

# Youth Literacy and Employability Commission

The report of the All-Party Parliamentary Literacy Group.  
Compiled by KPMG and the National Literacy Trust.





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# Foreword

One in five young people aged 18 to 24 are not in full-time education or employment. This has significant implications for the national economy, as well as the futures of the young people themselves. Youth unemployment is one of the most important issues facing our country.

Evidence gathered for the Youth Literacy and Employability Commission clearly shows that there is a strong link between youth unemployment and literacy skills. The business sector regularly expresses frustration at the lack of practical literacy skills among school leavers and 15% of employers provide remedial literacy training. This situation has not improved despite the continued increase in attainment in schools.

The frustration of employers highlights a gap between their literacy expectations and the literacy that is taught and measured in schools. This frustration is also felt by teachers, who told us of their concerns about pupils' ability to make use of their classroom learning in a workplace context.

The young people we talked to expressed concern about their futures; in a survey, half said they were worried about getting a job when they leave school. However, they have started to formulate career aspirations and showed they were keen to gain the skills they need to succeed. We should be using these aspirations to create a strong appetite for improving literacy skills, and ensuring that the

most disadvantaged children in particular are encouraged to develop their aspirations and understand what skills they need to achieve them.

Partnerships between education and business have an important role to play here. We heard a great deal of evidence about activity that is already taking place, but work is needed to ensure that partnerships have the greatest possible impact on the young people involved. A better evidence base is needed for this.

I hope that this commission helps move the debate towards a shared definition of workplace literacy that is accepted by both the education and business sectors, as we try to

reduce the gap between education and employability. I also look forward to seeing more partnerships between the education and business sectors that will foster young people's career aspirations and increase their understanding of the literacy demands of their future workplace.



**Stephen McPartland MP**



# Executive summary

1. Youth unemployment in the UK is a national priority: A fifth of 18 to 24-year-olds are not in full-time education or employment. The most recent study of international literacy highlights that this is closely related to low youth literacy levels. The correlation between literacy and low youth employment is reinforced by well-documented frustration from the business community. One survey has noted that 15% of employers provide remedial literacy training to school leavers.
2. This frustration does not correspond to academic measures of literacy. Literacy attainment in schools by this cohort (who have benefited from the literacy and education strategies of the past two decades) was stronger than their predecessors.
3. Addressing the gap between the literacy expectations of employers and the literacy taught and measured in schools is therefore a crucial issue: it is about our national economic performance as well as the extent to which our schools support social mobility and social justice.
4. Evidence submitted to this commission reveals significant fault lines in the debate: there is a lack of consensus on what literacy means and there is significant confusion as to the role of business in determining what skills are taught and how they are assessed.
5. This frustration is felt by many teachers who are concerned that they are not given the opportunity to use employment and real-life scenarios as a way to teach and assess literacy. There are also concerns that assessment that downplays speech and language skills as a vital element of literacy will fail to prepare young people for employment.
6. At the same time, there is evidence to suggest that while many businesses are deeply committed to education and literacy, the sector may not be fulfilling its potential as a partner in education. The evidence base for effective practice is patchy and partial.
7. Most significantly, young people's own aspirations – the most precious resource in raising literacy levels, creating social mobility and building a future workforce – are frequently left out of the equation.
8. To address this, we believe a deeper partnership needs to be developed between business and education, which focuses on growing young people's literacy by raising their realistic aspirations. The 11 to 14 age group should be a particular focus for this. The move to academies offers a new opportunity for refreshing partnerships between business and education.
9. A common definition of literacy, which schools share with business and which is embedded in the curriculum, assessment and qualifications, needs to be established at a national level. It also needs to be owned by local business and schools.
10. Evidence should be gathered on interventions and partnerships between business and schools that raise skill levels and could be replicated. This evidence needs to be disseminated to the education and business communities.
11. At all times, there needs to be a particular focus on partnerships between schools and business that raise and exploit young people's aspirations for their futures (beyond education) as a vital stimulus to literacy and learning.



# 1. Introduction

Young people in England aged 16 to 24 have among the lowest literacy levels internationally, ranking 21 out of 24 in a recent comparison of the richest countries in the world<sup>1</sup>. More worryingly, the survey shows that “England is the only country where the oldest age group has higher proficiency in both literacy and numeracy than the youngest group”. So the young people entering the workforce have skills levels that are worse than those who are about to leave, and this has serious implications for our international competitiveness.

Poor skills are already impacting on individuals’ employment prospects and social mobility. Youth unemployment has increased exponentially since the financial crisis in 2007; one in five young people aged 16 to 24 are currently unemployed<sup>2</sup>. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission<sup>3</sup> reported recently that while the labour market has been more resilient than expected, with more people in work than ever before, younger workers have benefited the least. Numbers of young people unemployed for two years or more are at a 20-year high.

The business sector frequently raises concerns over school leavers’ literacy levels and general employability skills. This is often translated into assertions that schools are not properly preparing young people for the demands of the workplace. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) argues that “employability skills” are a set of behaviours that can only be developed over time through a young person’s progression<sup>4</sup>. It lists communication and literacy as crucial skills for employability, along with

self-management, team-working, business and customer awareness, problem solving, numeracy and IT proficiency.

However, many teachers and education leaders feel that their responsibility – indeed, the criteria by which they are judged – is ensuring their pupils achieve within the education system, and this does not necessarily equate to developing those same skills that employers demand.

Within this dichotomy, very little consideration has been given to young people themselves and their career ambitions. Many young people have strong and positive aspirations for their lives beyond education, which are of vital importance in any effort to drive up literacy skills in preparation for the workplace. However, recent changes mean schools are no longer required to provide work experience to pupils. Therefore, many young people leave education having had very little contact with the world of work, which means very little chance to work out what they need to do to fulfil their ambitions or how they will need to apply their learning in this context.

The Youth Literacy and Employability Commission is a joint venture between the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy and the National Literacy Trust. It set out to gather evidence for the first time from all three stakeholders – employers, the education sector and young people.

This report presents the problem; analyses the views of young people, employers and the education sector; and looks at how business and schools can work in partnership to foster young people’s aspirations and demonstrate why literacy is of

vital importance to them. It makes recommendations to Government for a way forward to ensure that all young people enter the world of work with the skills required to succeed and fulfil their ambitions.

A range of evidence has been collected as part of the commission, including:

- Two reviews of relevant research, presenting evidence on employers’ and young people’s views on literacy and employability
- A survey of education practitioners, conducted through the National Literacy Trust
- National Literacy Trust research with 35,000 young people
- A survey of young people, carried out in conjunction with First News children’s newspaper
- An employer consultation carried out by KPMG
- An expert witness session in the House of Commons

While there are similar concerns about school leavers’ numeracy and other skills, and their impact on the national workforce profile, the remit of this commission was restricted to literacy. However, since there is a strong link between literacy and wider communication skills, it provides the vital underpinning to a person’s employability. As much of the evidence shows, literacy is a vital factor in a young person’s ability to gain employment and thrive in the workplace.

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1. [www.skills.oecd.org/OECD\\_Skills\\_Outlook\\_2013.pdf](http://www.skills.oecd.org/OECD_Skills_Outlook_2013.pdf)

2. [www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05871](http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05871)

3. Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013) State of the Nation 2013: social mobility and child poverty in Great Britain, [www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2013](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2013)

4. CBI (2012) First steps: A new approach for our schools, [www.cbi.org.uk/media/1845483/cbi\\_education\\_report\\_191112.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1845483/cbi_education_report_191112.pdf)

# 2. Background

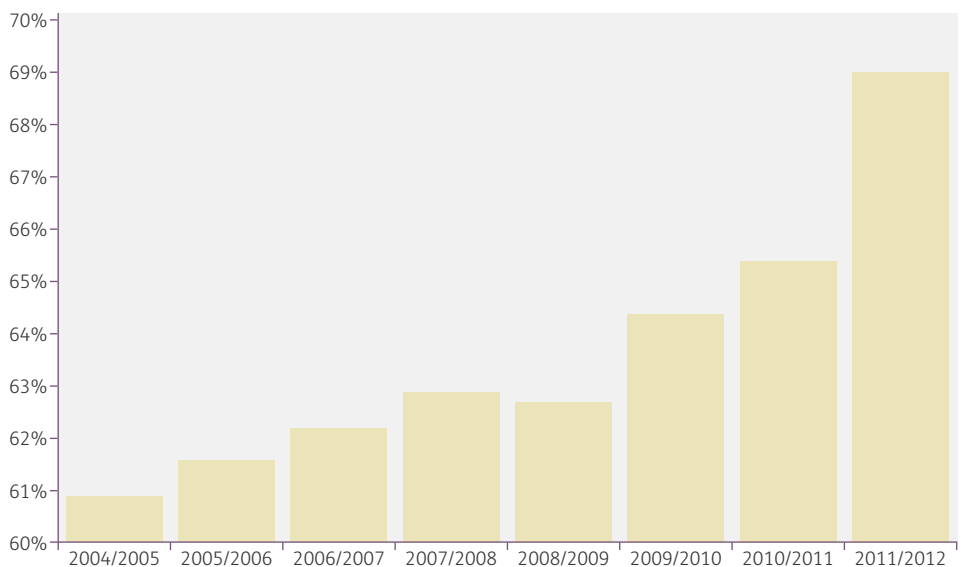
## 2.1 What is the problem?

