

# Early reading experiences of white working-class trainee teachers

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## ABSTRACT

In Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) trainees who considered themselves white British working class were asked to be interviewed for a small-scale research project. Six students volunteered to be interviewed. They all self-identified as women, and ranged in age from 24 to 52. Initially the research project was focused upon the trainees' identification with characters in books that they read as children, but the discussion ranged beyond this to the reading background of their families, their experiences at school and their views of themselves as readers now. Most of the trainees remembered their mothers as reading role models. Most had positive experiences of learning to read at school, although this did not always translate into reading for pleasure. All trainees seemed to value reading fiction over non-fiction.

## KEYWORDS

SOCIAL CLASS

READING

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

FAMILY

## BACKGROUND

The University of East London (UEL) is based in Newham, east London, which in 2010 was one of the most economically deprived boroughs in the country. Its demographics have changed somewhat since the 2012 Olympics: 2015 indices of deprivation show that it is now the 25th most economically deprived borough in the country, rather than second (ONS 2015). The University is committed to widening participation, and works closely with local schools, colleges and employers to provide opportunities for students who have not traditionally

considered university education. The 2011 census figures for Newham residents' self-defined ethnic or cultural background were 43.5% Asian/Asian British, 29% White, 19.6% Black/Black British, 4.5% mixed/multiple ethnic group and 3.5% any other ethnic group. For religion the figures were 40% Christian, 32% Muslim, 8.8% Hindu, 2.1% Sikh, 1.2% part of another religious group, 9.5% not religious and 6.4% did not state their religion (2011 census data, [www.newham.info](http://www.newham.info)). The University has 19,000 students from 120 countries (UEL 2017). Cass School of Education and Communities serves a very 'local' community, and

is therefore representative of that community – north and east London and Essex.

## INDICATORS OF SOCIAL CLASS IN EDUCATION

Since schools do not collect data on parental occupation or income, free school meals are used as a proxy to measure deprivation (Great Britain, House of Commons 2014: 7). I am aware that this is not the same as social class and that it is a crude measure. It should be noted that I did not ask my participants whether or not they had

been in receipt of free school meals; nor did I ask about parental occupation.

## RESEARCH

The educational underperformance of white working-class children has been of concern for government and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Sir Michael Wilshaw in his speech on 20 June 2013 launching the report *Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on* refers to Ofsted research carried out in 1993 under Stewart Sutherland and in 2003 under David Bell (Ofsted 2013a). The Ofsted Annual Report of 2013/14 states:

*‘The achievement gap between economically disadvantaged children and their peers is not closing quickly enough in secondary schools. The achievements of disadvantaged children from some ethnic backgrounds show that it is possible to close the gap, but poor White children continue to perform less well than all others.’* (Ofsted 2014)

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012 report notes that the United Kingdom’s performance has stagnated since 2006. The UK has a higher GDP than most PISA countries, and proportionally spends more on education; however, the report states:

*‘As in many other countries, socio-economically disadvantaged students in the United Kingdom are less likely to succeed at school than their more advantaged peers. However, some countries are more successful than the United Kingdom in reducing the influence of socio-economic status on student performance.’* (OECD 2012)

The Ofsted report *Unseen children* notes that while there have been significant improvements in the educational performance of all children, there is a 20% gap in the number of children eligible for free school meals judged to have a good level of development, and that only 36%

INITIAL	AGE AND GENDER	WHERE GREW UP
C	26, F	East London
E	28, F	East London
G	52, F	North London
H	24, F	West Yorkshire
J	34, F	East London
M	26, F	Essex

of children eligible for free school meals achieve five good GCSEs (Ofsted 2013b).

Sullivan & Brown (2013) of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, University of London, used the 1970 cohort study to explore the role of reading for pleasure on cognitive scores at the age of 16. Their research suggests that parental education and reading had a greater impact on children’s academic performance than what they term ‘economic resources’: income, social class and home ownership.

Reay (1998), in her research into mothers’ involvement in their children’s primary schooling, states, ‘confidence in relation to schooling, a key component of cultural capital, is crucially connected to women’s own educational histories’ (p. 105).

I was interested to find out whether Reay’s finding was also true of white working-class trainee teachers on the Primary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme at UEL, where I was until July 2016 a senior lecturer. The trainee teachers have been academically successful, as they have successfully completed their undergraduate degrees and met the academic entry requirements for Initial Teacher Education. I wanted to find out to what extent their early reading experiences had informed their decisions.

