gujerati and developing literacy in Urdu for religious purposes. Kenner has also conducted a number of studies which demonstrate the cognitive gains experienced by bilingual children, with evidence that six-year-olds are able to draw on different writing systems and thereby develop a deeper understanding of writing (Kenner *et al.* 2004). Opportunities for three- and four-year-olds to have access to home literacy materials stimulates not only purposeful social interaction but also production of writing and enhanced awareness of genres (Kenner 2010). However, she points out that the lack of status afforded to home languages combined with a largely monolingual curriculum do not provide opportunities for children to draw on their full linguistic repertoire in order to enhance their biliteracy in these ways (Kenner 2000).

Such research refutes the perceived 'dissonance' between home and school literacies which has tended to permeate government policy for most of recent history and which echoes the similarly perceived dissonances '*between what is expected at school and the home learning practices of children from economically disadvantaged families*' (Williams and Gregory 2001). Williams and

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<sup>5</sup> Individuals who speak many languages are plurilingual. Communities where many languages are spoken are multilingual.

Gregory's observation is, however, also significant because it highlights the links with theories relating to cultural capital. In so doing it offers an explanation for the academic success of some linguistic groups (such as Chinese and Gujarati) compared with that of children from a Bengali-, Punjabi-, or Roma-speaking background. It also highlights the differences between perceptions of English-Bengali bilingualism and English-French bilingualism, the latter of which would very rarely be perceived as a problem, and rather as an asset.

There is clear evidence that opportunities to develop into plurilingual individuals can enhance learning and academic success, and that this can pave the way towards upward mobility. However, it is also clear that the permutations of socio-economic and linguistic background require far more nuanced approaches towards inclusion in 'superdiverse' contexts. Given the lack of linguistic data in the UK, however, where language was only recently added as a category in the National Census, it is difficult to develop a more comprehensive picture of the relationships between the literacies of those from monolingual English-speaking backgrounds and those from different language groups.

In one of our intergenerational interviews, the grandmother told us that her earliest memory of reading was in 1965, aged five, she came to the UK:

*So I had to learn from the beginning. Parents didn't read and write so only teachers supported us at this time. These days the children are lucky the parents can support them and move them forward, and grandparents too. I didn't have parent support for reading and writing in English. They could read and write mother tongue but not the English Language.*

Her daughter remembers learning with her mother at home as well as in school:

*My mum, I went for help to her for reading and writing. And now I help my son. I read him in English and Gujarati, but my son can speak Gujarati but can't write – he can speak English – he's three-and-a-half. I read in English – my choice to do that because he has to learn – everything is English now – he can speak Gujarati at home but not outside. He needs to speak English outside.*

Thinking about her own experiences of learning to read, the grandmother said:

*I had trouble learning to read because I didn't have parent support [in English] I saw my parents struggling so I studied on my own, and with my bothers and sisters, to learn English at home. But our parents made us not talk English at home – they wanted to understand what we were all saying. I learned Urdu as well I speak 4 languages now – I am community interpreter.*

Respondents to our Facebook survey made no specific mention to social mobility *per se*, but (bearing in mind there were 19 respondents) there are discernible differences in the way responses are formulated. In answering the question 'why do you read', some respondents focus entirely on pleasure and escapism; others, however, seem aware of the multitude of different ways that reading might impact on one's life, as in the following example:

*Pleasure, escape, relaxation, an alternative point of view, learning, self-help and to gather information to produce in another form. Oh, and to read to / with my children. When [I was] a child [I read] for pleasure and escape and to experience the 'art' of words, how to relax and for information gathering, also to discuss with family and friends. (Caroline)*

Literacy is connected with respectability, and certain forms of text and reading material are considered by some to have more currency than others. Clearly Caroline, quoted above, has a range of currencies available to her and thus, we can assume, she has 'access' to a range of social settings and experiences.

It is clear that, without literacy in a valued and accepted language of the community, a person is 'othered', and so misses out on certain aspects of life and society. For many, literacy is a matter of personal identity – someone *is* a reader, someone *is* a writer, another *is* illiterate.

There is a danger that certain structures in society inhibit social mobility – often unintentionally – but some practices (for example, membership, access, language, finance) serve to 'keep people in their place'. Social mobility and initiatives to promote it need to be aware of the limitations of existing structures.

In the next section we will examine a key issue for this review, the role of the home and family role in generating positive attitudes and achievements in literacy.

#### 3.2.4 The home and family

We now know much more family literacy practices, and programmes to help parents support their children's developing literacy are becoming well established. In this section we explore a varied and diverse history of reading and writing as part of family life, and in what ways such practices might have made a difference to social mobility.

The everyday *literacy practices in families* can enhance children's literacy and cultural capital and have a positive impact on their later learning and achievement (Nutbrown et al. 2005). Since the 1970s we have seen a growth in programmes to encourage parents to develop skills and spend time in reading with their children from a young age. Such programmes have demonstrated success in encouraging home reading. What they all agree on is the importance of having something to read and all programmes incorporate some form of book loan or book gifting scheme. Booktrust's own recent initiatives contribute to this type of home reading programme.

Tracing developments in family literacy in England from the mid 1970s, Brooks et al. (2012), focusing specifically on *programmes*, describe the theoretical context and how practice has developed out of the linking of two strands of work: in early childhood education and in adult literacy education. In reviewing the effectiveness of family literacy programmes, they identify some key research areas: deficit approaches, targeting of programmes, evidence of effectiveness, gender, bilingualism, and policy research.

Vincent (2000) documents how most countries in Europe made mass literacy a goal over the course of the nineteenth century, moving from the home and community being the places where reading and writing were learned and used to the school being the locus of control. Attempts to achieve these goals were often twofold, promoting reading in the home and the teaching of reading skills in schools. In this section we examine initiatives to promote reading at home and evidence of reading for enjoyment.

Most responses from social media related to home and family reading. In addition to the responses already discussed at the beginning of this section, 'home' is also regarded as a personal, physical space that respondents associated with reading:

*My earliest memories related to reading are buying armfuls of books that I'd bought for 1p at the school book fairs, and reading by torch light under my bedclothes at night. (It had to be meticulously planned as I had to creep into my brothers room earlier in the day to steel his rechargeable torch, and then put it back the next day before he realized. I would read until the charge gradually faded to the point where it was touching the page to read each word.) (Joanne)*

In one of our intergenerational family interviews, Alan (36) recalled his first book:

*Yes – there was one particular book – but I can't find it now – can't remember what it was called. It was a western type of book – got horses in it – but I can't remember what it was called. I think I picked it up from a car book sale...Something lit! ...Yeah!...I think that western book is the earliest thing I can remember. I can't recall anything before that. I can't remember not being able to read.*

Nowadays, the importance of reading at home is well established, yet over time, several initiatives have been developed to encourage and resource reading at home, for pleasure. In the next section we will consider the history of some such initiatives.

### *The National Home Reading Union (1889–1930)*

Following the Education Act of 1870, concerns arose that universal elementary education would result in young people being taught how to read 'in a technical sense but not how to read progressively or systematically' (Snape 2002). In a desire to educate the working classes how to 'self-cultivate', and based on the

success of the 'Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Reading Circle' in America (Morrison 1974), John Brown Paton, the Principal of the Congregational Institute in Nottingham, founded the National Home Reading Union (NHRU) in 1889. In a contemporary paper, Collins identifies the objects of the Union as follows:

*To promote continuous and systematic home reading among all classes of people in such a way as to make it truly educational; to associate those who are engaged in definite courses of home reading in social circles, that they may pursue their studies under common guidance and after common methods; to give as much help to such students as can be given by printed explanatory notes, and by such instruction as can be communicated in writing; and lastly to bring the reading circles, if possible, and as much as possible, into contact with oral teachers. (1890: 196)*

As part of the NHRU, its participants were divided into three 'distinct classes of readers': boys and girls aged 11–15 who had left school (the ideal for them was to preserve their school learning, to obtain specialist instruction for their 'callings', and to 'form true ideals in life'). Other classes were the 'artisans' and the 'large miscellaneous class' whose education was considered to be further advanced than that of the young people. Each class had its own curriculum shaped around literary sections, including biography, elementary science, adventure, fiction, as well as natural and national history (the latter 'taught so as to quicken patriotism' (Collins 1890: 197).

Although the NHRU was set up specifically for the working classes, Snape (2002) reports that, after initial success, uptake among the working classes waned, a scarcity of communal reading areas and the complexity of the material (which included the *Iliad* and Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*) were blamed for this. Critics reported that the NHRU was fast becoming a hobby for the middle-class (Snape 2002). In schools, however, the NHRU was more successful – by 1912, there were four hundred school circles, with an estimated 75,000 members. While school provided the meeting place, the reading took place at home.

The NHRU began to decline with the death of its founder, Paton, in 1911, and was further weakened during World War One. Snape (2002) describes how, post-1918, the expansion of the Workers Education Association (WEA) and the birth of the BBC meant that the non-accredited curriculum of the NHRU was superseded by home-education models better suited to the arrival of modernism, where 'popular culture' might still have been regarded as vulgar and disdainful but accepted as an unstoppable sign of the times (Leavis 1930).

In more recent years, structured reading groups that are supported by lottery and council funding have had a re-emergence. *The Reader Organisation*, founded in 1997 by Jane Davies with a mission to create a 'Reading Revolution', is one such organisation. Focused primarily on Liverpool and the Wirral, there is also activity in London, the South West, Scotland, North Wales, and in Criminal Justice settings across the UK, and links with similar projects in Australia, Belgium and Denmark.

The mission of the Reader Organisation is clearly stated:

*We have established the movement of shared reading as a practical way to increase wellbeing, extend reading pleasure and foster social inclusion. We are an award-winning social enterprise with a strong partnership track record of reaching a wide range of people.*

*We bring people and great literature together. That's what we do. Our primary way of doing this is through Get Into Reading groups. This uses our innovative 'shared reading' model of bringing people together in weekly read aloud reading groups. Stories and poems are listened to. Thoughts and experiences are shared. Personal and social connections are made.<sup>6</sup>*

The literature on home reading in the UK following World War Two is sparse, yet something of the 'therapeutic' potential of books was seen to be important in the health sector (Moore 1943). Banton Smith explores whether reading 'changes children at all', urging that

*...research tells us that there is a strong relationship between reading achievement and mental health and that personality difficulties frequently improve as reading ability improves. In the light of this important information we see the necessity for intensifying our efforts to ensure every child rapid and efficient mastery of the skill of reading commensurate with his individual mentality. This necessity takes on renewed urgency, not only because reading is the basic tool in realizing reading values, but because the sense of reading achievement contributes to security, social approval, and self-confidence – all strong factors in the total state of mental well-being. (Banton Smith 1948: 499)*

Banton Smith points out that the choice of reading material tends to be made based on presuppositions, political leanings, and so on, with the majority of readers looking to read material which reinforces their opinions. In essence, what Banton Smith and her contemporaries describe is what Bourdieu would later refer to as 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu et al. 1994). Over 50 years later, Cullinan (2000) points out that reading functions as an introduction to society, stating that voluntary reading leads to increased social engagement, and that 'even the benefits of democracy, and the capacity to govern ourselves successfully, depend on reading', thus furthering the idea of reading as part of an individual's social identity and/or cultural capital.