Many employers believe that school leavers have inadequate literacy skills. In the latest CBI survey<sup>5</sup>, 32% report dissatisfaction with young people's literacy levels; 35% say they have organised remedial training for young people joining from school or college, most commonly in literacy, provided by 15%. 69% of businesses want primary schools to focus on literacy and numeracy. This is also most commonly (39%) cited as what should be the priority for 11 to 14-year-olds. As CBI data also shows<sup>6</sup>, literacy and numeracy skills are one of the most important factors employers weigh up when recruiting school and college leavers, cited by 50%, behind attitude to work (87%) and general aptitudes (57%).

Young people are disproportionately represented in unemployment figures; just over 20% of 16 to 24-year-olds are currently unemployed<sup>7</sup>. Youth unemployment studies (UKCES, 2012<sup>8</sup>; Bivand, 2012<sup>9</sup>; Lee et al., 2012<sup>10</sup>; Petrolo and van Reenen, 2012<sup>11</sup>) outline an array of interconnected causes, and one of the frequently cited ones relates to the young people's skills on leaving school and entering the job market.

On the other hand, the proportion of 15 and 16-year-olds who achieve English GCSE at grades A\* to C has increased steadily since 2005, and in 2012 69% of students achieved this benchmark<sup>12</sup> (see figure 1).

Figure 1: GCSE English A\* – C from 2005 to 2012



Employers' dissatisfaction may be explained by the number of young people not achieving this standard. However, employers also express dissatisfaction with the literacy skills of young people who have achieved a good pass level in the subject. Many large employers use their own literacy tests as part of the application process, and find failure even among those who possess the right qualifications for the job. 20% of employers also report shortcomings in the literacy skills of graduates<sup>13</sup>.

If students successfully pass English exams, but then fail in the workplace, several questions emerge. Are schools not placing enough emphasis on literacy? Are students unable to

transfer the skills learned in the classroom to the working context? Do employers and the education sector mean the same thing by "literacy"? Can and should literacy for the work environment be taught at school? Do young people understand the importance of literacy skills?

While it is clear that young people cannot possess a strong set of employability skills without an adequate level of literacy, it is less clear, perhaps, the level to which this has improved or worsened in recent years; whether the effect is magnified in the case of pre-existing employees or new school leavers; whether greater interaction with technology lessens or worsens literacy problems;

5. CBI (2013) Changing the pace: CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2013  
[www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education\\_and\\_skills\\_survey\\_2013.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education_and_skills_survey_2013.pdf)

6. CBI (2012) Learning to grow: what employers needs from education and skills, CBI Education and Skills Survey 2012,  
[www.cbi.org.uk/media/1514978/cbi\\_education\\_and\\_skills\\_survey\\_2012.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1514978/cbi_education_and_skills_survey_2012.pdf)

7. [www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05871](http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05871)

8. [www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/the-youth-employment-challenge.pdf](http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/the-youth-employment-challenge.pdf)

9. [www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/tucfiles/generation\\_lost\\_touchstone\\_extras\\_2012.pdf](http://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/tucfiles/generation_lost_touchstone_extras_2012.pdf)

10. [www.impetus-pef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Short-term-crisis-long-term-problem.pdf](http://www.impetus-pef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Short-term-crisis-long-term-problem.pdf)

11. [www.cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp338.pdf](http://www.cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp338.pdf)

12. Data from 2012 is at [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/219341/sfr02\\_202013.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/219341/sfr02_202013.pdf).  
A summary is provided in Clark and Formby (2013) Young People's Views on Literacy Skills and Employment,  
[www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt\\_research/5451](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/5451)

13. [www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education\\_and\\_skills\\_survey\\_2013.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education_and_skills_survey_2013.pdf)

and whether the teaching of literacy in secondary school has missed a trick by not placing it in the context of the workplace and career aspirations.

There is also the question of whether schools are able to provide young people with the wider skills they require to enter the working environment. This is perhaps particularly relevant in light of the abolition of compulsory work experience during Year 10, the development of a new National Careers Service, the development of new National Curriculum requirements, the proposed raising of standards within GCSEs and the outcomes of the Richard Review of Apprenticeships, among other factors.

Education is an important driver of social mobility. The National Literacy Trust's Literacy Changes Lives review (2008<sup>14</sup>) presents overwhelming evidence that literacy has a significant relationship with a person's happiness and success. It also shows that men and women with poor literacy and/or numeracy are least likely to be in full-time employment and more likely to be in manual jobs compared with those who are competent in both. Poor literacy skills can also be a serious barrier to progressing once in employment: 63% of men and 75% of women with very low literacy skills have never received a promotion. More worrying for these people are trends in the job market; the CBI has estimated that by 2020 46% of jobs will be managerial, professional or associated roles<sup>15</sup>.

The OECD Survey of Adult Skills<sup>16</sup> also showed that skills transform lives, generate prosperity and promote social inclusion. Without the right skills, people are kept at the margins of society, technological progress does not translate into economic growth, and enterprises and countries

can't compete in today's globally connected and increasingly complex world. The survey showed that, in all countries, individuals with lower proficiency in literacy were more likely to report poor health, to believe that they have little impact on political processes, and to not participate in associative or volunteer activities than those with better literacy skills. It also shows that the level of literacy in England is below the OECD average. Moreover, the relationship between literacy and social inequality in England is one of the strongest among all the countries surveyed.

## 2.2 What does literacy mean?

Employers' increasing dissatisfaction with the literacy levels of school leavers, at a time when achievement in literacy as measured through qualifications and school attainment has itself been increasing, suggests there may be different concepts being described; that academic literacy and literacy for the workplace may be qualitatively different.

The Rose Review<sup>17</sup> defined literacy for the purpose of its remit "as covering speaking, listening, reading and writing". However, the final report also highlighted that "Discussion of reading and writing in primary education sometimes fails to recognise the central importance of developing children's spoken communication." According to Ofsted<sup>18</sup> "the definition of literacy should be taken to include the ability to speak and listen effectively alongside the skills of reading and writing."

Among the five aims listed for the school curriculum, by an expert panel review in 2011<sup>19</sup>, the first was that provision should "Satisfy future economic needs for individuals and for the workforce as a whole, including the development of secure knowledge and skills in communication, literacy and mathematics..." This report also reiterated the view "that language enrichment work across the curriculum should continue throughout the period of compulsory education".



14. [www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt\\_research/243](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/243) Also see [www.kpmg.co.uk/pubs/ECR2006.pdf](http://www.kpmg.co.uk/pubs/ECR2006.pdf)

15. CBI (2013) Changing the pace: CBI/Pearson education and skills survey 2013  
[www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education\\_and\\_skills\\_survey\\_2013.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education_and_skills_survey_2013.pdf)

16. [www.skills.oecd.org/OECD\\_Skills\\_Outlook\\_2013.pdf](http://www.skills.oecd.org/OECD_Skills_Outlook_2013.pdf)

17. Rose (2009) Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum: Final Report,  
[webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100202100434/dcsf.gov.uk/primarycurriculumreview/](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100202100434/dcsf.gov.uk/primarycurriculumreview/)

18. Ofsted (2011), writing and communication (literacy), [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/reading-writing-and-communication-literacy](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/reading-writing-and-communication-literacy)

19. Department for Education (2011) The Framework for the National Curriculum. A report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum review,  
[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/175439/NCR-Expert\\_Panel\\_Report.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175439/NCR-Expert_Panel_Report.pdf)





However, many teachers feel that verbal communication is often pushed out in schools, and this was reflected in the evidence we received. Emma Boyle, a teacher at Bishop Challoner School, said: “Business literacy incorporates and underpins the ability to work with all levels of colleagues and clients (professionally and competently), to be an effective communicator at all levels, including public speaking and presenting ideas, formal writing, using business appropriate language, ability to interpret complex documents, technical writing, etc. School literacy focuses largely on spelling, punctuation, etc. and not the deeper points or the key skills and abilities needed for modern business.”

Other practitioners referred to the way in which literacy skills were put to use in different contexts. Kirsten Francis, Manager of Norfolk’s Schools and Young People’s Library Services, said: “There is a difference between functional literacy – understanding and comprehension of text [to] act on instructions and interpret information

relevant to the field you are employed in and ‘true fluency’ – being able to write reports, analyse, assess and summarise complex information, collate information in meaningful ways and write in a reflective way about practice, which are required by many employers who employ people in basic wage work, e.g. the social care sector.”

The CBI<sup>20</sup> has its own definition of what it means for an individual to be functionally literate, which says an individual must be able to:

- read and understand basic texts – drawing out relevant information
- construct properly spelt, grammatically correct writing that is suitable for the audience
- write with legible handwriting
- understand oral communications and react appropriately
- be sufficiently articulate to communicate orally.

Like the definitions provided by the Rose Review and Ofsted, the CBI

version highlights the importance of speaking and listening. This is interesting in light of the move to remove the speaking and listening element from the overall GCSE English grade, which was announced earlier this year<sup>21</sup>. Teachers’ views on this are included in chapter 3.

