

## **Of libraries, communities and children**

Dr Jeremy Goslin, 27 Churchill Way, Peverell, Plymouth. PL3 4PR.

Public libraries are more than places to find books: they are hubs for knowledge exchange (Halpin et al., 2013), who, as I will briefly argue, play a fundamental role in the social mobility of the young generations and the cohesiveness of the community. I am most concerned that the 'Plan for Libraries' has not presented any evidence addressing the potential impact that the prospective libraries closures will have on child literacy and social integration of the communities they currently serve.

One of the main drives of academic success at school, and subsequently, occupational and economic success in life, are reading comprehension skills, which are acquired in the early school years (Graves et al., 1998). All other factors being considered (such as socio-economic status or intelligence), a child who is a good reader has many more chances of success in all topics, especially in English and maths, which are the key skills all through education.

School provides of course the tools necessary to develop reading skills, but all children are not equal at the start of school, far from it. Amongst those who have the best chances to become good readers are those who had the more contact with books in the years preceding school (Schubert & Becker, 2010), irrespective of parental socio-economic status.

How do children access books? Of course, the best conditions are met when parents provide the necessary resources and the time to read to their children (Bonci, 2011). But the realities of living in poverty mean that the resources that facilitate a learning environment in the home are less readily available. Public libraries are naturally the only place where poor children will be able to access the books they need to develop pre-literacy skills so important for school.

Not only do public libraries provide the resources – the books - needed to tackle the attainment gap between children in high-income and low-income households, but they also provide a unique learning environment during rhyme time and family visits, which has been repeatedly demonstrated to support early literacy (Becker, 2012) through intergenerational transmission.

Access to books and practice of literacy are also fundamental to the integration of adults within their communities, socially and economically: regular library visitors are more likely to vote and to be active members of local clubs and societies. Indeed, by promoting physical presence and exchanges libraries foster citizenship, inclusiveness and integration (Aabø, 2005). They also provide a dedicated space for adult learning, for example by helping the elderly to become better users of internet technology to access health care (Xie & Bugg, 2009). Despite rumours of the contrary, libraries are increasingly becoming a network of community knowledge (Chowdhury et al., 2006), offering social cohesiveness in this digital world.

I would request to be called as a witness to the scrutiny committee to request that these points be addressed in the context of the local library closures outlined in the ‘Plan for Libraries’.

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