### *Free Public Libraries*

Since 1850, the free public libraries have been a main provider of free reading material for adults and for children. The Public Libraries Act of 1850 gave local boroughs within the UK the power to establish free public libraries, with open access for all available from 1893. In the nineteenth century, they were frequently criticised for not only supplying recreational reading material to the masses, but

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thereader.org.uk/what-we-do-and-why.aspx#sthash.luKRFxV5.dpuf>



also for supplying non-literary fiction of little educational or moral content to readers who, according to critics, would be susceptible to its influence (Snape 2002). Libraries were, for many, a much appreciated source of reading material, as one contributor to the Mass Observation Archive wrote:

*I used to get three books out at a time, always choosing the most beautifully illustrated ones that I could find. (A1530, female)*

In 1920, the Board of Education assumed departmental responsibility for public libraries in line with the provisions of the Public Libraries Act (1919), except for the power of financial sanction and audit which, interestingly, continued to rest with the Ministry of Health.<sup>7</sup> The affiliation of libraries with councils and government meant that a reporting structure became necessary and the Roberts Committee was set up in 1957 in order to provide an overview of the efficiency of the service (Ministry of Education 1959). While the report focused on the running of libraries, contemporary reports (Groombridge 1964) concern themselves with the people-facing aspect of libraries.

The role of libraries is more difficult to define in modern times, where literacy is omnipresent via computers, mobile phones, computer games, the Internet, magazines and so on. At the same time, libraries fulfil multiple uses, enabling access to computers, organising events such as plays, visiting authors, coffee mornings, community meetings, and craft activities. Pahl and Allen (2011) identified the library as a community space where children experienced literacy in a multitude of forms.

The role of the librarian is of particular importance and encompasses much more than a 'person who hands out books'. In supporting the children through a number of activities, whether for leisure or school work, the librarian, it could be argued, fulfilled a role in encouraging literacy practices and, potentially, social mobility (Eastell 2008). In the 1980s, Gibbs (1983) argued for special training for children's librarians to take their important role in child development into account. In parallel to research recognising the importance of the role, however, the annual Survey of Library Services to Schools and Children in the UK, year on year, reports a decline of professional children's librarians (Creaser and Maynard 2004, 2006). This survey ran for seventeen years before it was discontinued in 2006.

Public libraries began as a resource for adults and in recent years many are threatened with closure due to government cuts in funding and local authorities seeking ways of reducing expenditure. However, such closures are resisted by regular library users. As one family member that we interviewed said:

*We still use our library – the internet and Google doesn't replace our need to read books that you can really hold in your hand. My daughter (15) and I (46) go every fortnight – usually Saturdays – and choose a couple (of*

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<sup>7</sup> [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk).

*books) each – they threatened to close our library but we fought back and it's staying for now. ((Anne)*

Some libraries have become as much a 'space' for social and community activities as well as for reading, as well as a borrowing facility. Our social media survey respondents recalled:

*My friend and I had tickets at multiple libraries in the town and bussed around to increase our choice. (Hattie)*

*I loved the library. My Mum worked in the same building, and sometimes, she would pick me up from school, then go back to work for a couple of hours, and I got to sit in the library and read as many books as I wanted – bliss! I knew all the librarians by name, and they knew me. Sometimes, if they knew I was coming, they'd sneak aside new or returned books they thought I would like. It was home away from home. (Sasha)*

With the growth of e-books, many libraries now have virtual book facilities. One contributor to the Mass Observation Archive noted how things change over time:

*We do different things at different stages of life. I used the public library for book borrowing only rarely when I was working – no time to read previously...Its retirement that has brought me back again, and ill-health which has curtailed my other activities and led to a more sedentary existence. (M388, female)*

### *Reading for pleasure*

Albjerg's (1962) discussion of reading for pleasure cites a large number of famous authors to emphasise the point that there is, in fact, no 'bad' reading, neatly juxtaposing the earlier assumptions that reading must be guided, especially for the working classes, so that they only read 'good' books (Snape 2002). This latter view echoes Charlotte Mason's call in the late 1800s for children to read good books and not 'twaddle' (her word) that oversimplified the world and literature itself.

One Mass Observation contributor wrote of the pleasure of sharing books with her children:

*As for my own children, it was a great joy to me to introduce our first-born child, our daughter...to books. From the earliest time, I showed her picture books before bed-time, building up to Tom's Midnight Garden and The Borrowers by the time she reached the end of the primary school stage. (A1530, female)*

Albjerg argues for reading for escapism, and suggests that how we respond to books is linked to our own personal histories, with each reader selecting their



own heroes and heroines based on their personal context, history, and/or needs at the time. As another Mass Observation contributor recalled:

*As a young man, commuting to work by train, I devoured an enormous amount of paperback detective fiction: I have never got rid of these books...As I became more busy at work and had more responsibilities, I read less and less for pleasure, being obliged to devote all my reading time to professional journals and legal and technical books. But I still purchased books for pleasure it gave me, hoping to find the time to read them later. (B1509, male)*

In the 1960s, Albjerg called for a broad range of reading material so that each reader may find something that corresponds to their experiences, to provide an 'escape' for their context. The importance of reading 'good literature' has been long debated – and many will recall prejudices around reading Enid Blyton stories in preference to what might be called 'the children's classics'. Yet there are many accounts of young readers enjoying Enid Blyton's books, as one of our family interviewees recalled. Jo has hearing difficulties so she recalls emphasis on clarity of speech. She does not recall learning to read but she remembers her family considering reading to be important and she read at home every day. Jo said:

*I probably read for pleasure about 2 hours a day, mostly fiction. My grandparents could both read but I don't remember them reading for pleasure...My mum reads a lot for pleasure...There were books around the house but neither my mum or her brother were made to read...My parents house now is full of books...My dad was a late reader – he read books about the church. My dad reads a lot more for information, he always valued books as a way of learning whereas mum read for pleasure....I remember reading The Famous Five...I wanted to be in the Famous Five!*

Though outside the scope of this review, there is considerable evidence in the Mass Observation Archive on 'selection and taste in book-reading' and 'children's reading', both based on surveys carried out in 1940 at Fulham Library. One contributor wrote:

*Comics and magazines were a constant companion in the [19]30s when perhaps I should have been following more serious pursuits, but in a way I think, in retrospect, they widened my world and coloured it during a period of depression and poverty for my parents. (L1504, male)*

Reading choices and the means by which children and their families can read for pleasure have been greatly extended by the advancement of technology. The Ofcom (2012) *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes* report provides detailed evidence of media use, attitudes and understanding among children and young people aged 3–15. As would be expected, increasing numbers of children now have access to smart phones and tablets, using these for communication such as email, texting and for online game playing. Some of these activities

include literacy practices. When comparing by gender, boys in each age group are more likely than girls to say they would miss playing computer games. In contrast, girls aged 5–7 and 8–11 are more likely to miss watching television. Girls aged 5–7 are also more likely to miss reading magazines, comics or newspapers than other literacy activities.

Marsh et al. (2005) surveyed 1,852 parents and carers and 524 practitioners, about young children's use of popular culture, media and new technologies in the home, and adult attitudes towards children's use of popular culture, media and new technologies. They found that

*...young children are immersed in practices relating to popular culture, media and new technologies from birth. They are growing up in a digital world and develop a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding of this world from birth. (Marsh et al. 2005: 5)*

Importantly, they add that

*...parents and other family members scaffold this learning, either implicitly or explicitly, and children engage in family social and cultural practices which develop their understanding of the role of media and technology in society. (Marsh et al. 2005: 5)*

The implication of children growing up in digital contexts is that technologies associated with this change have brought about shifts in multimodal communication practices. Modes such as image, writing, music, gesture and speech are combined more than ever in the creation and dissemination of texts. With the rapid and seemingly constant development of new and emerging technology, there has also been a change of concepts around space and time. The speed and the wealth of access to global information now available was unimagined a century, or even a decade, ago. These developments have changed the boundaries of what reading and writing are and how literacy is shaped.

The following extract from an intergenerational interview with sisters Janie (82) and Gracie (80), Gracie's daughter Mary (51), and Gracie's granddaughter Alexia (22) shows how the women's attitudes to reading and reading material have shifted from 'traditional' texts to include digital technologies across three generations:

Janie: *I never read for fun! No! For fun I would go dancing!*  
Gracie: *I'm the same – I still get the local paper still on a Friday – and a magazine – but they are expensive now – I used to like the Woman's Weekly – and I remember Mother used to have The People's Friend but that wasn't like – reading that was just a magazine.*  
Alexia: *Magazines are reading, Gran!*  
Gracie: *Well now, you – Miss – always have your head in a book reading – except when you are on that computer thing of yours...*

Alexia: *I love reading! Vampire stories mainly – Twilight – but Gran – there’s lots of reading to do when you are on the internet...if you can’t read someone would really struggle on the internet, I think...It’s still reading – just not in a book.*

The ‘digital native’, ‘digital immigrant’, ‘digital settler’ (Prensky 2001) metaphors highlight the cultural divide between the younger generations who have grown up with new technologies of digital age (digital natives) and older generations who have witnessed their invention and incorporation into life and learning (digital immigrants and settlers). As one contributor to the Mass Observation Archive wrote:

*The difference between emails and letters are: emails are shorter and faster whereas letters are long and can be read anywhere not just from a monitor. (You can’t perfume an email either.) (S1534, female)*

Many now take for granted digital reading and writing activities, such as Twitter, wikis, blogs or various social networking and sharing sites. In one of our intergenerational interviews, Alan, a father of four children, told us of the range of reading sources and genres that he, his partner and his children used. Responding to some negative media coverage about children and the internet, Alan said:

*The internet isn’t a bad thing. I’d got good reads on my internet book blog – you add friends to your book club and they comment on yours and you comment on theirs. It’s a good thing – to a certain extent. There is some things where you need to put parental controls on but ... yeah.*

However, while communication has always been multimodal, the visual now plays a larger part in written communication, including elements of text design such as style, colour and placement. This in turn has implications for reading. As such literacy is not just a technical or neutral skill, it provides a social view, which is expanded by treating literacy as not only a social practice but also as a multimodal form of communication. Words, images, sound, colour, animation, video, and styles of print can be combined. This approach moves from a deficit model of literacies and instead recognises that

*language, literacy and numeracy involve paying attention first and foremost to the contexts, purposes and practices in which language (spoken and written) and mathematical operations play a part. (Barton and Hamilton 1998: 17)*

Frank Smith argued that

*until education – like farming, manufacturing and public administration – became systematically organised in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the prevailing point of view had for centuries been that **you learn from the company you keep.** (2011: 14)*

This provides an important justification for supporting parents to help their children learn to read and to enjoy reading at home through a range of media. From the 1950s to the 1970s, a number of studies shift their focus towards working with parents, to explicitly encourage them to teach their children to read, and to motivate them. Reading at home was then becoming an activity that is no longer left to chance, but actively facilitated (see, for example, Larrick 1959; Gomberg 1970; Niedermeyer 1970).