Despite the similarities in definitions, there is no agreement of what literacy means in the context of work and employability and whether this definition should be the same in an education environment. As well as good basic literacy, many employers say they want staff who are able to research, redact, and communicate information, to produce appropriate correspondence, and communicate effectively both in writing and verbally. This implies that, while not losing the baseline definition of literacy, we should also ensure we teach and assess higher order literacy skills that contribute so crucially to overall employability.

20. CBI (2006) Working on the Three Rs: Employers’ Priorities for Functional Skills in Maths and English and re-iterated in CBI publications thereafter: this list is taken from CBI (2011) Education and Skills Survey, [www.cbi.org.uk/media/1051530/cbi\\_edi\\_education\\_skills\\_survey\\_2011.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1051530/cbi_edi_education_skills_survey_2011.pdf)

21. [www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-22292779](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-22292779)

## 2.3 How is literacy assessed?

In an effort to drive up literacy standards, the Coalition Government has adopted an approach that emphasises the “basics” of literacy, including the introduction of a spelling, punctuation and grammar test in Year 6 and awarding extra marks for accuracy in these in GCSE exams. However, a report by Ofsted<sup>22</sup> earlier this year on secondary literacy criticised the “diminished view” of what literacy encompasses and called for schools to take a wider view of literacy that will underpin teaching and learning policies, and support pupils’ wider employability. Literacy teaching, it said, should encompass broader skills where pupils are ready “to engage with challenging concepts, to make constructive connections between subjects and to learn from the thinking and experience of others”.

Patricia Metham, Head of English at Ofsted, criticised a focus on exams and achieving results for creating a generation of teachers “who teach for the test and there is reluctance to be innovative”. This view has been confirmed by the frustration of some teachers who responded to the survey, who feel they must teach how to pass exams rather than giving their students the skills to succeed after they leave school and enter the world of work.

An earlier Ofsted report<sup>23</sup> on English teaching highlighted the issue of subject relevance to pupils and how this impacted on both their enthusiasm and progress, particularly “in an age of substantial technological change”. The report also referred specifically to the issue of school leavers’ literacy levels not meeting the expectations of many employers:

“The blame is then directed towards schools, although examples are legion of businesses that subvert standard spellings and syntax in their trade names and slogans, and of official publications and signage that disregard standard rules of punctuation. The message for those still at school or college is that the rules and conventions they are being taught have little to do with ‘real life’.”

Evidence<sup>24</sup> shows that formative assessment, focusing on qualitative feedback by teachers and students rather than a simple score, is one of the most effective ways of improving students’ results. However, it has not produced the results it should in England as it has not been properly understood. Professor Dylan Wiliam has said<sup>25</sup> that “it turned from a way of encouraging students to ‘own’ their learning...into a way of measuring progress in fine detail.”

In an action research project delivered by the National Literacy Trust, Transforming Writing, 68% of pupils made above average progress in writing when systematic formative assessment was used across the whole school<sup>26</sup>. Greater use of formative assessment in literacy could improve pupils’ ability to reflect on and improve their own work and that of others, skills that are important in the “real world” context of the workplace.

Other recent research<sup>27</sup> has looked at how technologies have changed the way we communicate and new literacy practices that have emerged through our online and digital communications. Merchant (2009) claims that “literacy itself is changing”; yet our current curriculum does little to acknowledge these changes. Our current education

system does not maximise the literacy opportunities new technologies present.

Grace Breen, Lead Education Policy Adviser at the CBI, described employers’ need to quickly assess applicants’ basic practical skills – the ability to read and interpret text effectively, write in a way that clearly and accurately conveys meaning, use correct spelling and grammar and understand and respond appropriately to oral communications. She said, “The widely accepted baseline qualification for English...a grade C at GCSE, must be a guarantee of these basic practical skills.” However, she also acknowledged the role of the wider package of skills that employers are demanding, which is much harder to infer from attainment at GCSE: “The primary concern when we surveyed our members when they are recruiting school and college leavers, is not these literacy skills, but the attitude and aptitude to work.”

National Literacy Trust research, and many other studies, indicate the importance of reading fiction for attainment. However, current assessment of GCSE English is focused on non-fiction, driving out fiction from the curriculum at both Key Stage 3 and 4. Witnesses giving evidence agreed on the importance of reading beyond the basic skills of decoding and vocabulary. Russell Hobby, General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said: “I do not think we spend enough time on whole books and literature. I think if we want to get people excited about reading, it is not the basic skills, but a love of reading that drives that. I do not think it is cool enough in business to be interested in literature for its own sake, as opposed to, say, management literature.”

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22. Ofsted (2013), Improving literacy in secondary schools: a shared responsibility [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120363](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120363)

23. Ofsted (2009) English at the crossroads, [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080247](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080247)

24. [www.faa-training.measuredprogress.org/documents/10157/15652/InsideBlackBox.pdf](http://www.faa-training.measuredprogress.org/documents/10157/15652/InsideBlackBox.pdf)

25. [www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6367610](http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6367610)

26. National Literacy Trust (2013, forthcoming) Transforming Writing evaluation report

27. Davies, J. and Merchant, G. (2009) Web 2.0 for schools: learning and social participation, New York: Peter Lang, Merchant, G. (2009) Literacy in virtual worlds, Journal of Research in Reading, Volume 32, Issue 1, 2009, pp. 38–56, and Davies, J. (2011) Facework on Facebook as a new literacy practice, Computers & Education, Volume 59, Issue 1, August 2012, pp. 19–29

# 3. Perspectives on youth literacy and employability

## 3.1 Employers

There is a wealth of literature and surveys documenting employers' perceptions of the skills of young people entering the job market. In 2013, the CBI's annual Education and Skills Survey showed 32% of employers are dissatisfied with literacy skills<sup>28</sup>, and similar figures have been reported since 2003. In 2012, employers placed literacy as the second highest priority for those teaching 14 to 19-year-olds (50%, after 71% for employability skills, with numeracy featuring third with 45% and communication skills fourth at 42%)<sup>29</sup>.

2013 survey data shows the level of concern about basic literacy skills varies between sectors – it hits a peak in the public sector, with 73% of those questioned expressing concern, compared with 69% in retail and hospitality, 68% in construction (health and safety reports are an issue of substantial concern), 52% in manufacturing, 42% in engineering, IT and science and 42% in professional services. In every sector this is greater than concerns about basic numeracy skills, although in some sectors IT skills beat both as a cause for concern.

UKCES data<sup>30</sup> on literacy and numeracy differs substantially from the level of concern reported in the CBI survey: only 5% of recruiters cited 16-year-old school leavers as poorly or very poorly prepared in terms of literacy and numeracy, decreasing to 3% of 17 to 18-year-old school leavers, 2% of college leavers and only 1% of those who

have completed higher education. In terms of employer concerns about specific skills, literacy stands at 29% (numeracy 26%) but with softer skills being of more concern to employers (job specific skills 66%, planning and organisation skills 41% and problem solving skills 37%, by way of example). However, 33% expressed concern about written communication skills and 38% regarding oral communication skills.

Although with different percentages, both surveys demonstrate how literacy is a concern for employers and must be therefore a priority for students.

Interviews with some of the largest UK employers have confirmed these views, as well as perceptions that the trend has worsened in recent years. One declared that the level of functional literacy is lower today

than 5-10 years ago, and that today the number of people who join the company with English and maths at GCSE is lower than in the past.

In evidence given to the commission, there were also concerns about a perceived lack of rigour in education in terms of literacy. Dame Gail Rebuck, Chair of the Penguin Random House UK Board, said, "I have taken countless business leaders to schools...who have been shown work very proudly by teachers, which is full of spelling mistakes. I have said quietly, 'You might be very proud of this, but it is full of spelling mistakes.' They say, 'That does not matter, because actually what is important is the ideas contained in this.' I say, 'In the real world that does matter.'" Nina Mills, Balfour Beatty, made the same point: "I have been told on more than one occasion by educators and students alike that (disability and



28. CBI (2013) Changing the pace: CBI/Pearson education and skills survey 2013  
[www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education\\_and\\_skills\\_survey\\_2013.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/2119176/education_and_skills_survey_2013.pdf)

29. CBI (2012) Learning to grow: what employers needs from education and skills, CBI Education and Skills Survey 2012,  
[www.cbi.org.uk/media/1514978/cbi\\_education\\_and\\_skills\\_survey\\_2012.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1514978/cbi_education_and_skills_survey_2012.pdf)

30. [www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/the-youth-employment-challenge.pdf](http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/the-youth-employment-challenge.pdf)

second languages notwithstanding) it is not important to be able to spell correctly, as long as the meaning can be understood as this is what examinations require. From an employment perspective this is not the case; the documentation that is produced as standard in most career areas today demands significant literacy skill.”

The UK is unique among all European countries in not requiring own-language study at ages 16 to 19. As the Wolf Review of Vocational Education stated, in 2011: “Mathematics and own language skills are central to vocational success and educational progress. In England, Maths and English GCSEs (A\*-C) have become the key indicators of acceptable levels of attainment, used by gatekeepers to sift, select, and determine access. The importance of these subjects has been recognised for decades; and yet English education continues to be unique in the most dysfunctional of ways.”<sup>31</sup>

When asked about possible reasons behind the problem, some employers shared the view that schools do not place enough emphasis on teaching grammar, spelling and punctuation; and no time is dedicated today to teaching how to write professional communications<sup>32</sup>. Employers also appreciate that it is difficult for young people to understand the link between literacy and employability; and believe that through work experience, young people can appreciate the importance of correct communication to succeed at work.