I sought participants from the entire Primary PGCE cohort via e-mail through the virtual learning environment. I asked for volunteers who considered themselves white working class, and had six respondees, all of whom describe themselves as white working-

class women. The youngest was 24 and the oldest was 52. My interviews were fairly unstructured; while I had a list of areas I wanted to cover, I also asked supplementary questions where I wanted more information or clarity. If the interviewee had already addressed one of the areas, I didn’t repeat it. Four of my six participants grew up in London (three east London, one north London); one grew up in West Yorkshire and one in Essex, just outside London.

## THEMES ARISING

### 1 PRE-SCHOOL READING EXPERIENCES

All my participants had positive experiences of books pre-school. Two remember being able to read before going to school; Participant E had been taught by her mother. Participant H remembers being able to identify words and titles of books at nursery. On the other hand, Participant G says that her mother didn’t teach her how to read before starting school ‘because she thought school would teach me’. This tallies with my experience as a child: my mother prioritised me learning to dress myself and eat with cutlery before going to school over reading and academic learning.

### 2. HOME READING EXPERIENCES

Five of the six remember their mothers reading, although one (H) specifically mentions her father as her main reading role model; she says that she was copying her dad when borrowing books from the library. All remember their parents (and one remembers her grandparents)

reading to them. Only one (C) says that she doesn't remember either of her parents reading when she was a child. M commented: 'My mum eats books!'

A common theme is mothers reading more than fathers. I asked follow-up questions about what they remember about fathers reading; commonly 'Dad read (or reads) newspapers, not books' was the response. This may be because they associate me, as Primary lead for English with a particular interest in children's fantasy fiction, with reading novels, but it is an interesting point that reading newspapers and magazines was not seen as 'proper' reading by participants.

Public libraries were a common source of books. Two of the six trainees, E and C, who were at the younger end of the age range, explicitly mentioned that books were expensive so they had not had many at home. All participants stated that the wide range of choice was a positive experience for them. None mentioned any kind of coercion or discouragement from their parents as a result of any books being deemed inappropriate.

### 3. EARLY EXPERIENCES OF READING SUCCESS AT SCHOOL

Four of the six stated that they had early success in reading at school and had a positive self-image as a reader. However,

G remembers that her competitive streak, encouraging her to rush through the Peter and Jane reading scheme ahead of her peers, did not translate into wanting to read non-reading-scheme books: 'it took me a long time to want to read stories'. Becoming a 'free reader' (that is, completing the reading scheme) was seen as a rite of passage by two of the participants. H felt a sense of achievement in being permitted to go into the school hall and choose ungraded books in Year 5; J felt a sense of failure in not being able to do so until Year 6. C states that she was in a lot of intervention groups at primary school, but associates the end of these groups with starting to enjoy reading in Year 4. E discovered that she is dyslexic while at university, but says that it did not affect her at primary school.

### 4. IDENTIFICATION WITH CHARACTERS IN FAVOURITE BOOKS

Four of the six could identify with characters in books; C explicitly stated that the social class of the protagonist of her favourite story, *The Fib*, is why she identified with him:

*'My mum was a northerner and had a similar upbringing so I identified with it. I identified with the main character. It's working-class and gritty.'*

H identified with Sophie from *The Tiger*

*who Came to Tea* because she was an only child, and the talk of food and beer reminds her of when her dad came home after working away. E liked Jacqueline Wilson books because she liked reading about girls the same age as her; M found *Not Now, Bernard!* 'relatable' because of the feeling of being ignored that she remembered sometimes as a child, and because it was a 'naughty' story about a 'bad child'.

Four participants mentioned that their early reading experience contributed to their decisions about undergraduate study. E studied graphic design and mentions illustrating favourite books as a child. M, G and J all studied Early Childhood BA; all talked about their own love of reading supporting their study.

## CONCLUSIONS

Any conclusions drawn from so small a cohort can only be tentative. However, I think that in teachers' laudable aim to promote a love of story and pleasure in reading, there is a danger that we promote only one kind of reading as good. The type of reading that may be class-coded as 'low culture', that is, newspapers, magazines, instructional texts (such as DIY manuals) and popular biography, should not be invalidated, otherwise working-class children may not recognise what their parents do as reading. There is equally a danger in coding book-reading as 'valid' and the consumption of reading materials on tablets, smart phones and e-readers as 'invalid'. Secondly, allowing choice and freedom in independent reading is vital. The joy and richness the participants described in being able to choose for themselves in libraries, even those who said that there were a lot of books in their home, was infectious. Investment in a library of texts in primary schools, outside of graded reading schemes, may serve to mitigate the damage that library closures will do. Thirdly, celebrating achievement and making learning to read as successful as possible for working-class children is something that I will be advocating for my future students. ■



Image co [www.teachertoolkit.co.uk](http://www.teachertoolkit.co.uk) - the 1980s classroom

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