In an attempt to find out why some children were 'omnivorous readers', while others could 'barely be stimulated to browse', Hansen (1969) measured the home literary environment according to four variables: availability of reading material in the home; amount of reading done with the child; guidance and encouragement given by parents, parents as reading role models. The study identified significant links between the home literacy environment and later reading habits, and encouraged schools to work with parents in order to address reading difficulties. Hansen's research was seeking a correlation between the literary home environment and children's attitude to reading. Interestingly, this study noted the fathers' occupation and education level and found that it had no impact, whereas later studies identify that the *mother's* level of education has an impact on children's literacy.

Along similar lines, Taylor and Strickland (1986) followed families who regularly shared story books with their children, and provided advice for other families, explaining why sharing books is 'good', how it helps with writing, and which books to read. The influence of parental attitude towards reading and its resulting motivational influence on children is also explored by Baker et al. (1997) who found that only 6 per cent of young children did not enjoy being read to, and that parents made conscious efforts in their reading (by assuming different voices, the choice of reading material, or creating a stimulating reading environment) to foster motivation. It is becoming clear that, while access to books is crucial, the role of a mediator, in the form of a parent, who spends time with the child and makes reading 'exciting', is important (Cullinan 2000). Again, the Mass Observation Archive contains examples of parents reading to children and telling them stories, and of the importance of stories to people's lives, whatever their age:

*My life wouldn't be worth living without books. They rank third in the love I feel for my wife and daughter, and I am not ashamed to say it. I read magazines and newspapers from time to time, but these are trivial things compared to books. (B1654, male)*

In the late 1980s emphasis on enjoyment in learning to read came to the fore when 'real books' (as distinct from reading schemes) were promoted as a means of giving children the experience of the pleasure of reading before they were taught specific skills. In *Read with Me*, Waterland (1988) set out what she called an *apprenticeship approach* to reading whereby children had access to good-quality picture books and stories and learned to read alongside an adult (teacher or parent). The practice of putting pleasure before skill was controversial, prompting fears of 'wasting time' and delaying the acquisition of reading skills.

As part of their international Reading for Change report, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development found that 'those from more modest backgrounds who read regularly and feel positive about it are better readers than people with home advantages but weaker reading engagement' (OECD 2002: 19). In the US, the National Endowment for the Arts has linked 'reading for pleasure' to participation in other 'civic activities', such as visiting museums, attending plays and concerts, and even playing sports and/or participating in outdoor activities (NEA 2007).

Once school begins, reading can become redefined and learning to read becomes more regulated, with many schools encouraging children to work their way through a reading scheme. Nutbrown et al. (2005) asked over two hundred 5-year-old children 'who reads with you?' Most children replied 'my mum', 'my dad' or gave the names of other family members. This was despite the fact that the children were in their first term of full-time school and required to read with their teacher every day. For those children, the place for 'reading' was in the family. It seems that they thought of what they did in school as something different from the pleasure of sharing stories with loved ones. For many children, once at school, the focus seems to shift from reading 'enjoyment' to the reading of books as a means to learning to read. This can mean that some children's attitudes to reading at home and at school are different (Levy 2011).

When asked why people read for pleasure, studies reveal numerous motivations, including the development of enhanced literacy and/or thinking skills (Howard 2011), companionship and/or social integration (Hodges 2010) and escapism (Dungworth et al. 2004).

Alan, in our intergenerational family interviews, told us that reading was for pleasure, but also for quality of life:

*I think – for me – I didn't want to grow up not being able to read... It's a personal choice – I didn't want to go the way my parents went. I decided that I was staying on at school. I chose my options an' stuff. My mum and dad were never interested. (*

Alan explained that he had decided whilst unemployed to study for a degree in English Language and Literature with the Open University. He explained:

*I've got mobility problems now and I'm only 36 so work is a bit 'iffy' at the moment. I've always worked, since leaving college, but recently I've not been able to do much so at the moment I'm just trying to keep my mind active. Because if I don't keep my mind active I am gonna rot and I don't wanna do that...so...*

Alan's comments indicate a desire to do better than his parents did, perhaps giving a sense of determination to enhance his own social mobility and that of his family.

In Hodges' study (2010), reading provides a 'social glue' which enables friends to talk about their reading experiences, something the Reader Organisation seeks

to encourage. Hodges, however, also points out that many studies that delve into motivations for reading do so at a superficial level, encouraging ranking and/or tick-box exercises, rather than truly seeking to understand the reasons behind reading. This is something we have sought to address in the empirical element of this review.

### *Support for reading development*

In the 1980s, several schemes and movements were introduced, focusing on linking school and home reading, and introducing the concept of ‘parents as educators’ (Topping 1986). The Haringey Reading Project (1981) was influential in persuading schools to adopt the practice of sending children’s reading books home on a regular basis. Later, the Belfield Project (Hannon 1989) encouraged children to take books home daily and supported their parents in reading with their children. Viewed from the perspective of 2014, this seems a simple and basic move, but at the time it was innovative and effective in extending children’s opportunities to practise reading with an adult. The study confirmed that many working-class parents read with their children at home in the early years of school and that this was strongly associated with reading attainment.

The understanding that both school and parents share responsibility for the same children (Glynn 1996) prompted a drive towards consistent partnership models for literacy development. Hewison and Tizard (1980) pioneered the home reading model PACT (‘Parents and Children and Teachers’) whereby children regularly took books home from school to read to their parents. Communication about progress takes place via a record card or reading diary, and similar schemes developed elsewhere in the UK (Branston 1996; Glynn 1996). Evidence from the Mass Observation Archive shows that some children, who missed school due to long periods of illness and could not read and write, were taught at home in order to catch them up again. One correspondent wrote about her Grandma L (1888–1972):

*[She] educated my mother and uncle at home for a year or two, because they were ill with childhood illnesses (scarlet fever and diphtheria) and could not go to school at the proper age of 5. Uncle went to school when he was 6, and my mother did not go until she was 7. Grandma therefore taught them to read and write a little before they went to school, so as not to let them get behind. Both Grandma and Grandpa L encouraged their children to value education, and the three who survived infancy did fairly well at school. (A2212, female)*

The awareness that literacy development at home differs widely between families led to a model of ‘family literacy’ by the Basic Skills Agency in 1994 (Brooks et al. 1997, 1999). It also pointed to the argument that parental involvement ought to be encouraged in the pre-school years in order to help reduce the achievement gap at school-start age (Hannon 1996).

Around the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, concerns about lack of reading surfaced, and research moved to find ways of convincing parents about the positive impact of home reading. Once more, the notion of cultural capital



becomes prominent, and reading at home is connected to the notion of habitus – a way of being which is influenced by notions of family, culture, society, history and language, amongst others.

Reay (1998) argues that while white middle-class mothers were comfortable in becoming involved in their child's education, mothers from minority backgrounds and working-class mothers found themselves in a position where they were expected to transform habitus, a prospect with which they often engaged unsuccessfully. In the US, Patricia Edwards (1994) argued strongly that black working-class and unemployed mothers should be taught the skills that white middle-class mothers already had, so that they, too, could support their own children's literacy development. Hartas (2011) also suggested that mothers who are educated may be more likely to be able to identify and access activities for their children, and argued for educating parents so that they may be best equipped to help their children. In Hartas's view, parental involvement, whilst strongly effective, should not be seen as the '*panacea for making up for the effects of socio-economic inequality*' (2011: 909). Rather, it needs to be part of a coherent policy designed to address social justice issues.

The Sheffield *Raising Early Achievement in Literacy* (REAL) Project (1997–2005) identified ways of working with families in their own homes to effectively support parents in enhancing their own children's literacy development in the pre-school years. The randomised control trial showed how home-visiting, lending resources, and giving parents key information about how literacy develops was effective in raising the literacy achievement in young children, most particularly those children whose mothers reported having no formal educational qualifications.<sup>8</sup>

Blackledge (2001) outlines clearly how Bangladeshi women in Birmingham felt strongly about notions of reading at home, and engaged heavily in story-telling and reading with their children in their mother tongue. Yet, they showed frustration at language difficulties and school expectations to read with children at home in English. Auerbach (1989) cautions us not to interpret family reading in ethnic minority families as a 'deficit model' simply because it may not occur in the same way, or the same language, as that encouraged by British schools. Using data from the Millennium Cohort Study, Hartas (2011) identified that literacy development in young children at age five is more directly related to the mother's level of education than it is to family income, and this was also a finding from the REAL project.

### *Booktrust projects*

The UK reading and writing charity Booktrust describes its work as aiming to change '*lives through reading. By creating a society motivated to read our programmes will increase life chances and improve social mobility*'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.real-online.group.shef.ac.uk/aboutreal-text.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.booktrust.org.uk/>

Booktrust has developed a range of programmes to help people of all ages and backgrounds to enjoy reading. Booktrust has itself contributed to the accessibility of books in all family homes, particularly in low-income households (HM Treasury 2004). This has been further evidenced in the evaluations of 'Booked Up' and 'Bookbuzz' which are gifting schemes for children in Year 7. In their report 'Bookbuzz: Evidence of best practice', Clague and Levy note that motivation for reading is seen to decline during young people's early years in secondary school, but 'Bookbuzz makes a sound and deliberate attempt to address this issue, by implementing a strategy to raise the motivation of young people at this crucial point in their lives' (2013: 47).

Moreover, the Bookstart initiative, which was first piloted in Birmingham in 1992, supplies free books to babies and toddlers at several stages of their lives, once in their first year at around 7–9 months, and again around 3–4 years. The initiative is funded by the government and supplemented by sponsorship from a range of children's book publishers and book sellers. Parents can access the packs through libraries, health professionals and early years professionals.

Although there are some complex issues to bear in mind when looking to evaluate the long-term benefits of a specific long-term reading intervention programme (see, for example, Hall 2001). Several studies commissioned by Booktrust since the project's inception (Wade and Moore 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2000, 2003) have identified a number of positive outcomes, ranging from early interest in and interaction with parents regarding books (Wade and Moore 1996b) to improved Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) results (Wade and Moore 2000).

