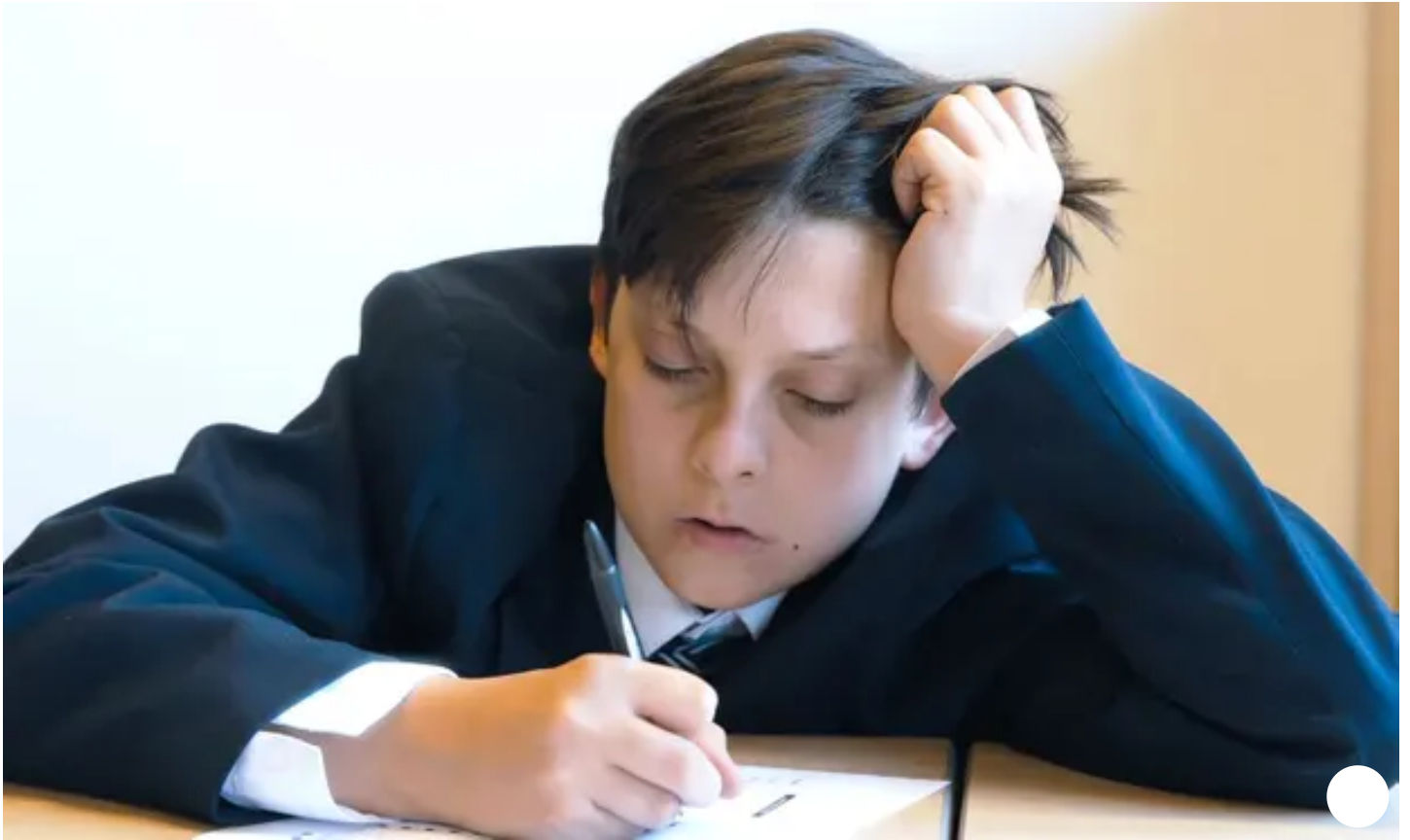


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Britain's battle to get to grips with literacy is laid bare in *H is for Harry*

New documentary reveals difficulties facing white, working-class boys

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Life repeats itself, Grant says dejectedly. “It’s just repeat, repeat, repeat. I had it, my dad had it, and now my son’s going to have it.” He’s talking about illiteracy, which has trapped his family in poverty and shame for generations. But Grant is desperate to break the cycle.

His hopes are pinned on his son, Harry, the engaging star of a new documentary that tracks the boy’s struggles with reading and writing during his first two years at secondary school. *H is for Harry* is released in cinemas on World Book Day on 7 March and will be shown to MPs in Westminster two days before.