Many employers complained about the use of text-speak when writing in a professional context and frequently mentioned young people not having a grasp of what is appropriate or inappropriate in business communication. However, there was not a strong view on an overt link between poor literacy levels and the increased use of technology from the people spoken with for this review.

While there are clearly legitimate concerns that young people do not always have the relevant skills to construct a formal business letter or

email, some respondents felt that some of the skills sought were out-of-step with the way in which businesses operate today – a trend which is only likely to increase in the future.

### 3.2 Teachers

While most teachers would agree that pupils should leave them ready for the world of work, a survey of practitioners – including teachers, literacy consultants, librarians and university lecturers – raised a number of recurring themes in relation to what is taught in school and what is expected by many employers.

In general, they seem to agree that many employers have a rather narrow definition of literacy, defining it as good spelling, punctuation and grammar, while failing to recognise that true literacy means more than that. However, there were also concerns over pupils’ ability to transfer their skills to the working environment. Catharine Driver, a language and literacy consultant, said: “Reading and writing in employment settings is very different. The audiences and purposes are so different, each setting has its own literacy genres and jargon; such as writing a report for a manager, or a set of instructions about how to complete a process.”

Some teachers expressed concerns about the relevance of some aspects of the English curriculum to workplace contexts. Victoria Gilbert, English teacher at Torpoint Community College, said: “Students are being asked to learn grammatical terminology and sit exams on Shakespeare, and then being asked to transfer those skills to their everyday life and workplace. The question that comes to my mind is ‘What literacy skills are employers looking for?’ Online communication skills? Telephone skills? Letter writing?”

As one teacher describes it: “Due to government pressure English teaching has evolved into specifically teaching towards controlled assessment tasks and exam preparation. In most cases this is fine, but for some students they

can perform for the tasks, but may not be able to transfer these skills into the workplace and therefore there may be an assumption that their actual skills do not reflect the grade they have achieved”.

This was echoed by Julie Cordiner, Lead on School Led Partnership at Middlesbrough County Council: “League tables don’t place emphasis in right place to improve employability. Good grades are effective at getting students interviews, though they don’t necessarily translate into relevant skills and students with those good grades still often don’t get the jobs.”

Distinctions were often made by teachers between a “prescriptive GCSE syllabus” focused on writing essays about Victorian texts and modern manifestations of literacy and communication skills in the workplace. Suzy Kendall, English teacher at Denefield School, added, “The emphasis on a final exam will not teach children how to use word processors properly e.g. using spelling and grammar check. There will be no place for redrafting skills.” Ultimately, as another teacher expressed it, their focus has to be on ensuring their students pass exams not that they learn skills for their future jobs.

Teachers are also worried that removing the assessment of speaking and listening from GCSE English could result in these skills being considered less important. Victoria Gilbert said, “Removing speaking and listening assessment from GCSE devalues the importance of communicating verbally and in my opinion is perhaps more relevant to the workplace than basic writing skills.” Suzy Kendall agreed: “Not examining speaking and listening means that schools/English depts will marginalise speaking skills within their offering and this is the literacy skill probably most relevant to the workplace.”

31. Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report, Professor Alison Wolf, April 2011, [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180504/DFE-00031-2011.pdf)

32. An employer consultation was carried out by KPMG to gather evidence for the commission. For details see appendix.

### 3.3 Young people

While employers' perceptions of the skills of young people entering the job market have been well-documented, there is a dearth of similar studies outlining the perceptions of young people themselves – both with respect to general employment skills and literacy skills, in particular.

Morris et al (1999) reported that young people aged 15 to 24 believe employers are most likely to seek communication skills, general education, good appearance and team working skills. Johnson and Burden (2003) found that young people recognise the importance of soft skills beyond their formal qualifications and mention communication skills, team working ability, organisational skills and customer service as the most important skills to succeed at work.

A recent National Literacy Trust survey<sup>33</sup> also highlighted young people's awareness of the importance of communication skills. Of the 35,000 8 to 16-year-olds surveyed, nine in 10 (86.1%) agreed that good communication skills are important to get a job. Indeed, when asked what the most important skill is to succeed in life, most believed it is speaking and listening, followed by maths.

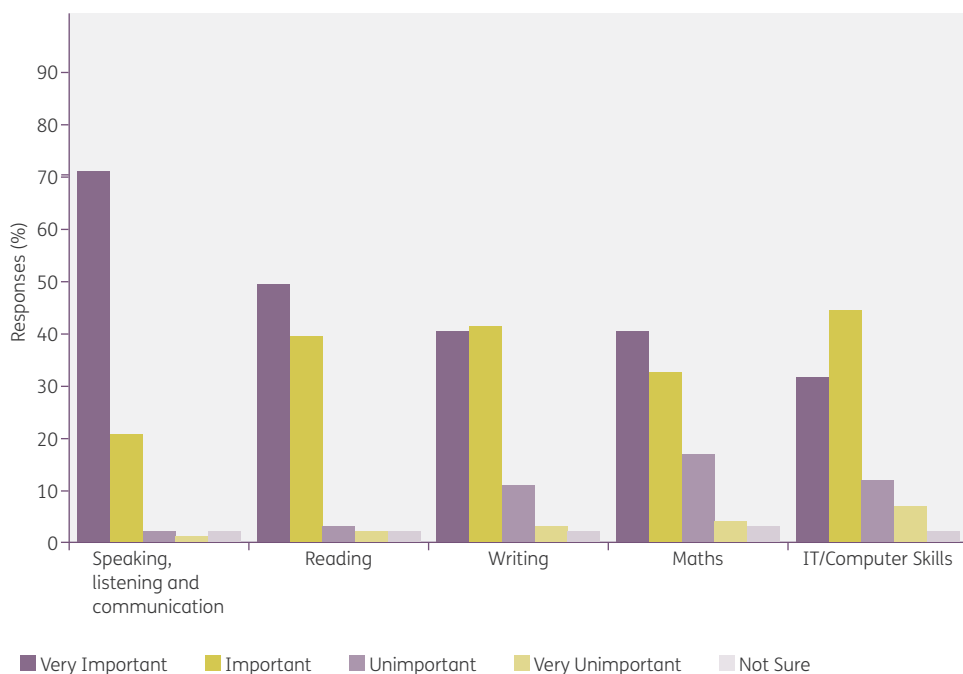
However, those surveyed seemed less able to make the link between more traditional literacy skills and employment. Only 56% agreed that if they are good at writing they will get a better job when they grow up, which means that four in 10 children and young people do not appear to see the link between writing skills and their job prospects.

The fact that a large number of young people do not see the link between their writing ability and their success when they start working is clearly an issue which needs addressing, especially since employers have such high expectations of literacy and consider it a key factor for employability.

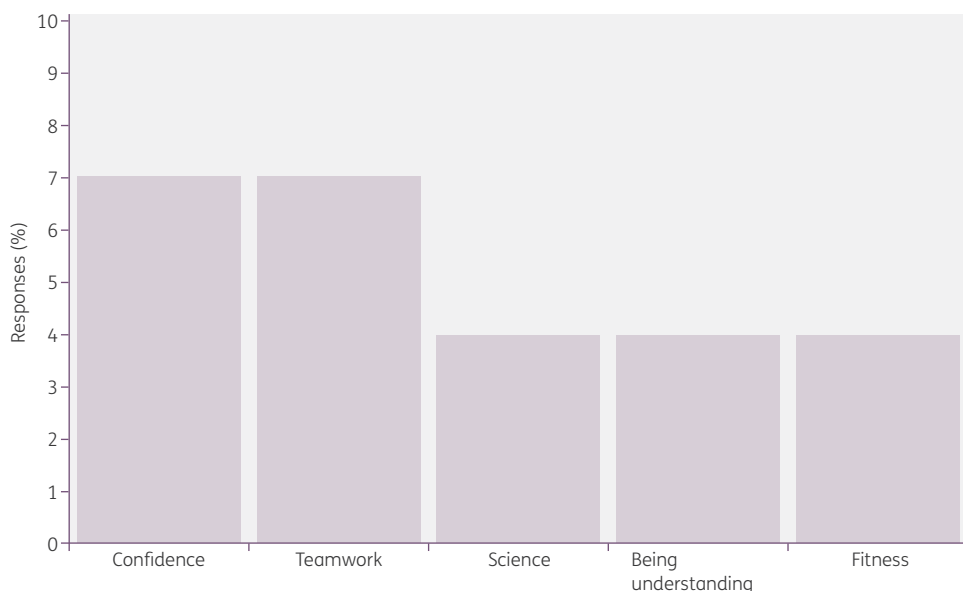
These findings are further confirmed by the survey conducted in partnership with First News children's newspaper. This found that, among the sample of 177, young people considered speaking, listening and communication to be the most important skills required for

employment. Maths was considered the most unimportant, followed by IT/computer skills and writing. Young people regularly cited confidence and teamwork as additional important skills for the job they want.

#### How important are the following skills for the job you want?



#### Is there any other skill you think is important?



33. Clark and Formby (2013) Young People's Views on Literacy Skills and Employment, [www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt\\_research/5451](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/5451).