Bookstart initiatives open channels for communication about books and reading between families and support providers, although some families, especially from backgrounds less confident in their own literacy and/or from an EAL background, need further help to embed reading into their everyday lives (Collins and Svensson 2005). Looking at particularly confident young readers from a pool of Bookstart children, Collins and Svensson (2008) identify rich home literacy environments, and parents discussing their children's books, characters, plots, and so forth, regardless of the family's socio-economic background. A more recent, large-scale study (Hines and Brooks 2009) states that, while findings overall are inconsistent, the Bookstart initiative has increased library membership and improved parents' and carers' attitudes towards reading with their children, particularly in families with previously little literacy engagement. In conjunction with the literature surrounding the positive impact of a home environment rich in literacy events (e.g. Wells 1986) and making reading with children exciting (Cullinan 2000), the Bookstart initiative functions as both an enabler and reminder for parents and carers to enjoy books with their children. This all very much supports Booktrust's wider aim to '*start at the earliest possible age as we believe children who have an early introduction to books benefit in many ways; educationally, socially, culturally and emotionally*'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.booktrust.org.uk/d/about-us/>



There can be no doubt that the home and family is an important location for reading and much has been done to foster reading for enjoyment in homes and families. However, as we saw in section 4.2.3, social mobility is dependent upon a large number of other factors too. Reading *alone* is not, and cannot be, responsible for social change, although enhanced socio-cultural capital *can be beneficial* in learning to read. Children need an understanding of the world that relates to the difficulty of the vocabulary and the context of their reading experience. As Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) point out, this involves two levels of translating reading into meaning – the ‘inside out’ (the functional decoding of text into accurate pronunciation), and the ‘outside in’ (the meaning-making from words and context). Buckingham et al. (2013) tie this to socio-economic background, arguing that ‘reading with your child’ is only part of family literacy development. They view the breadth of experiences children have at an early age as having a direct influence on their ability to make sense of their reading. Where parents engage their children in opportunities to enhance their socio-cultural capital (such as by going to museums and visiting new places), they are also supporting their children’s reading. Our review makes clear that looking at reading in isolation from other aspects that may influence social mobility could lead to a dangerous over-simplification of a complex field, which in turn would not be helpful in reaching useful conclusions for a way forward.

### 3.2.5 Gender and Literacy

It has long been recognised that more boys struggle with literacy than girls, and that women are the main supporters of their children’s literacy (Mace 1998). In the past, however, women have sometimes been seen as a threat to the household hierarchy a fear powerfully portrayed in Rushton’s (1983) play *Educating Rita*. In this sense ‘literacy’ means much more than the ability to be able to read and write, it is a powerful element of social capital. Vincent writes:

Girls had always suffered relative neglect in the education systems, especially in respect of learning to write in the formal classroom. As in poor developing countries of the late twentieth century, scarce cultural resources always went first to sons rather than daughters. However, a little after the boys in their community had commenced their journey towards universal literacy, they joined in the pursuit. Although the gap in achievement could initially widen, over the nineteenth century as a whole their illiteracy rates fell faster than those of men, with the differentials reduced to a few decimal points by 1913. (2000: 11)

Despite the fact that it is well documented that boys do not presently achieve as highly as girls in all aspects of literacy, women have often struggled to attain education in comparison with men, and remain under-represented in the higher end of the job market.

For some time now, studies have indicated that girls outperform boys in all aspects of literacy achievement and engagement (Twist and Sainsbury 2009; Bradshaw et al. 2010). While much of the research has consistently shown that girls do better at reading than boys at all stages of their school career (DfE

2011a, 2011b, 2011c), the same is also true of writing, with boys performing less well than girls (Estyn 2008; DfES 2007).

This was not necessarily the case for everyone in the past. With the need for girls to help in the home, they sometimes did not benefit from education that could lead to a career in the way that their brothers did, though there was not necessarily a generational pattern. In our intergenerational interview with sisters Janie (82) and Gracie (80), they said that they hated school and were glad to leave, even though that meant starting full-time work as soon as they turned fourteen. The experience of Gracie's daughter, Mary (51), was quite different because, although the leaving age had been raised to sixteen when she was due to leave, she continued her social work qualifications and had no difficulty in becoming employed. Gracie says that this was because she went to a 'good school', having passed the 11-plus exam and gone to a girls' grammar school. This interview extract shares something of these women's attitudes to school:

- Gracie: *And we skived off lessons – if the weather was nice.*  
Janie: *Sometimes we had to help with the summer visitors so we stayed at home, but father didn't like it if we did that because he said if we didn't go to school we'd never learn.*  
Gracie: *We both hated school. So did our brother but he did well, he went in the army. We went to the factory – loved it!*  
Janie: *...Well, we had a laugh, we girls, but we worked!*

Though Janie and Gracie 'hated' school, they did learn to read and write and, as we saw earlier, they occasionally read, though it is not their main pleasure. In the Mass Observation Archive there is evidence of a different woman's experience, and a different perspective about the role of the family in reading. This contributor wrote of her maternal grandmother (born in the late 1870s) who was not able to attend school much as she had to help her mother at home. She did not learn to read and write:

*[As an adult] she was always busy with her household chores and looking after her husband and children and, even if she had been literate, she would certainly never have had the time to help her children with their reading. They all learned to read and write well – at school, of course...Literacy depends on the schooling, and has very little to do with the literacy of the mother. (B89, female)*

Many attempts to raise the literacy achievement of boys in the last few decades have resulted in considerable effort to understand why boys are less engaged with literacy in comparison with girls (Millard 1997; Connolly 2004). Over the years boys have frequently been reported as demonstrating greater disengagement from reading than girls. The large-scale study of Whitehead et al. (1975) revealed a steep decline in reading for pleasure amongst adolescents, which was particularly marked in boys. Benton (1995), two decades later, used a similar questionnaire to the Whitehead study and found that a third of boys aged 13+ reported that they did not choose to read for pleasure. Although Hall and

Coles (1997: 96) state that children were reading more books and periodicals in 1994 than in 1971, they still concluded that 'boys tended to read less than girls'.

Connolly (2004) argues that, because boys' underachievement in education has now become a global concern, there is an urgent need to begin tackling the problem of boys' lower educational performance in the early years. In the first major study of its kind to focus specifically on young boys and achievement, Connolly provides a detailed analysis of national evidence regarding gender differences in educational achievement, from the early years through to the end of compulsory schooling. This demonstrates that it is the boys in the lower classes of society that may need support in order to enhance their literacy. Connolly writes:

*Not all young boys are 'underachieving' and, equally, not all young girls are achieving well...Social class and ethnicity tend to have a far greater impact on the educational performance of young children than gender....While boys do tend to lag behind girls in the early years whatever social class or ethnic group...the size of the gender gap is greatest among those groups that tend to already be doing badly in education (working class young children) and is smallest among those already doing well (middle class young children). (Connolly 2004: 3)*

Like Connolly, Smith (2003) also claims that the debate concerning boys' literacy has been unhelpfully over-simplified, arguing that this is partly due to uncritical and inaccurate constructions of the term 'underachievement'. She writes:

*The 'moral panic' surrounding the academic achievement of the nation's boys has come about largely because examination results suggest that the performance of girls, especially at GCSE, has overtaken that of boys...and the fact that the attainment of all pupils has risen steadily over the last 30 years is barely mentioned...in short, boys have fallen behind girls in this crude measure of success and the dominant view is that something has to be done about it. (Smith 2003: 283)*

This raises several issues that are important for this review. Firstly, the binary notion of 'underachieving boys and successful girls' is being heralded as over-simplistic and subsequently unhelpful in attempting to understand how gender influences 'achievement' in literacy. To illustrate, Safford et al. (2004) voiced the concern that the portrayal of boys as reluctant, resistant or weak readers unhelpfully hardens a stereotype of boys as being 'virtually un-teachable'. Similarly Weaver-Hightower (2003) claims that much of the debate about boys' performance in schools has failed to address the question 'which boys?' He stresses that, in particular, feminists have argued that not all boys experience disadvantage in the schooling system, a point largely overlooked in much of the literature. Moreover, Gillborn and Youdell (2000) argue that attention on 'underachieving boys' fails to take into account the 'real issues' of disadvantage, relating to issues of social class and racial inequality. This brings us back to Connolly's point that factors such as social class and ethnicity have a far greater impact on the educational performance of young children than gender alone. Given that these factors have been addressed in detail elsewhere in this review,

the impact of social class and ethnicity on attitudes towards literacy and social mobility will not be discussed further here.

However, this does lead towards another issue that is highly relevant to the interplay between gender, literacy and social mobility. For some time now, feminists have argued that work emphasising the 'underachievement' of boys has in fact failed to address the achievements of girls in school (Francis 2000). Nevertheless, it is perhaps more important to stress that, even though it is very well documented that girls and women 'achieve' in literacy in comparison with boys and men, women remain underrepresented in the high-paying end of the job market (Arnot et al. 1999).

Furthermore, given that concepts of 'education' and 'literacy acquisition' are regarded as synonymous, as discussed earlier in the review, it must be recognised that education has in itself been denied to many women from all social classes at times during the last century. For this reason, the remainder of this section will focus predominantly on women's attitudes to literacy and their opportunities for social mobility over the years, given that gender – as a discrete factor – appears to have disadvantaged women more than men in this area. As one Mass Observation correspondent wrote:

*[My grandmother (1888–1952)] was allowed to stay at school until she was 13. I have been told how they all paid 2d. per week to attend the local Board School.*

*My mother left school to become a nursery maid, later progressing to lady's maid in various high-class families. In addition to other skills, it was necessary to 'write a good hand' as many wealthy elderly ladies could neither read nor write, much of their social correspondence being dictated to a trusted maid. (B1261, female)*

Autobiographies of British men and women born between 1860 and 1914 (Galbraith 1997) provide fascinating insights into the ways in which gender was interwoven with class and family histories to inhibit opportunities for many women within different social classes. Galbraith makes reference to the autobiographies of a number of middle-class women, all of whom spoke regretfully about the years that their brothers went to boarding school while they were left at home. For example, one woman spoke directly of her sense of loss when her brother returned, 'full of disdain for girls' (Galbraith 1997: 15).

Another woman, Katherine Chorley (born in 1897), talked about the 'separate spheres' marked by gender, which allowed men access to the 'big world' while women stayed at home. Galbraith notes that 'she remembered that after the 9:18 train had taken all the men off to work, a town of women was left behind' (1997: 15). Many of these women continued to receive an education at home although this was often met with resentment. Helena Swanwick (born 1864) wrote of 'the intense desire...for more opportunities for concentration and continuity' and her anger against 'the assumption that whereas education was important for my brothers, it was of no account for me' (1997: 15–16). Despite this, she attended

Girton College overcoming her parents' indifference to her education, after receiving a scholarship and financial support from her godmother.

A number of working-class men spoke in their autobiographies with 'a sense of regret' (Galbraith 1997: 16) about their sisters' missed education. Galbraith's analysis of autobiographical material raises a number of issues, and two particular points that are especially relevant to our concerns: 1) women readers did not necessarily experience opportunities for social mobility; and 2) where women experienced social mobility it was usually through the support of someone else – often a man.

Many of the women in Galbraith's study were skilled and dedicated readers and writers, and most had access to books and magazines, but this in itself had little impact on opportunities for mobility. This is further exemplified in the histories of many female authors, who struggled to have their writing taken seriously. The classic example of Mary Anne Evans (1819–1880), who selected the pen name George Eliot rather than use her real name, is a stark reminder of the struggle women faced to overcome gender prejudice in publishing.