Harry is a white working-class boy, the demographic that does least well at school. His story shines a light on a scarcely believable fact: that in the 21st century, in one of the most developed countries in the world, one in five children leave primary school unable to read or write properly.

At the start of the film, Harry says: “I don’t want to be a person who is left out. I want a better life than my dad.” But he struggles to imagine a way of conquering his disadvantages. “What

are you going to be doing when you're 25?" asks Sophie, his patient, dedicated, inspiring teacher. "Trying to stay alive," replies Harry.

Nine million adults in the UK are functionally illiterate, and one in four British five-year-olds struggles with basic vocabulary. Three-quarters of white working-class boys fail to achieve the government's benchmark at the age of 16.

The cost to the economy is put at more than £37bn a year by the World Literacy Foundation. Adults with poor literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed or in low-paid jobs. There is a link between low levels of literacy and shorter life expectancy, depression and obesity. According to the National Literacy Trust (NLT), a boy born in Stockton-on-Tees, which has some of the most serious literacy challenges in the country, has a life expectancy 26.1 years shorter than a boy born in north Oxford.

Functionally illiterate adults are more likely to be socially isolated and lack self-esteem. Books, newspapers, email, the internet, forms, road signs, bank accounts, instruction leaflets, written directions: all are beyond their reach. They are unable to help their children with schoolwork, reinforcing a cycle of illiteracy. On top of that, there is a pervasive sense of shame and secrecy. "It's a lifelong disability," said Fiona Evans of the NLT.

According to a charity working with families and in schools in south London, early intervention is the key to breaking a cycle of intergenerational poverty. "At Harry's age, the speed of academic progress required is just too much for such huge gaps to be closed," said Teresa Harris, the founder of Learn2Love2Read.

It works one-to-one with children in the first years of primary school and with pre-school toddlers, using "a whole family approach, encouraging and equipping parents so they can help with their children's reading at home".

Ayesha Azaz has gone one step further. After her son Arham was helped with his poor reading by Learn2Love2Read, she became a volunteer. "I was really impressed. I thought I could help other children, and it will help me too."



Ayesha Azaz reading with her sons Arham, seven, and Ehsan, three
Photograph: Richard Saker/The Observer

Azaz hadn't realised the importance of books at home, but now she takes Arham and his three-year-old brother Ehsan to the local library regularly. Arham no longer needs extra help with reading. "Sometimes he reads by himself and sometimes I read to him," said Azaz. "It's such a good change, and so important for his future."

But, say literacy experts, ideally intervention should begin from birth. Last week Tameside council in Greater Manchester - where 34% of children start school with below-average

language and reading skills - pledged to give every newborn baby a book, plus reading tips for parents, over the next 12 months.

Mei Lim of the Reach Children's Hub - linked to the Reach academy school in Feltham, Middlesex, attended by Harry - said: "Children need to arrive at school ready to explore, discover, interact." The hub, which is just starting out, wants to connect with parents before their babies are born to emphasise the value of storytelling, singing and reading.

"Breaking the cycle is challenging. We need to create new models that sit alongside schools, that work with parents and have a real impact on families," said Lim.

Harry is 11 before he gets one-to-one specialist help from newly qualified teacher Sophie. The relationship between the two is central to the film: Sophie, encouraging, positive, empathetic; Harry, mostly charming, sometimes surly, occasionally angry.

"It's an observational film, from the child's point of view," said Ed Owles, one of the directors. "The relationship between Sophie and Harry became very central - it became obvious that's where the heart of the story lay."

Grant was also a crucial figure. "He's passionate about Harry's education but he doesn't possess the skills to help. There's not much support for adults like Grant out there," said Owles.

Harry is now 16, and preparing to take maths, English and science GCSEs at another school this summer. Beyond that, he's considering his options. He is "probably an exceptional case", said Prof Alan Smithers, an educationist at Buckingham University. "Literacy and numeracy are the key to getting as much out of life as you possibly can. Without them, you simply can't live the kind of life we all want."

According to Harris, "it's tempting to blame individuals or governments, but in our experience there are no easy answers or quick fixes. Teachers, parents, charities, policymakers and children themselves all have a role. It requires passion, commitment, creativity and a constant focus to ensure that no child leaves school unable to read."

1 in 5

Children left primary school in 2018 unable to read or write properly (DfE)

£37bn

Estimated yearly cost of functional illiteracy to the UK economy (World Literacy Foundation)

17th

Where the UK ranks for literacy among 34 OECD countries. It ranks 15th for numeracy. (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

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