A study by City and Guilds<sup>34</sup> maintains that young people perceive key subjects such as English and maths as important for the workplace, but 16 to 18-year-olds report that the teaching of mathematics should be made more relevant by teaching “real world” skills. The relevance of skills learned at school to day-to-day working life has been frequently mentioned also by the teachers who have provided evidence to the commission.

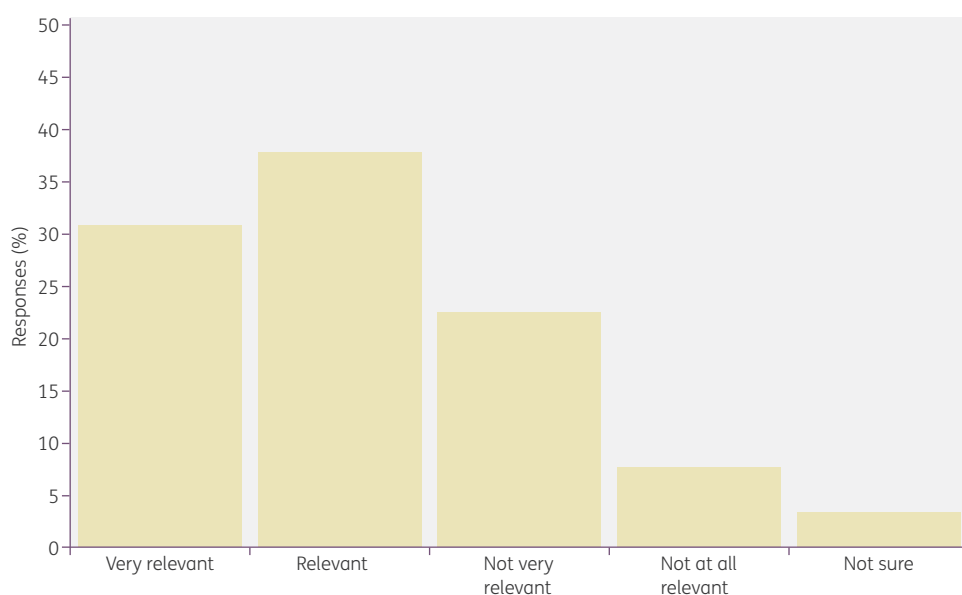
In our survey with First News, English/literacy curriculum content was deemed either very relevant

or relevant to getting specified employment by 68% of respondents. It was deemed not very relevant or not at all relevant by 29.4% of respondents, that is three out of 10 young people. However, it was considered relevant by far more girls (75.9%) than boys (60.9%), and twice as many girls said it was very relevant (39.4% vs 21.1%). When asked specifically about the ways in which school prepares them for the workplace, many pupils were clear about what they felt was lacking, and the relevance to real life. One

said, “I think that school helps you and prepares you for teamwork and working alone, and sometimes helps you with the academic side of things; but they have a reasonably outdated spectrum of topics which exclude more up-to-date subjects like computing.” Another echoed the concerns of many teachers: “It is isolated - the main focus is on exam preparation and results for league tables.”

A review of the literature<sup>35</sup> also suggests a disconnect between young people’s perceptions of their skills and the views of employers. Some research shows young people have a very limited understanding of what team working and communication skills actually mean within the workplace context<sup>36</sup>; if so, this situation is likely to be compounded by the fact that many do not get the opportunity to gain work experience while still at school. A YouGov survey for the Private Equity Foundation found that most young people were confident about their skills, with 87% rating their literacy and numeracy as good or very good, 75% their soft skills, 65% their knowledge of the workplace and 49% their technical skills<sup>37</sup>. So the issue is not only that young people may not see the importance of formal literacy skills but also that they do not appear to think they need to improve or make any effort to adapt these skills for the workplace.

### How relevant is what you study in English/literacy to getting the job you want?



34. A study by City and Guilds (2012) [www.cityandguilds.com/~media/Documents/About-us/CityandGuildsWaysintoWorkViewsofYoungPeopleReportpdf.ashx](http://www.cityandguilds.com/~media/Documents/About-us/CityandGuildsWaysintoWorkViewsofYoungPeopleReportpdf.ashx)

35. Clark and Formby (2013) Young People’s Views on Literacy Skills and Employment, [www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt\\_research/5451](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/5451)

36. [www.demos.co.uk/files/workingprogress1.pdf](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/workingprogress1.pdf)

37. See [www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/5/2/Young-people-entering-work-a-review-of-the-research-accessible-version.pdf](http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/5/2/Young-people-entering-work-a-review-of-the-research-accessible-version.pdf)

# 4. The way forward

## 4.1 Putting young people at the centre

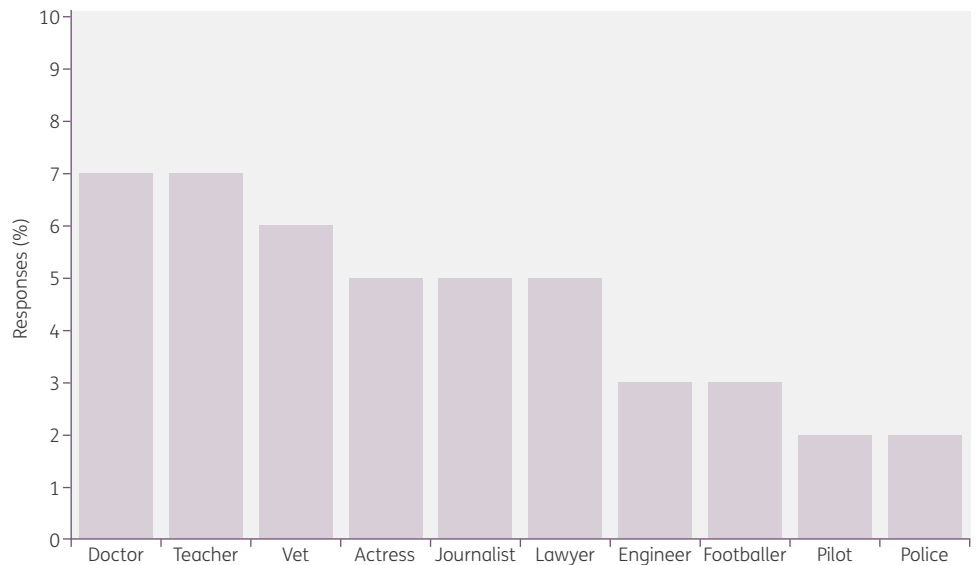
Despite employers' concerns for their literacy levels, most young people have strong and positive career aspirations. Among those responding to the First News survey (with an average age of 12 and a half), an impressive range of career ambitions were mentioned.

This is not to suggest that young people are unaware of the difficulties in entering the labour market. Indeed, almost half of respondents said they were worried about getting a job when they were older.

The issue seems to be that many are not properly aware of the limiting impact their own literacy skills may have on their chances of achieving their ambitions. A review by Oxenbridge and Evesson (2012)<sup>38</sup> on young people's expectations of work and the skills required to be successful found their knowledge varied according to their personal circumstances: "The degree of knowledge of work and labour markets among young people not yet in the labour market is mixed, and may be dependent on their personal circumstances, their available networks, and the labour market opportunities available to them."

Young people's aspirations could be a vital tool in developing literacy skills for employment. Aspiration (what a person hopes will happen in future) is strongly related to behaviour and attitudes. Aspirations change as young people get older. A 2008 Cabinet Office paper looking at skills and attainment highlighted that the crucial period is between 11 and 14, when young people form solid aspirations which inform their future and life choices and ultimately their earnings, quality of life and other outcomes<sup>39</sup>. At this point young people shift from idealistic

## What job would you like to do when you are older?



aspirations to realistic aspirations. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has confirmed the association between aspiration and attainment<sup>40</sup>, while pointing out that this does not establish causality. However, research tends to focus on "educational aspiration" – the aspiration to participate and attain in education – and how this impacts on attainment. Our research, and the evidence we received, strongly suggests that, particularly for the crucial 11 to 14 age group, developing realistic employment aspirations can provide a powerful framework for the development of educational aspiration, which will support skills development and literacy. 82.1% of young people surveyed said knowing which subjects are important to get the job they want would make them work harder at those subjects at school.

The importance of employment aspirations as a driver of educational aspiration and literacy attainment seems to be especially significant for pupils from deprived backgrounds, as many will have little or no

experience of the wide range of employment opportunities that may be available to them, with the right skills and qualifications. As teacher Jo Washburn, from Bournville School, said at the evidence session: "Almost half of our children are in the bottom 20% on the IDACI index of deprivation, so it is really important that we give them opportunities to be exposed to the world of work."

Interestingly, in our survey of young people, it was the pupils on free school meals who were least worried about getting a job when they are older: just 33% said they worried about this, compared with 47% among those not receiving free school meals. This perhaps suggests a lack of engagement or aspiration rather than confidence in their prospects beyond school; that they have not yet begun to consider what they may need to do to gain employment, or how prepared they currently are for the workplace. In terms of increasing social mobility, this point is vital. A recent report<sup>41</sup> by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission stated that class is a bigger barrier than gender in getting a

38. [www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/5/2/Young-people-entering-work-a-review-of-the-research-accessible-version.pdf](http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/5/2/Young-people-entering-work-a-review-of-the-research-accessible-version.pdf)

39. [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090114000528/http://cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/109339/aspirations\\_evidence\\_pack.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090114000528/http://cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/109339/aspirations_evidence_pack.pdf)

40. [www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/education-young-people-parents-full.pdf](http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/education-young-people-parents-full.pdf)

41. Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013) State of the Nation 2013: social mobility and child poverty in Great Britain, [www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2013](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2013)

top job. If we do not foster aspiration among this group, their chances of success beyond school remain slim.