Similarly, Galbraith points out that female authors in Victorian and Edwardian England had 'less access to the public world of publishers, editors and academia than their male colleagues' (1997: 81), which resulted in authors such as Edith Nesbit remaining compelled to produce children's literature, as they struggled to be taken seriously as writers for adults. This is as much a comment on how children's literature was valued as it is on the position of women as writers.

For many of the women in Galbraith's study, evidence of mobility could often be traced to the support of a particular person at a particularly crucial point in time. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (Galbraith 1997: 14) spoke of her father's influence in encouraging her to make a stand 'for the extension of democratic liberty'. Galbraith mentions some fathers as being influential in helping their daughters to study for university entrance exams and women being supported financially by relatives of close family friends.

This suggests that a positive attitude to reading and writing is in itself, often not sufficient to enable women to achieve mobility in society. That said, there is some evidence to suggest that literacy – in particular *reading for pleasure* – was beneficial for many women through the last century. Long (2003) reflected on the role of women's book clubs in the early 1900s and concluded that regular attendance at such clubs was cherished by participants. It enabled '*women to gain organizational skills, the ability to participate in serious, orderly and rational discussion, the self-confidence of cultural authority, and...the knowledge ...to form opinions about the wider world and their own place within it*' (2003: 47).

Long argues that many of the reading groups were designed to have a 'social mission' (2003: 69), meaning that their reason for being was to educate as well as to entertain. It must also be recognised, however, that, despite the claims at the time that these groups existed to 'represent all women' (2003: 69), they were limited by class and race. As became the case for the NHRU, they tended to be attended by white middle-class women.

Another Mass Observation correspondent described her grandmother (1891–1963) as follows:

*She went to school from the age of five until 14, and was proud of having done well there. She was particularly proud of her spelling, at which she was best in the class and the teacher relied on her to correct everybody else's spelling...[After she got married and had a family] she didn't read much, and never bought any reading material. She read the newspapers her husband bought, and occasional magazines of the True Confessions type brought in by her children...She never joined a library and had a positive animosity towards them, believing library books harboured germs. (B1665, female)*

### *The women's novel*

Hanson suggests that, given that the 'women's novel' is 'written by and for educated middle-class women' (2000: 7) and emerged as a significant form in the 1920s and 1930s, 'its emergence can be linked with the expansion of women's education in the early twentieth century' (2000: 7). This suggests that 'women's novels', though scorned by some, were viewed by many others as a significant contribution towards the growing education of women. This was not least because they offered women an opportunity to engage with the discourse surrounding women's lives at that time.

Attitudes towards the reading of women's novels over the last century are interesting. Hanson describes how feminist critics have often dismissed women's novels over the years on the grounds that they do not 'have any necessary relationship to feminism' (2000: 1), as well as being considered inferior to 'literary or high culture texts' (2000: 4) which encourage more academic engagement and interpretation on the part of the reader. Yet, as Hanson points out, a number of scholars argue that women's novels have always been of interest to the feminist critic precisely because of 'the centrality they attribute to women's experiences' (2000: 1).

### *Women's magazines*

In addition to the growth of the women's novel, the period between the 1920s and 1945 also saw tremendous growth in the women's magazine market, with sixty new titles being launched during this time period. These magazines also strongly reflected women's lives and were, not surprisingly, focused very much on selling 'the domestic ideal' (Hanson 2000: 9). This trend continued into the 1950s and 1960s, as exemplified in Winship's (1981) exploration of women's magazines between 1954 and 1969. Winship argues that the 1950s for women was 'a period of amazing optimism, when it was frequently considered...that women had achieved equality'. Women were represented as 'equal but different to men'. Their perceived 'natural' difference, through their positioning as mothers, wives

and homemakers, was evident in magazines such as *Woman*. The following extracts are quoted in Winship's study:

*Margaret is loving the privacy of this first home of her own... Though Derek wasn't a contemporary fan he had complete faith in Margaret's choice – happy now about the furniture they bought. (Woman, 1/1/57: 27)*

*To almost every woman her work comes first too – the work of homemaking and husband tending. (Woman, 13/1/51: 33)*

*I hope Mrs X does not go rushing out to look for a job. She is not cheating her children by staying at home. She is giving them the supreme gift – herself. (Woman's Own, 8/3/56: 28)*

Constructions of gender and links with social mobility and opportunity is a vast topic and cannot be covered in detail here. Historical sources indicate, however, that, while women's (and indeed men's) *reading for pleasure* offered a range of benefits, such reading was embedded within a wider societal context and could be seen to inhibit as well as support opportunities for social mobility. *Attitudes surrounding literacy practices* have not received the critical appraisal they require with regard to gender.

Gilbert (1992: 186) argues that there is 'an interesting silence about the gendered nature of narrative practice' despite the fact that there is mounting evidence that 'literacy is inevitably culturally and historically specific' and is 'therefore inevitably gendered'. Though evidence suggests that many popular books are gendered, and offer powerful constructions of stereotypical femininity and masculinity (Johnson 1986), Gilbert argues that these can only ever be understood as 'plausible' if '*readers begin with particular cultural expectations of gender*' (1992: 191). Gilbert goes on to argue that, in order to challenge stereotypical constructions of gender (or any other social convention for that matter), it is necessary to become a '*resistant reader to what has come to pass as the socially conventional "reading" of a story*' (1992: 189).

She further argues that this can only be achieved with access to different discourses that challenge assumptions in any given text, concluding that

*it is less possible to be a resistant reader if you see nothing to challenge in the dominant reading position offered: if you cannot denaturalise the apparent naturalness and opacity of the language; or if you cannot conceive of other ways to construct a plausible narrative sequence of events; or if you are unable to reconstruct what counts as a narrative 'event' differently (Gilbert 1992: 189).*

A historical consideration of *attitudes towards literacy and social mobility*, uncovers a complex picture with regard to gender. Constructions of gender are deeply entwined with class, culture and family. Any exploration of gendered attitudes to literacy, or literacy and social mobility, must take these factors into consideration. However, it is clear that opportunities for 'advancement' (which



includes education, access to the job market, career progression, social mobility and positive self-esteem) have always been influenced by gender.

Positive attitudes towards literacy can enhance social mobility because being able to read and write supports one's ability to engage in discussions, gain knowledge and grow in self-confidence, as well as develop the skills needed for university entrance and employment. However, given that many texts (and, in particular, popular books associated with reading for pleasure) are culturally and historically situated, they are also 'inevitably gendered' and can therefore have a direct role in inhibiting (or limiting) opportunities and aspiration for greater social mobility.

Stereotypical constructions of women as 'homemakers' and men as 'breadwinners' have an inevitable impact on the extent to which opportunities for social mobility have been taken up by women and for many in the working classes. As one woman wrote for Mass Observation:

*I do read all the time every book or paper I get my hands on. At the moment I don't read novels/books (apart from reference books) as they would take up too much of my time. I have so much to do. When I knit jumpers I work out stitches to the inch and do not work from patterns – except for knitted motifs. I make cakes and pastries etc. without recipes. (S496, female)*

Whilst many women may have been inhibited from achieving greater social mobility, it is also important to recognise that the home has always been a major influence on how families (and children in particular) develop attitudes towards literacy. As we saw earlier (in section 4.2.4), mother's educational qualifications are key to their children's literacy and wider educational achievement, and mothers are in the main the primary supporters of their children's literacy. Almost all respondents from our Facebook survey were female and many were mothers. There was no mention of gender when it came to reading, other than by way of introducing children ('my daughter/son'), or themselves ('when I was a girl'). Only one respondent referred to books in a gendered way:

*Sometimes I'd leave my window open for Peter Pan to come and take me away ... but he never did. I think I wanted to be Tiger Lily rather than Wendy (who I think bugged me a bit as she seemed a bit dull).*

Talking about the books that made an impression on her, she added:

*Women Who Run with the Wolves by Clarissa Pinkola Estes (might have spelled that wrong). 25 years old, and the adult book I remember having the most impact. 'Women's Book' about Story Telling, women and stuff – if I remember correctly, I think she is a Jungist Therapist and she used stories, and particularly Fairy Tales (and The Red Shoes a lot) to explore women, psychology, society, etc. I remember thinking it was magnificent and that I was a Wild Woman (Ha! Ha! Maybe more then than now). (Joanne)*



Clearly the issues relating to gender and reading are complex and, although it is unwise to generalise from individual accounts, the literature makes clear that there is an unevenness relating to gender and reading for pleasure, and reading achievement. Having considered key issues in relation to gender and to social mobility, the next section will focus on employment.

### 3.2.6 Employment

Although several respondents from our Facebook data collection stated that they read for work, there is little or no reference to employment beyond this. One exception is John, who states:

*I'm a City lawyer, so I read (and draft) an awful lot at work. 170-page facility agreements, deeds, documents, emails, letters... [...] I'd be utterly lost without [my reading and writing abilities]. I read and write for a living. I draft complex legal documents, I communicate in writing to clients and other professionals.*

With successive reviews for government (Wolf 2011; Nutbrown 2012) highlighting the importance of school leavers attaining GCSE in English and Maths, and Government policy moving to support some such recommendations, there is no doubt that employment (and unemployment) is, to a considerable degree, influenced (if not determined) by the literacy levels of those new to the workforce (Taylor *et al.* 2012).

Changes in the UK economy over the last fifty years have seen patterns of employment becoming increasingly insecure and transient. In a post-industrial society, it seems that there are no longer 'jobs for life' but rather workers must be willing to engage in further training as and when required to take on different jobs to ensure their financial security. Globalisation, competition and rapid progress of technology have caused a shift in the nature and patterns of working life and employment. The current plans for the UK remain ambitious. In 2010, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills stated:

*It is our ambition to be one of the top countries in the world – for jobs, for productivity and for skills. A World Class economy, built on World Class skills, supporting World Class jobs and businesses. We should aim to be in the top quartile of OECD countries in all three – jobs, productivity and skills – by 2020. This means being in the top eight countries of the world. Our future prosperity depends ultimately on employment and productivity: how many people are in work and how productive they are when they are in work. Skills are essential to both. If we are to become World Class, we must raise our game to match the productivity, skills and jobs of the best.*  
(UKCES 2010: 6)

Widening access to education is also depicted as being beneficial to society in a wider sense, to help combat social exclusion and increase employability. However, some provision of 'learning for pleasure' or 'recreational' classes

continues with organisations such as the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the University of the Third Age (U3A) providing courses of study in languages, local and family history, or philosophy for beginners, for example. In the case of the latter this is provision for those who have in the main retired from regular paid employment.

'Widening participation' means something quite specific the most recent being the Labour government promotion of increased access to university. Current discourses about widening participation have their origins in the Dearing Report (1997) and Kennedy Report (1997), and refer to particular groups that are under-represented within a particular kind of institution (such as further education) or within a curriculum area (such as ICT). Widening participation relates particularly to access to higher education. Social class differentials (along with gender, ethnicity and disability) in HE participation rates have been the key to understanding under-representation and have led to taking steps to widen participation in HE (Reay et al. 2005; Thomas 2001).