Some young people may be unable to make the connection between the skills they learn in school and how they will use them in later life. When asked how they think school prepares them for the workplace, answers were varied depending on what type of work they wanted to do. A large proportion mentioned “softer skills” including confidence, independence, organisation, teamwork and working to deadlines, while there was a significant minority who said it doesn’t prepare them at all. One said: “we need to learn some more life skills as at school, we seem to be in a little bubble from the outside world!” while another commented, “It prepares us in practically every way apart from learning about business”.

These comments show that, while schools can do a lot to foster aspiration, when done in partnership with the business community it can be much stronger. Jo Washburn summed it up: “Schools do a lot to inform students, but it was the interaction with the volunteers that really made a difference. There was the missing link to making it all work.” This was echoed by her pupil, Kadique, who talked about the volunteer he worked with: “Anna is someone who is successful, so she could tell us how she got to this point in her life”. Partnerships with business can also help make classroom learning more relevant, and encourage students to think about the need to transfer

their learning to the workplace environment. Student Lucy Anne Doncaster commented on how the lessons involving volunteers differed from usual: “The work done in the classroom was relevant, engaging and challenging, not just theoretical.”

Partnerships with business are vital in opening up career options that pupils may otherwise be unaware of. As Julie Cordiner from Middlesbrough County Council said, “Schools do not know what the emerging industries are or what jobs are available to leavers and hence are not adequately preparing them with relevant skills.”

This would traditionally be the role of careers advisers but data suggests that failings here may be inhibiting young people’s aspirations. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission stated that, “Following devolution of responsibility for careers advice to schools, three-quarters are failing to provide an adequate service. Government has devolved the service without devolving the resources.”<sup>42</sup>

Working with volunteers and businesses can make significant differences to the young people who participate, as they feel more aware of what will be expected of them and better equipped to face the challenges of the work environment. It can also make a huge difference to their levels of confidence in workplace scenarios, as Amanda Delaney, a volunteer with the National Literacy Trust’s Words Work programme, explained: “The group I was working with found what was expected of them overwhelming.

They lacked real life experience of work-related situations, and did not understand how they should behave or how to work independently or as a group to follow a brief. Their lack of confidence and communication skills was holding them back.”

A recent CIPD (2013: 4<sup>43</sup>) report said: “Confidence is an issue for many young people and many find interview situations particularly stressful as they have no prior experience of the workplace and they often don’t know how to talk about their skills or how to ‘market’ themselves to a potential employer.” Confidence may be a major barrier to fostering aspiration as a route to improving employability. As First News editor Nicky Cox stated in her evidence to the commission, “It’s all about self-esteem, which is the beginning and end of everything.”

## 4.2 The role of business in supporting learners

Business support for learners can take many different forms, including presentations to assemblies, providing careers advice and work experience, mentoring, volunteering in classrooms, working together on curriculum projects or acting as school governors. Perhaps the most common form of literacy support is the one-to-one reading volunteering offered to schools by charities such as Beanstalk.

The CBI’s 2012 survey<sup>44</sup> showed 57% of employers have links with secondary schools; 39% had increased their links in the past year;



42. Ibid, p.6

43. [www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/MarsVenus%20FINAL%2030%2004%2013.pdf](http://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/MarsVenus%20FINAL%2030%2004%2013.pdf)

44. CBI (2012) Learning to grow: what employers needs from education and skills, CBI Education and Skills Survey 2012, [www.cbi.org.uk/media/1514978/cbi\\_education\\_and\\_skills\\_survey\\_2012.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1514978/cbi_education_and_skills_survey_2012.pdf)



and 20% had links with primary schools. Research<sup>45</sup> seems to support the value of these links, showing that children who have four or more interactions with business people and careers activities at school are five times less likely to fall into the NEET category (not in education, employment or training) upon leaving school and earn, on average, 16% more than their peers.

Young people appear to recognise the value of these interactions, according to the survey with First News children's newspaper. When asked what would help them to gain the skills they need for the job they want, they were more likely to choose support from people doing the job already over additional time learning these skills in class (92.6% chose help from those doing the job; 87.5% chose work experience; 71.3% chose teaching of those skills at school; and 61.6% chose practising by themselves).

Work experience is one of the most widespread forms of support, provided by 70% of businesses that support education<sup>46</sup>. The benefits have been identified by numerous studies, with as many young people believing in its importance as employers or parents<sup>47</sup>. Yet, a YouGov survey for the Private Equity Foundation (2011<sup>48</sup>) found that more than one in 10 young people have never undertaken work experience and one in four will leave school without any interaction with employers<sup>49</sup>. This is likely to be further reduced by the recent removal of the requirement to provide work experience in Year 10. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission<sup>50</sup> also drew attention to low levels of work experience, stating just over a quarter of businesses in England offer work experience (27%).

Another common form business support can take is one-off visits to talk to pupils about career opportunities. Jo Washburn talked about the deeper level of engagement that was possible through volunteers working more closely with young people, over a longer period of time: "We have had volunteers in before. There are 220 in a year group, and they would stand in front of them but the engagement was not there."

In the Words for Work programme that she delivered to pupils, she had one volunteer to four students, and this, she feels, was key to its success. However, she also acknowledged the issues this raises with meeting demand and upscaling to work with whole year groups, when many more volunteers would be needed. Recruitment, and availability, of business volunteers in this context is not always easy. This point was also made by Clive Dalton, who even when working to engage employers right across Birmingham and Solihull, hit barriers in recruitment. He would have been able to roll the programme out to a far greater number of targeted students, he said, each in urgent need of this kind of support, had capacity among volunteers been greater. Jo also feels that a final stage to the programme, in which the students go to work with their volunteer for the day, would help to contextualise everything they've learnt, but would obviously pose additional capacity issues. However, "the students would love the chance to see what the volunteers do."

Many employers promote engagement with schools as part of their CSR agenda and see it as a way to add value to their own employees. Business interaction in the classroom can help to produce a better understanding of the value and

purpose of learning for children than a normal classroom situation, especially in terms of literacy and numeracy. However, they often do not know how best to approach this or how to make the experience valuable for young people (26% of employers said this was a barrier to forging links with schools and colleges)<sup>51</sup>.

The quality of these interactions is vital in order to make the desired impact on pupils. Brokerage support is available, such as through programmes like Words for Work and Business in the Community's Business Class<sup>52</sup>, which can help businesses engage successfully. But both companies and schools need to be aware of these opportunities, and invest the time to make the most of them. Companies also need a better understanding of the requirements around criminal record checks. Among the employers we spoke to there was often confusion and misunderstanding about current regulations.

There are also concerns about the quality of work experience. A recent report<sup>53</sup> concluded that it is often a "tick-box exercise" and so recommended that, given its potential impact on young people with low aspirations, "the quality of work experience in schools should be vastly improved and more properly integrated with the curriculum and careers advice and support".

This report also recommended exploring the possibility of offering work experience earlier in Key Stage 3. This suggests that more attention needs to be given to developing a repertoire of workplace engagement opportunities for pupils at different ages and stages, to foster aspiration, increase engagement and develop confidence and knowledge about how literacy is used in the workplace.

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45. It's who you meet: Why employer contacts at school make a difference to the employment prospects of young adults (February 2012), An article by Dr Anthony Mann, Director of Research and Policy, Education and Employers Taskforce, [www.educationandemployers.org/media/15069/its\\_who\\_you\\_meet\\_final\\_26\\_06\\_12.pdf](http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/15069/its_who_you_meet_final_26_06_12.pdf)

46. CBI (2012) see left page

47. For examples see Clark and Formby (2013)

48. [www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/09/13/young-people-think-they-w\\_n\\_959942.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/09/13/young-people-think-they-w_n_959942.html)

49. Also see Demos and the Private Equity Foundation (2011) The Forgotten Half, [www.demos.co.uk/files/The\\_Forgotten\\_Half\\_-\\_web.pdf](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/The_Forgotten_Half_-_web.pdf)

50. Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013) State of the Nation 2013: social mobility and child poverty in Great Britain, [www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2013](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2013)

51. CBI (2012) see above

52. [www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/business-class](http://www.bitc.org.uk/programmes/business-class)

53. Demos and the Private Equity Foundation (2011) The Forgotten Half, [www.demos.co.uk/files/The\\_Forgotten\\_Half\\_-\\_web.pdf](http://www.demos.co.uk/files/The_Forgotten_Half_-_web.pdf)

## Case study – Words for Work

The National Literacy Trust's Words for Work programme recruits and trains volunteers from the business community to help improve students' literacy and communication skills. They work in small groups with targeted pupils to develop crucial employability skills and confidence. Pupils attending the evidence session gave encouraging accounts of how the programme had helped them make the link between school and work, and how it had prepared them for work better than school alone could.