In the context of widening participation, the notion of individual autonomy does not recognise the structural inequalities faced by many learners and the communities in which they live, and individual learning is privileged over collective learning. This positions education as a commodity and largely ignores issues of economic, political and social equality. The job of education in this context is to provide a flexible, adaptable and skilled workforce to ensure competitiveness in the globalised economy.

One 55-year-old grandmother in our intergenerational interviews told us:

*I came (to the UK) speaking just Gujarati and I learned English because I know it was important. I work in Mental Health and I use my languages with patients in the community. I speak in their language and I read and write notes in English – you have to. Everything is on...computer so I have learned and adapted. For my daughter and grandson this is normal – but for me – I have to work at it to...to do it.*

Inequalities can arise depending on the school attended, the streaming or banding of students, the nature of the curriculum, and lack of language support. These and other factors can serve to prepare children from different social classes to enter employment at different levels of organisations; the organisation of schooling and work are knitted together to perpetuate the inequalities in the class system. 'Functional literacy skills' are often accepted as a basic minimum entry point but, whilst this might mean a person can operate adequately as an employee, it ignores the importance of reading for pleasure.

### 3.2.7 Adult literacy education initiatives

Early adult literacy education initiatives included the development of Sunday Schools and the establishment of Free Public Libraries. From the point where Sunday Schools taught adults to read the Bible, through the Workers' Education Association supported by the trade unions, to the creation of the Open University,

we can trace a relationship between adults' attitudes to literacy, ambition and accessing additional opportunities for education.

Street (1997) points out that it was during the 1960s that the United Kingdom recognised a need for public support for adults with literacy difficulties. This in turn led to '*government grants, a national campaign, and the development of local practice and experience*' (Street 1997: 1). Street helps us to understand the context for this 'discovery' when he reflects on the fact that educational theorists in the nineteenth century argued for the benefits of literacy as contributing towards the 'critical skills necessary for mass democracy' (1997: 3). However, history also suggests that there was competing concern at that time about 'educating the masses beyond their station' (Street 1997: 3), with politicians in particular worrying that mass literacy would inhibit the production of a workforce trained in the disciplines of the workplace (Howard 1991).

Adult literacy education has been particularly prominent during the last three decades. Together with post-compulsory education and training (PCET), it has been significantly reshaped by national policy initiatives since the 1970s. As the concept of lifelong learning appeared in international policy (Field 2000), the UK government showed greater interest in the education and training of adults.

The mid 1970s saw a literacy campaign led by a coalition of voluntary agencies and partnered by the BBC. The 'Right to Read' movement, which emerged in the 1970s as a grassroots campaign, later received UK government funding and developed into the Adult Literacy Resource Agency. It later became the Basic Skills Agency, whose aim was to develop adult literacy provision (Hamilton 1996). This period saw a considerable development of basic skills provision, supported by local education authority (LEA) adult education services and voluntary organisations, with leadership, training and development funding from a national agency, the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Agency (ALBSU), later known as the Basic Skills Agency (BSA).

By the 1990s a reduction in LEA funding and control saw basic skills receiving statutory status through the further education (FE) system which was dependent on funding through a national body, the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) (Hamilton and Hillier 2006). The late 1990s also saw the Moser Report, '*A Fresh Start – Improving Literacy and Numeracy*', which helped shape the Labour government's strategy to improve the literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) skills of adults (DfES 1999). The report recommended the development of a national strategy to address adult literacy and numeracy needs. Its targets for reducing the number of adults with low skills levels were ambitious. The Moser Report estimated that approximately 20 per cent of the UK population (a total of as many as seven million people) apparently had difficulty with functional literacy and/or numeracy. This was defined as 'the ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function at work and in society in general'. The resulting strategy, *Skills for Life (SfL)*, identified a number of priority groups which included people who lived in disadvantaged communities (DfES 2001). The Leitch Report of December 2006, called 'Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: World Class Skills', set ambitious goals which impacted on

Skills for Life (Leitch 2006: 3). In an ever-changing landscape, adult literacy provision is now an established component of vocational education and training in the UK.

Clara Grant, who began her teaching career in 1888 (Simon 1965), echoed these sentiments when she argued that the curriculum at that time did not consider children's needs, but was instead designed to make children into useful future employees, a sentiment reflected in current national policy. Education (and adult education) was designed to benefit the economy. This again highlights the importance of recognising that attitudes towards literacy can only be understood in relation to the historical, social and cultural context within which they exist.

Robert Tressell's novel *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, written in 1910, is important in terms of being a 'historical source document of the working-class and Labour movements, portrait of working-class life, and an example of working-class art' (Graff 1987: 216–17). While some struggled to acquire an education, and thirsted for literacy, 'a deep and pronounced ambivalence' towards education and literacy was manifest in the working class (Graff 1987: 223). Tressell, himself a house painter by trade, tells the story of a group of painters and decorators and their families. Owen, the main character, attempts to enlighten his fellow workmen to the oppression and exploitation of their lives, and recognise 'the subjection, deception, and destitution of the people whose labour helped to create the luxury and glitter of the Edwardian age' (Sillitoe 1955: 95). The book aims to fulfil a number of literary and political goals. Of particular interest to this review, however, is 'the portrayal of the roles and meanings of literacy and schooling and the attitudes of the working class towards literacy skills and schooling's place' (Graff 1987: 217). Graff points out that the novel confirms what other historical sources suggest, that is, the fact that many at that time did not require a high degree of literacy, and few attained it. Nevertheless, print did penetrate their lives in the forms of bills, notices and list-making, and many were sufficiently able to read and write in order to cope with the basic literacy demands in their lives.

Tressell regularly spoke of the reproduction of social and class structure in the novel, but particularly interesting is the blame attributed to the school system in maintaining social and class structure. Tressell wrote, for example, that the workers '*saw their children as condemned to the same life of degradation, hard labour and privation, yet they refused to help bring about a better state of affairs*' (Tressell 1910). He continued by emphasising:

*It must be remembered that they had been taught self-contempt when they were children. In the so-called 'Christian' schools they attended then, they were taught to 'order themselves lowly and reverently towards their betters...they had a vast amount of consideration for their betters, and for the children of their betters, but very little for their own children. ( Tressell 1910: 223).*

Graff points out that many of these people had indeed received some publicly sponsored education, though in most cases this was brief and intermittent, but it probably allowed the acquisition of some literacy that was of use to their daily

lives. He goes on to argue, however, that this 'did not often change their lives or their minds, despite the prognostications of social and psychological theorists about the 'modernizing' and 'transforming' impacts of literacy' (1987: 223). In fact, Graff goes as far as to claim that these people were 'taught' to accept their station in life, concluding that for the most part, 'expectations were not hopes for the improvement or mobility of selves or children'. While some were clearly prepared to struggle to acquire an education, and thirsted for literacy, Graff argues that 'a deep and pronounced ambivalence' towards education and literacy was manifest in the working-class, for reasons already discussed (1987). Societal attitudes towards illiteracy did change, and this can perhaps be traced to the time of the Second World War which, as Jones and Marriott (2006: 338) point out, 'stimulated significant interest in standards of reading and writing among young adults, particularly because of what was being revealed by psychological assessment of entrants to military service'. There followed a number of strategies to improve levels of literacy amongst new recruits to the Army. In the winter of 1943/4, for example, most military districts in mainland Britain began to organise centres for teaching literacy skills and provided courses which generally lasted up to eight weeks (Jones and Marriott 2006). Many of these strategies were successful, with the Ministry of Education reporting in 1950 that many had indeed learned to read and write in this way, and had 'learned to take their places with increased self-respect as soldiers and to get more satisfaction out of life' (Jones and Marriott 2006: 9).

Adult literacy programmes have a fragmented history. Jones and Marriott (2006) argue that little attempt was made to capitalise on the success of the literacy programmes within the armed forces and as a result it was another twenty-five years before something resembling a national response to the need for wider access to adult literacy programs began to exist. However, Jones and Marriott make the further point that this was in part due to the fact that adults who experienced difficulty with literacy were too embarrassed to seek help. This is not surprising given that having difficulty in reading and writing was perceived as, among other things, 'a function of permanent mental inadequacy, or a bedfellow of criminality' (Jones and Marriott 2006: 351). One Mass Observation correspondent wrote:

*At times I have thought about going to adult education classes but shortage of time and money has put a stop to that idea. I am self taught learning from books and my mistakes...<sup>11</sup> (S496, female)*

Attitudes towards literacy, and the acquisition of reading and writing skills, are highly complex and tightly bound with issues of identity, class and culture. We can see that the present 'norm' is that literacy skills needed for life are acquired in childhood – most often before the age of ten, because when children reach secondary school still struggling – they are likely to continue to struggle for life. Again, rather than suggesting that the cultivation of positive attitudes towards literacy can impact upon social mobility, it seems that the research literature is

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<sup>11</sup> The account moves to a different topic at this point and the contributor may have lost her train of thought.

suggesting that negative attitudes towards literacy difficulty are in fact highly disabling.

As Hargreaves reflected, measuring the success of literacy programmes is perhaps more to do with measuring gains in self-confidence, rather than a 'mastery of literacy skills' (1980: 94). In other words, acquiring literacy to function in society is not just about performativity of literacy skill, but is about having the confidence and self-belief to gain and use literacy skills to one's best potential. This differs significantly from what Stock refers to as the 'rather narrow economic functionalism of the UNESCO literacy programme' (Stock 1985: 228). Clearly, factors associated with confidence in literacy, as well as opportunity, link with issues of class and identity including gender.

### 3.2.8 'Illiteracy' and social difficulty

As Vincent reminds us of the nineteenth century:

*In their basic social groups, literate and illiterate were rarely strangers to each other. They married each other or mingled in the streets and other public places. They lived with parents who had been raised with fewer opportunities to learn their letters or with children brought up with more.* (2000: 16)

During the mid-1950s Hoggart, explored ways in which society enabled and exploited increasing access to the written word, asserting that '*illiteracy as it is normally measured has been largely removed*' (1957: 278). Yet, many still struggle with literacy and, whilst identifying the factors in individuals and societies that enable us to identify possible relationships between positive attitudes to literacy and social mobility, we are mindful of the 'other side of the coin' where negative experiences of, and attitudes to, literacy can lead not only to unemployment but also to crime. In 2010, 48 per cent of prisoners in the UK had literacy skills at or below what is expected of an eleven-year-old (Natale 2010). It is important to note that the standard of literacy expected of an eleven-year-old should certainly be defined as 'functionally literate', if not more, and so this statement cannot be assumed to mean that 48 per cent of prisoners are illiterate.

For most people, being 'literate' is regarded as a largely attainable goal for anyone who has completed a significant amount of schooling. This is evident in the UNESCO survey in 1957, *World Literacy at Mid-Century*, which concluded:

*If all children of school age in any country attended school for a sufficient length of time, there would eventually be no adult illiterates in the population, except those mentally deficient and incapable of learning to read and write. It follows, therefore, that the best means of preventing illiteracy is to provide adequate education for all children.* (1957: 165)

The concept of illiteracy is therefore assigned to adults – adults who, for whatever reason, were either unable to attend school or were unable (or even

unwilling) to develop literacy skills through the context of their education. In one of our intergenerational interviews, Millie (86) talked about helping her friend:

*Millie: Well I wouldn't say Ellen was 'illiterate' – no – but she struggled. So, well, every week, most weeks, I would help her write a letter back to her son. I would read his letter to her and she would tell me what to write and I would write it down. My spelling isn't that good really, well – but it was good enough for what she needed. I said 'go to lessons' but she didn't want to – said people might think she was stupid. Now, no, she wasn't stupid – just didn't manage to pick up enough at school to be able to read and write for herself. Her mother couldn't either, she said, but it didn't seem to matter then – with her mother – never thought about it – my mother could read, yes. She left at 13 – I left at 14 – but I got enough to be able to read and write a letter. I never told anybody that I used to help Ellen with the letters.*

However, Ramsey-Kurz (2007) argues that it is important to recognize that illiteracy is not an autonomous category, but rather it is part of a binary construct – an 'opposite' of literacy. She goes on to explain that constructions of 'illiteracy' can only ever exist in relation to literate cultures. She states:

*Individuals or cultures without a script are not comprehended as illiterate purely on account of their orality, but only when they come into contact with a writing system or its users. It is only by virtue of their particular relationship to a literate civilization, then, they qualify as 'il-', 'non-', or 'preliterate' (2007: 19).*

As Ramsey-Kurtz then argues, this explains why Western societies did not begin to perceive or discuss concepts of illiteracy as a 'concern' much before the nineteenth century because, up to this point, illiteracy was regarded as a 'cultural norm' while literacy was an 'exception to this norm'. However, for UNESCO (2006) it is not acceptable to conceptualise 'illiteracy' as a socio-cultural construction. In *Education for All*, UNESCO's fourth global monitoring report, the authors state:

*The fact that some 770 million adults – about one-fifth of the world's adult population – do not have basic literacy skills is not only morally indefensible but is also an appalling loss of human potential and economic capacity. (UNESCO 2005: iv)*

Hannon et al. (2005: 117) suggest that it is important to understand '*literacy inequalities*', by which they mean '*unequal access to those literacy practices associated with power in society or those literacy practices valued in formal education*'. They argue that '*teaching literacy cannot by itself reduce literacy inequality but it can contribute to that goal*'.



Even into the early twentieth century, attitudes towards illiteracy (here defined as the inability to read and write) seemed less condemnatory than became apparent a few decades later. This is evident in William Woodruff's autobiographical account of his childhood in *The Road to Nab End*. Born in 1916 and raised in extreme poverty in the heart of Blackburn's cotton-weaving community, this book suggests that concepts of literacy and illiteracy were not treated with any particular reverence or scorn, but rather were simply embedded within the social and cultural structure of life at that time.

To illustrate, like many men then, Woodruff's father learned to read and write while in the armed forces (the Navy in his case) and as a result he was described as being one of the few adult members of the family (and possibly even the local community) who was able to read and write. Maggie, Woodruff's mother, was illiterate, but this was not spoken of with any sense of regret or sympathy.

Of greater importance to the memoir was her 'spontaneous, expansive [and] impulsive' nature. She had a 'fine voice' and 'was always singing', which stood in contrast to Woodruff's description of his father who never sang, and was described as being rather dull. While being able to read and write was not completely disregarded, such skills were clearly not viewed as being as valuable as learning 'a skill in t'mill', which would result in financial gain and ultimate survival. The uncritical treatment of literacy skill in the Woodruff household is further evidenced in the following extract. Speaking of his mother, Woodruff wrote:

*She was forever doing something different; she had to, she was easily bored. She tired when father read the newspaper to her at night. Although she couldn't read or write (the only time she had written her name was on her wedding certificate, and that was with father's help), whatever father read to her, she wanted to jump to the end. He droned on monotonously reading every single word, with no sign of tiring; or for that matter, of interest either, unless perchance he came across news from America.*  
(Woodruff 1999: 273)

In order to understand attitudes towards literacy, it is therefore very revealing to consider attitudes towards illiteracy. While Woodruff's father's literacy skills were of apparent benefit to the family, *The Road to Nab End* does not portray any particular attitudes of pride in, or ambition to acquire, skills in reading and writing. This stood in sharp contrast to the evident importance of 'work', and the perceived value of gaining skills that would be used in the cotton mill. Illiteracy simply existed; it was regarded as neither a blessing nor a curse. This is not a surprise when we examine the historical context within which this autobiography is set. Scholars argue that although adult literacy has been an issue in Britain since at least the time of the Norman Conquest, adult illiteracy was effectively 'discovered' during the 1960s (Street 1997).

During the 1960s those with difficulties in reading and writing were viewed with increasingly negative associations. For example, Street discusses the National Institute of Adult Education (NIAE) revelation that stereotypical perceptions of 'illiterates' as 'unemployed and incompetent' (1997: 8) were largely unfounded.



Only about a third of those enrolling in various adult literacy programs in the 1970s being 'beginners, with limited sound sight vocabulary' (1997: 8 and about half were in 'relatively skilled occupations'. The NIAE study shows that what all individuals had in common was 'a sensitivity to their literacy difficulties, however defined, and a history of "failure" in literacy or in school' (Street 1997: 8).

The evidence concerning adult literacy difficulties provides us with a great deal of insight into *attitudes* towards literacy over the last century or so. Many were either unable to read or write during the early twentieth century, or owned a very basic level of 'functional' literacy skill. While literacy skills were evidently regarded as useful, however, the desire to acquire such skills was unlikely to promote social mobility in its own right. Concepts of social mobility were actively discouraged. One's class and station were regarded as fixed for life by virtue of one's birth. Education, particularly girls' education, played a role in perpetuating these concepts, so it seemed unlikely that capacity to read and write alone would be sufficient.

As the century progressed, and literacy skills became more of the 'norm', so attitudes towards 'illiteracy' (a hotly contested term) became progressively negative. As one literacy tutor reported, people who struggle with literacy

*are usually so ashamed of their disability [sic] that some manage to hide the truth from their own family and friends...and because of the taboo that still shrouds illiteracy, they imagine themselves alone and fear ridicule in coming forward.* (Mace 1979: 22)

Rather than suggesting that the cultivation of positive attitudes towards literacy can impact upon social mobility, the evidence seems to suggest that negative attitudes towards 'illiteracy' are in fact highly disabling.

### 3.3 Section summary

In this section we have presented and discussed our review of the evidence on attitudes to reading and writing and links with social mobility 1914–2014. Drawing on documentary evidence from the Mass Observation Archive, intergenerational interviews, data gathered through social media, the literature of the time and academic writings, we have explored eight key themes drawing on original empirical data as well as documentary evidence and other writings.

It is clear that **reading and writing are now part of wider 'literacy' practices** incorporating **digital** technologies unheard of in 1914.

We have considered how being able to read and write puts individuals in a position where they are more likely to be included in communities and societies more widely, and how **those new to communities, with different literacy practices and different languages, can experience exclusion and social injustices.**

We have seen that being a reader does not in itself carry a promise of greater positive social mobility, yet it seems that **without a capacity to read and write and engage in literacy practices necessary to understand and challenge power, social mobility is less likely.**

What is clear is that the home and family are crucial in the development of reading and writing, particularly in terms of reading for pleasure. Whilst we found no direct correlation between parents' reading practices and the literacy of their children, **it seems to be the case that reading for pleasure 'rubs off' in the home.**

In terms of *gender and literacy*, whilst boys' achievement in literacy has been a concern in recent times, **for most of the period under study it has been women's opportunities to learn to read and write that should give most cause for concern.** Whilst working to promote positive attitudes in boys towards reading for pleasure, girls' and women's reading and writing should not be neglected in the future.

Clear links are identified between success in employment choice and reading and writing abilities and **limited ability to read and write remains a concern of employers and government to this day.**

Whilst governments have focused primarily on children's literacy and the teaching of reading and writing (and later 'literacy') in schools, **there remains a need for adult literacy education initiatives to support those adults who do not succeed in schools.**

Oral cultures as they relate to reading and writing have a crucial place. 'Literacy' is socially constructed and we must remember that issues of 'illiteracy' and social difficulty need to be considered in relation to when and where they occur. Different 'modes' of expression have always been used for reading and writing, new technologies have increased the 'modes' and possibilities available. **Some adults still struggle with literacy, although significantly fewer than in 1914. While this review has mainly focused on the relationships between positive attitudes to literacy and social mobility, it is important to also be aware that negative attitudes to or experiences of literacy can inhibit life choices.**

Having presented and discussed our main findings we will next return to our six research questions, summarising our responses to them and identifying implications for the future work of Booktrust.

## 4. Recommendations for the wider work of Booktrust

### 4.1 Overview

This report has evaluated the evidence of attitudes to reading and writing and their links with social mobility from the outbreak of the First World War to the present day. This has been a time of remarkable developments in technologies, which have moved the acts of reading and writing into a broader age of 'literacy', which is now practiced through technologies never dreamed of by soldiers in the 1914 trenches.

Focusing on England and UK perspectives, we have considered the lived realities of trends and habits in reading and writing and their shifting nature through a century, as use of text has expanded to include digital technologies and new multimodal literacy practices.

We have drawn on a wide range of documentary sources, including the Mass Observation Archive, and carried out a small life history study using interviews. We have also gathered data collected via social media. Taken together, these sources have enabled us to learn from and feature the voices of stakeholders throughout the period. We have sought to weave personal stories through the general evidence available in order to illustrate how reading and writing have evolved into 'literacy', and how communication using written text has evolved over time. We have seen, too, something of the shifting attitudes towards reading and writing and their impact on social mobilities. What is meant by literacy now is very different from the more easily defined acts of reading and writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

We have been conscious of the types of 'capital' associated with literacy and the extent to which oral expression in the development of communication practices have become inseparable from the 'literate'; what one reads and how one speaks hold different 'capital' in different strata of society.

As this review has emphasised, definitions and constructions of literacy are highly context-dependent and we must acknowledge the vital role of socio-historical context. This means that, as we move further into the twenty-first century, we are obliged not only to recognise the impact of digital technology, but the need to strive actively to understand how advancement in media and electronic text is changing constructions and practices of literacy and text. This in turn challenges notions of what it means to read and write today, and what it will mean in the future. The very act of carrying out a historical evidence review, and understanding the importance of acknowledging historical context within such debates, emphasises the continued need to research how constructions of literacy are changing in present times.

## 4.2 Responses to research questions

In conclusion we return to our six research questions, summarising our findings in relation to each and making recommendations for Booktrust.