Students felt that they learned more from the volunteers: because they felt they were treated on more equal terms, were able to call them by their first names, felt relaxed talking to them, saw them as role models, respected their success and wanted to learn from them the skills they needed to achieve the same. They didn't see teachers in the same way, as Lucy Anne Doncaster explained: "Teachers expect a level of maturity, not in our behaviour but in our communication and interactions. We are children after all. The business volunteers, however, are not necessarily used to this and expect us to act as colleagues. This forced us to develop confidence quickly and develop positive relationships based on our behaviours and how we put ourselves forward."

The relationships built between volunteers and young people were rewarding on both sides. It appears that just changing what is taught in school by teachers is not enough to see real impact on the ability of young people to develop the skills they need in the workplace. According to Clive Dalton, teacher at Baverstock Academy, this kind of exposure to the world of work also had positive effects on the young people back in the classroom, and their use of spoken language in lessons. Teachers had reported to him increased engagement, and greater confidence "to put up their hands and speak, whether that is 'I don't understand,' but they have been given the confidence to do that." Jo Washburn, teacher at Bournville School, also saw the impact: "Students who took part who received the Pupil Premium, performed much better than the students who did not do the project".

### Jordana

Jordana, 15, is a student at Bournville School, where nearly 40% of students receive Pupil Premium funding. In spring 2013, the whole Year 10 cohort (220 students) took part in the first phase of Words for Work, using classroom activities on speech, language and communication as preparation for their work experience. Jordana was chosen to take part in the second phase also, working alongside

business volunteers in team-based tasks. She said: "It is the best thing I have done at school. Everything about it was really useful to me. After the project, I was moved up a grade in my speaking and listening, because I felt more confident presenting in front of my teacher. Working in small groups with volunteers was really good, because the communication was two-way." When she leaves school, Jordana would like to work in healthcare.

### John

John, 14, is a gypsy Roma traveller student at Baverstock Academy in Birmingham. He arrived at the school in 2012, speaking very little English. He was recently identified to take part in the Words for Work programme by teacher Clive Dalton. Clive recruits and trains business volunteers to work in schools across Birmingham and Solihull, supporting targeted students with low literacy skills, self-esteem and confidence issues.

John attended the evidence session in Parliament, and was immensely proud of himself for taking the chance to talk in front of a panel of MPs and other witnesses. It showed what huge progress he had made since he arrived in the school. He

said: "When I came to England, my point of view was very bad, because there was no help for me at school. When I went to school last year, my writing and spelling did not exist but, with the help of the teacher, I was able to improve and now I can speak and write something in English. I can understand that Words for Work was a good project for me and for the school, because the volunteers can help me to see real jobs."

John would like to be a paramedic when he leaves school. With his improved literacy and confidence, and support from Clive, who has introduced him to local paramedics to talk about their work and career training, he has taken the crucial first steps towards achieving his dream.

### Jack

Jack, 15, also took part in the Words for Work programme at Bournville School. He believes the programme helped make school feel more relevant to his future, as it showed him how it is similar to the world of work: "You have to work hard to pass your GCSEs; you have to work hard to do certain awards, and it is the same in the world of work." However, he also highlighted how the programme was different from normal school lessons. "School focuses on our qualifications. We're told that qualifications will get you an interview, but the next step is missing because we don't know how to succeed in the interview. I feel like I have an advantage over other people now because I've learnt how to handle an interview."

The programme included mock interviews, in which Jack worked with a business volunteer. He scored good and excellent in every category, and says, "I don't think I would have got this without Anna's help and advice. I feel like Anna gave us the tools to survive an interview."

When he leaves school, Jack wants to work in the food industry – with aspirations to be a world class cook. Shortly after taking part in Words for Work, he went on work experience in a restaurant, and he credits the programme with getting him his first job in the industry when he was offered a summer job. He said, "I felt a lot more confident speaking to the customers after Words for Work – I think it helped me to get more tips!"

### 4.3 Moving towards consensus

Previous analysis of the issue has proposed a supply and demand model in which education is failing to supply the properly skilled workforce that business demands. But this model takes no account of young people's aspirations or what sort of future they would like their education to prepare them for.

Evidence shows that aspirations are the key to social mobility and can provide the impetus required to break the cycle of deprivation. Young people have strong and positive aspirations so we should be using these to increase their literacy skills in preparation for the career they wish for themselves. By putting young people at the centre, we can ensure that children of all backgrounds are introduced to the world of work,

can see how the labour market is changing and what opportunities currently exist, and understand how they will need to put into practice the skills and knowledge they are taught at school. Business will have a key role to play in this process.

There is also a link between intergenerational literacy issues and recurring unemployment within families, where those in areas of extreme poverty have often been without work for generations and therefore young people do not learn a work ethic from home. As Fiona Aldridge stated in the evidence session, one of the key ways to address literacy difficulties is to ensure that parents and carers are offered high quality family learning programmes in the early years. "By having adults learning alongside children, you are giving children that

sense of aspiration of what adults can do, what they can grow into, and giving adults a greater confidence to support their children to engage with school." This applies equally to literacy and wider employability skills.

It was also echoed by the young people at the evidence session. Jordana, 15, said, "At first, my mum did not think I would really learn anything. As the weeks went by, I explained to my mum how good it was and how I learned many new things. She said 'I think I had better meet them and get some tips for myself'."

As well as finding ways to successfully engage businesses, secondary schools must find a way to use real life employment scenarios to teach literacy, so that transferability of these skills is absolutely explicit.



# 5. Conclusions and recommendations

The evidence we have seen and the people we have met in the course of this commission have given us a new and fresh perspective on why the business sector is frustrated by the skills of a cohort of young people who, according to school assessment systems, have higher levels of literacy than any previous generation.

**Business and education mean different things by “literacy”.** While united in their understanding of the importance of young people’s skills, there is a significant gap between what business and education mean by “literacy”. The danger is that young people are falling down this gap. This creates personal tragedies and a national crisis as economic success and social mobility suffer.

**Young people are deeply concerned about their future employment options and want the skills that will help them succeed.** However, they can find formulating their aspirations hard and can also find it hard to work out what skills they need for the future. We believe that supporting young people in formulating realistic employment aspirations (particularly in the first years of secondary education) would provide a strong framework for them to formulate their educational aspirations. These aspirations will create a strong appetite for improving literacy skills.

**A renewed partnership between business and education is the key for unlocking the literacy skills of young people in schools.** This partnership needs to be deeper and more systematic than before. Current changes in the governance and structures of secondary schools, resulting from the Government’s academies programme, are creating new opportunities for this. However, demand and supply need to be addressed, as does brokerage. Employers need to recognise that

support for a new workforce is crucial for sustainability. Schools need to recognise that links with business will drive up standards and raise pupils’ aspirations. The increased focus on evidence-based practice in schools will require these partnerships to be developed on a much stronger evidence base than currently exists. Third sector and local organisations that act as brokers fulfil a vital role. They engage businesses, develop partnerships, train volunteers and support schools. However, in the current economic environment they are often squeezed.

**Strengthening the influence of business in education will only strengthen education.** This means reflecting business needs in assessment and curricula – for instance, restoring speech, language and communication assessment as part of the overall GCSE English grade. Business needs to understand and trust qualifications; we met

much cynicism about what literacy skills were actually guaranteed by an A\*-C grade GCSE in English. There is no trade-off between educational excellence in schools and schools’ responsiveness to the needs of business.

**Literacy teaching in secondary schools is frequently not as systematic or as strongly led as in primary schools.** Many pupils leave primary school without reaching the expected levels in reading and writing. A major area of concern is that the literacy skills many pupils achieve at primary school actually drop off in the first years of their secondary education. However, many secondary schools find it hard to adopt a systematic approach to literacy that operates across the curriculum and supports all students. A recent Ofsted report has highlighted the challenges involved.



Our recommendations are addressed to Government. We believe that there is a strong causal link between low literacy and youth unemployment. We believe that this is not inevitable and we believe that Government should lead a national campaign working with education, business and the third sector to address it. We believe that systematically strengthening the links between business and education at national, local and structural levels is the necessary foundation for increasing literacy levels to meet employers' expectations. The focus for this needs to be on stimulating realistic employment aspirations for the 11 to 14 age group.