### 4.2.1 How have conceptions of literacy in the UK changed during the last century?

We acknowledge anachronism in our own framing of this question, since literacy is a relatively recent term which first took on some shared currency as an umbrella term for reading and writing in the late nineteenth century (the first documented instance being in the United States in 1880). With the advent of the National Curriculum in schools in the late 1980s, literacy became the conventional term in education. In terms of current usage, whilst not quite contestable, it still falls short of a core conceptual centre. For most UK national and local policies, it is broadly identifiable with a traditional notion of reading and writing skills (with some recent, if limited, acknowledgment of oral expression as an important co-function). Elsewhere, and in critical communities, the term assumes political freight when used as an index of informed and active participation in communities (albeit enabled by reading and writing skills). Other current uses – such as in the terms ‘*visual literacy*’, ‘*emotional literacy*’ and ‘*e-literacy*’ – indicate a heterogeneity which enhances a broadly politicised conception.

What has become clear to us in the course of this study is that, whilst functional definitions of literacy may be useful they have in 2014 become overwritten with ideology, often a politically saturated perspective. We conclude that literacy comprehends a complexity of abilities to understand and use persuasively the dominant symbol systems of a culture – including the affective – for personal and community development. These abilities necessarily demand the manipulation of media and electronic text, in addition to alphabetic and numerical systems. The abilities vary in different social and cultural contexts according to politicised needs, demands and forms of education. **In future projects we recommend that Booktrust remains mindful of changing definitions and practices of literacy as technologies that make use of literacy, and extend literacy practices, evolve.**

### 4.2.2 How has literacy impacted on social mobility over the last hundred years?

Whilst there is little direct evidence to suggest a clear and consistent link between positive attitudes towards literacy and social mobility, the evidence discussed indicates that **positive attitudes towards literacy (including confidence in reading for work and for pleasure) can contribute towards the complex web of factors that influence opportunity and ability to be socially mobile**. Our review has identified, with some persuasion, that reading and writing to the point where one is skilled enough to find pleasure in reading can help when it comes to social mobility. However – and this is important – a positive attitude to literacy is not sufficient on its own to make an individual

socially mobile. It might create ambition, and even opportunity, but it is not enough 'just' to be able to read and write in today's world. People need much more than this. They need to thrive in circumstances where employment, health, and social networking (real and virtual) are supported. Their personal cultural capital needs to be valued and they need to be able to operate in different parts of society, overcoming certain structures that 'keep them in their place'. It will be important for Booktrust to continue to consider how **new arrivals in the UK who bring different languages and literacy practices to communities can be included in a socially just society. Additionally, Booktrust's work should seek new ways to work with communities where many languages are spoken.**

#### 4.2.3 To what extent has the teaching of literacy shifted between home and school during this time?

The teaching of literacy between home and school has had an interesting journey, and there is evidence of families reading for pleasure at all points in the period studied. Children from privileged backgrounds were often taught at home by a governess, whilst children living in poverty may not have attended school at all and had little or no access to books. Without doubt the free public libraries established in 1850 had an impact on access to books, particularly for those who could not afford to buy them. The National Home Reading Union, set up in 1889, was also a vehicle for the encouragement of all in reading for pleasure. This review has shown how the home has always played a part in reading, and how the reading activities in families have changed over time. Work with parents since the 1950s has been aimed at encouraging parents to be involved in their children's learning, and work since the 1980s has focused on parents being actively involved in supporting early literacy development. Booktrust's own initiatives have contributed significantly to this development in recent years. Without doubt, the home and family have been key to reading and writing, particularly in terms of reading for pleasure, but also (for some, and for a variety of reasons) as an alternative to schooling. Whilst we found no direct correlation between parents who did not read and the literacy of their children, **it seems to be the case that reading for pleasure 'rubs off' in the home.** This is not to say that parents who do not read rear children who do not read. As our family interview with Alan showed, some children will enjoy reading despite their parents' discouragement or disinterest. **Without doubt, families can support early reading development. Booktrust has had success in involving parents in reading for pleasure with their children. It may wish to consider reviewing its current programmes as a whole to identify and highlight successful approaches to enhancing home engagement in literacy.**

#### 4.2.4 What have been the impacts of societal and technological changes on literacy?

This review highlights the need to understand how literacy is socially constructed, and this means that we must actively strive to understand how societal and technological change is influencing what is meant by the terms 'literacy' and

'text', as well as what is meant by the terms being a 'reader' and 'writer'. The pace and nature of shifts in technological development have, we suggest, had an impact on literacy that no other generation has experienced. It would seem that new literacy practices are evolving with the evolution of new multimodal practices, including the role of images in communication, reading and writing. As our data gathered through social media have shown, **new technologies are now strongly impacting on, and shaping, literacy practices for all ages. In the future, Booktrust may wish to consider the development of Story Apps to maximise the availability of technology in terms of reading for pleasure using smart phones, tablets and laptop technologies.**

#### 4.2.5 To what extent has literacy influenced social mobility in relation to gender?

Understanding the interplay between gender, literacy and social mobility is complex. It is well documented that boys do not achieve as highly as girls in literacy-based assessment. This has remained consistent across the boundaries of time, place and social context. Similarly, girls and women report more positive attitudes towards literacy in comparison with boys and men. Yet, despite this 'advantage', women have struggled to attain education in comparison with men and continue to this day to remain underrepresented in the higher end of the job market.

This review indicates that positive attitudes towards literacy are therefore not sufficient in themselves to enable social mobility, given that, as a group, women have had (and continue to have) more positive attitudes towards reading and writing but fewer opportunities to achieve mobility in society.

Nevertheless, this review further suggests that there are various ways in which positive attitudes towards literacy support the potential for social mobility. Firstly, this review provides strong evidence to suggest that interaction with text, whether individual or part of a reading group, has helped women over the years to develop confidence and knowledge. It has provided them with 'cultural authority' as well as the language to voice opinions of the world around them. This is important as it indicates that literacy is a powerful tool for everyone, regardless of gender. Secondly, the review has highlighted the important role women play in supporting their children's literacy in the home. This has major implications for the study of family literacy as a whole as well as our continuing understanding of the impact of gender within this context.

Finally, this study has shown that reading materials in themselves make a significant contribution towards the perpetuation of social conventions that keep people 'in their place'. While it is clearly the case that this applies to issues of class, culture and ethnicity, the data has revealed that **stereotypical constructions of women and men in books and magazines have had an impact on opportunities for social mobility. This suggests a continued need to encourage skills of critical engagement with literature in order to challenge accepted discourses and social conventions.**

#### 4.2.6 How has literacy impacted on the social mobility of new arrivals to England in the last hundred years?

Responses to the needs of bi- and plurilingual learners have tended to be politicised, largely because they are closely connected to immigration policy, and consequently subject to political changes. The overriding position, however, is that languages other than English are seen primarily as a problem, an obstacle to integration and cohesion.

The invisibility of linguistic diversity from much of the curricula over the past hundred years can be perceived as an obstacle to the broader inclusion of new arrivals who bring with them a different language, even though there are many examples of children experiencing great academic success just a few years following their arrival. **Given the connections between academic success and social mobility, it would appear that, although there is no explicitly identifiable linkage between the social mobility of new arrivals to the UK and their literacy, the combination of multiple factors (undervalued home language, low economic status, lack of strength in the community) can lead to underachievement. Booktrust may wish further to consider how its programmes reach into communities with records of low social mobility.**

### 4.3 Conclusion

To return to our original aims and objectives: this study aimed to investigate the extent to which a relationship between attitudes to reading/writing and social mobility can be established, drawing on evidence about attitudes to reading and writing over the last century. Given Booktrust's own ethos and mission, understanding the role of the family in developing attitudes towards literacy remains a particular concern.

We conclude that, whilst there is little evidence to suggest a **direct link** between positive attitudes towards literacy and social mobility, there are strong indicators of the importance of reading, writing and 'literacy' in **contributing to** positive social mobility. Given that there are a number of factors associated with social mobility, however, such as access to education, family background, economic status, and health, this study has thrown light on some of the factors that inhibit social mobility and suggests ways in which these issues might be addressed.

- It is important that we acknowledge the complexity of the debate and understand that, as Graff cautions, it is dangerous to try to assign '*consequences*', '*implications*' or '*concomitants*' (1987: 19) to the acquisition of literacy, just as it is naïve to assume that education in itself can transform both people's '*sense of power and the existing social and economic hierarchies*' (Elasser and John-Steiner 1997: 361). Rather **we need to understand the need for social change and how educational intervention can support this.**
- There is a need to continue to tackle issues connected to disadvantage associated with social class and migration. This review has explored how



the reproduction of social and class structure has historically prevented certain groups of people from being socially mobile. Many of these issues remain today. **Research strongly indicates that social class is one of the greatest predictors of academic achievement – and it remains very difficult to move from one social bracket into another.** All of this suggests that we need to continue to research ways in which to tackle the issue of social disadvantage. This means supporting projects such as Booktrust's Booktime, and so on, which are designed to support all children at a crucial point in their education.

- For more than a hundred years, and, in fact, for far longer, this country has seen 'new arrivals' bringing with them 'new' languages and 'new' cultures. Many of these new arrivals have developed into academically and economically successful citizens, able to draw on their full language repertoire in order to afford themselves cultural, social and economic advantages. However, **there is significant evidence that some people are less included in schools and society as a whole, particularly when their language is perceived by others as low status and when they are economically disadvantaged.** There has historically been a marked reluctance to collect data on home languages in the UK, but without this data it is difficult to identify strategies which could lead to greater academic success and social mobility for all.
- There is a need to continue to understand how gender influences and inhibits the ability of men and women to achieve in society. **We must continue to understand and challenge social conventions that prevent individuals from accessing social mobility on the grounds of gender.** We also need further to explore ways to capitalise on the advantages of literacy – such as the promotion of self-confidence, extension of knowledge, and so on.
- This review has underlined the importance of the home in reading development and reading for pleasure, along with the need for children to engage with home literacy practices from their earliest years. It also further emphasises that literacy within the home is complex, influenced and inhibited by the other factors discussed in this review (social class, ethnicity, gender, etc). In particular, we have highlighted that **reading and writing are essential to achievement, yet literacy alone is not, and cannot be, responsible for social change.** Nonetheless, enhanced socio-cultural capital can be beneficial in learning to read. **Research has shown how families can support their children at home, this needs to be further embedded in practice in order that more parents can help their children to enhance their literacy and their socio-cultural capital.** It is clear that reading for pleasure is an essential component in reading success and enhanced life achievements. **The early years are crucial in fostering a love of reading for enjoyment, which runs in parallel with eagerness to learn to read and self-confidence in the ability to read from an early age.**
- As we move further into the twenty-first century, there is an urgent need

not only to *recognise* the impact of digital technology, but to **actively strive to understand how advancement in media and electronic text is changing constructions of literacy, text, and notions of what it means to read and write today, and in the future.**

We end this review where we began, reflecting on the importance of communication amongst troops. One Mass Observation correspondent penned what can be viewed as a tribute to the power of reading and writing for communication in everyday lives:

*A common pleasure in every barrack-room or mess with the personnel unable to go out – from lack of funds or other reasons – was young men quietly engaged writing to friends and family. No call was more looked forward to than mail call when incoming mail was handed out. For members of the armed Forces overseas and often in danger the links were vital. (S2246, male)*

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