**1. Government should act to increase the demand from schools for contact with business.**

Government should strongly signal to schools and academy sponsors the importance of partnerships between education and business as an indispensable element in the

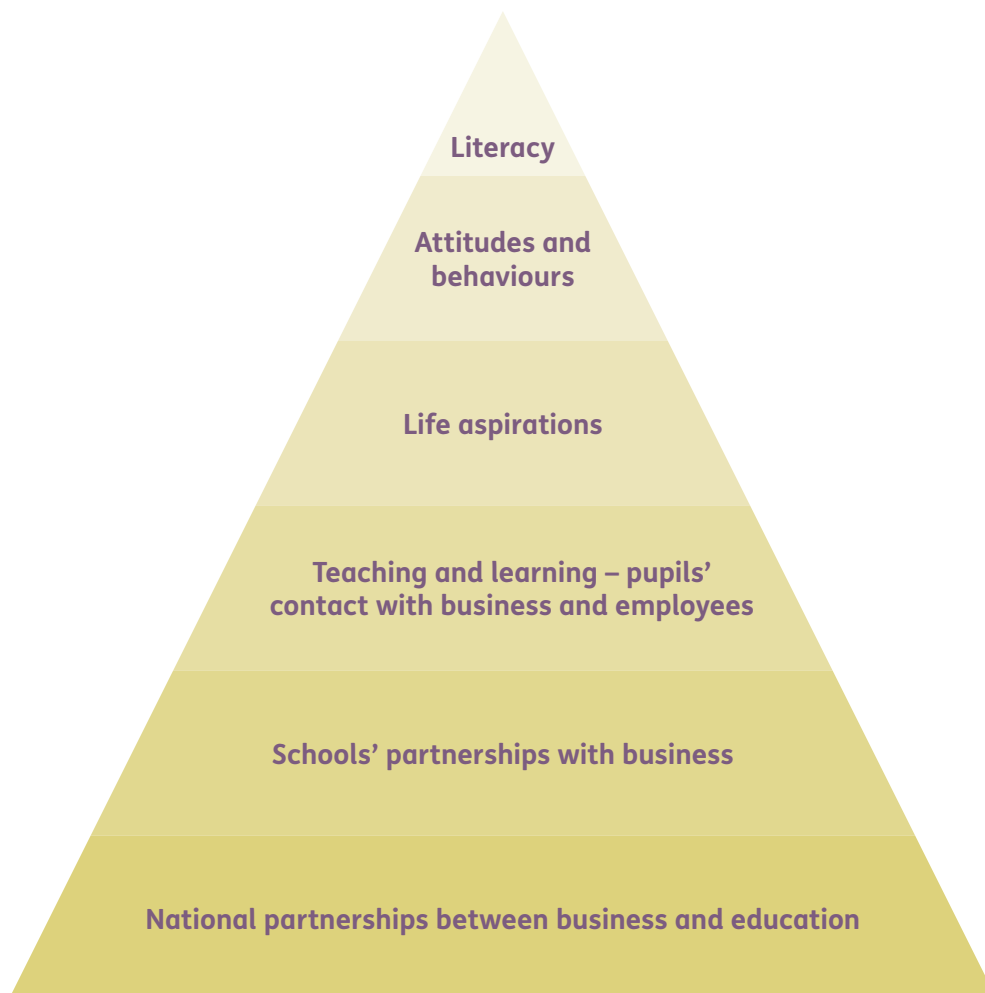
teaching of literacy skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) for the 11 to 14 age group. As Government looks at future system reform and change for schools it must be mindful of the needs of business and partnerships with business.

**2. Government should act to increase the supply of opportunities for young people to work with employees and develop realistic employment aspirations.** Barriers should be removed and incentives offered to increase the numbers of businesses willing to work with schools and their students. This should include consideration of financial benefits for employers who work with students in education (mirroring benefits to companies offering apprenticeships) as well as clarification of requirements for criminal record checks for employees going into schools.

Businesses should be particularly encouraged to consider how they can work with students between the ages of 11 and 14.

**3. Government should act to improve brokerage between the business and education sector.**

If businesses are to forge appropriate and lasting relationships with schools to boost literacy for employment, brokerage is essential. This is frequently facilitated locally. However, national Government has a specific role to play in working with the Education Endowment Foundation to commission evaluation (through randomised controlled trials where possible) to grow the evidence of the effectiveness of different models of business involvement in education to support and inform brokerage. It also needs to map and strengthen the current brokerage agencies connecting schools to business.



# Appendix

## **An evidence session at the House of Commons on 5 September 2013 heard from the following witnesses:**

**Fiona Aldridge** – Head of Learning for Work and Head of Research, NIACE

**David Barber** – Deputy Head, Heath Park School with pupils Dominic Beards and Lucy Anne Doncaster

**Gladys Berry** – Head teacher, Highbury Fields School

**Grace Breen** – Lead Education Policy Advisor at CBI

**Nicky Cox MBE** – Editor, First News children's newspaper

**Clive Dalton** – Teacher at Baverstock School with pupils John and Andrei

**Amanda Delaney** – Executive Secretary, KPMG and volunteer at Lillian Baylis School

**Kevin Haws** – Commercial Manager, Balfour Beatty Workplace and volunteer at Bournville School

**Russell Hobby** – General Secretary, National Association of Head Teachers

**Patricia Metham** – Lead Inspector for English, Ofsted

**Nina Mills** – Regeneration Officer, Balfour Beatty Investments (written evidence provided)

**Dame Gail Rebuck CBE** – Chair of Penguin Random House UK Board

**Craig Robinson** – Director, Education Advisory Services, KPMG

**Jo Washburn** – Teacher at Bournville School with pupils Kadique Lindsay, Jordana Baylis and Jack Dixon

## **Employer interviews were conducted with:**

**Janet Cooper** – Early Language and Communication Programme Manager at Stoke on Trent City Council

**Julie Cordiner** – Lead on School Led Partnership at Middlesbrough Council

**Sue Husband** – National Education Manager at McDonald's

**Sandra Kelly** – Education and Skills Manager at Whitbread

**Nina Mills** – Regeneration Officer, Balfour Beatty

**Nicola Swaney** – Education Manager at Rolls-Royce

**Katerina Rüdiger** – Skills Policy Adviser, CIPD

**Caroline Brown** – Education Manager, Business in the Community

**Mick Keay** – Project Director, BT

## **Report drafted by Nick Taylor, Public Sector Education Consultant, KPMG.**

### **Researchers**

#### **National Literacy Trust**

Sam Brookes  
Christina Clark  
Jonathan Douglas  
Susie Formby  
Joe Morrisroe  
Harriet Wood

#### **KPMG**

Joanna Pick  
Craig Robinson

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## CASE STUDY: WHITBREAD

Whitbread works with Believe in Young People, a charity that brings large companies together with schools to provide careers advice and quality work experience placements.

Whitbread managers are connecting with schools and communities by going into schools and educating young people and teachers on the skills required to work in the hospitality industry.

There is also a work experience programme for those who believe they may want to work in the industry. Whitbread has recently improved the programme to

now focus heavily on literacy and communication. It has since had reports of pupils going back into school and telling their teachers that they are much more confident communicators and now understand why literacy is important.

During their work experience the pupils help in customer-facing roles and are able to recognise where they themselves are falling short. They also improve their wider communication and team work skills and are more able to match themselves to jobs in the future.

The company has invested more than £1million in this programme and, according to Education and Skills Manager, Sandra Kelly, does

it so that they can better connect with the community that they have a presence in, helping pupils to be better prepared for joining the workforce and investing in their “pipeline of future employees”.

Over the last few years, Whitbread employees have also spent time looking at the curriculum and helping teachers plan lessons and give guidance to the pupils.

They have found that pupils who take part in the work experience scheme have higher attainment when they return to school as they now understand why literacy and communication are important and relevant to their life beyond school.

## CASE STUDY: MCDONALD'S

10 years ago, the Leitch Review of Skills made recommendations for urgent action required to improve skills and ensure the UK maximised economic growth, productivity and social justice. It was clear that the impact of poor literacy reached beyond the education system to have an enormous impact on the workforce. McDonald's realised that it was likely to employ a larger proportion of struggling adults than other businesses and so decided to introduce literacy training.

It introduced optional online literacy/numeracy courses run by LearnDirect (with Government funding). Employees complete these in their own time, but computers are provided in the staff room so staff can work on them during lunch breaks. The company has found that, in this environment, university students working part time often provide informal support to those who are completing the courses.

As National Education Manager Sue Husband explains, good literacy skills are not initially essential to be successful at McDonald's; employees are hired based on qualities not qualifications and it is

more important to be friendly than have strong literacy skills. Employees are not tested on their literacy and numeracy, and they put themselves forward to do qualifications only if they want. Literacy is not considered essential but good communication skills are important as staff need to be able to communicate well with customers.

However, since introducing their education programme, customer feedback and general reviews of the restaurants have improved. And there has been a noticeable improvement in employee feedback, stating the company is helping them and giving them more confidence.

There is also anecdotal evidence. Employees often write in to say thank you, saying the programme has helped them outside the workplace as well (citing examples such as the ability to read to their children, or look through a holiday brochure to choose a holiday).

The programme has also provided support to those members of staff who reach the level of Business Manager (i.e. running their own restaurant). At this stage, employees embark on a foundation degree, and McDonald's has found that literacy levels at this point are not

high enough, and most employees struggle when writing a report.

The company has now provided over 50,000 qualifications, of which 25,000 are in maths and English. In the first year the programme was available, only 50 out of 90,000 employees took it up, but since then interest has snowballed.

McDonald's recognises the responsibility of schools to educate children, but feels that in cases where this doesn't work, it will step in. As Sue Husband says, employers can often be in a better position to educate some young people, particularly in the case of students who fall behind in school and never catch up. And once away from the school environment, with the added maturity that brings, they may be more willing to learn by acting on their own decision rather than being made to. McDonald's believes literacy can be improved significantly in a year under these conditions.

Improved literacy helps the employer as well as the employee. According to McDonald's experience, as well as increased self-confidence, employees tend to become more engaged and want to give something back to the company.

**Phone:** 020 7587 1842

**Email:** [contact@literacytrust.org.uk](mailto:contact@literacytrust.org.uk)

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