

Mind the Reading Gap: How Children's Publishers Assist in Tackling Illiteracy

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Abstract

Illiteracy amongst children in the UK and beyond is a deeply rooted societal problem that has been further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. There are a variety of methods that children's publishers can employ to help alleviate this issue, such as the implementation of a variety of production and editorial techniques in the creation of their books, and by participating in initiatives that assist in getting reading materials into the hands of children.

This article addresses qualitative research in the form of academic talks delivered by industry professionals from Barrington Stoke and Pratham Books. Examples of existing texts as case studies are also provided to demonstrate practices and results achieved in texts produced for struggling readers. Statistics on British and Indian schoolchildren and the impact of COVID-19 on young readers are also discussed in the context of illiteracy.

Keywords

Literacy, illiteracy, the reading gap, dyslexia, COVID-19.

Introduction

Illiteracy is a key issue faced by young readers throughout the UK and beyond. Research indicates that the reading gap is the result of several contributing factors, such as economic background, homelife, dyslexia and other learning difficulties, and access to reading materials. Illiteracy amongst children has been further compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article discusses techniques implemented by a variety of children’s publishers that aim to alleviate the issue of illiteracy, such as practical elements used in book production, and publishers’ contribution to charitable schemes that assist young readers in a variety of ways, such as by providing widespread access to books.

Existing research on this topic presents issues of illiteracy within certain demographics of British schoolchildren, such as the Sutton Trust’s article that focuses only on the issues that boys have with reading (2013). The National Literacy Trust has discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the reading ability of British children but has not in this instance discussed how publishers can assist in alleviating this issue (2020). The Journal of Social Science provides an article on the impact that having illiterate parents has on a child’s ability to read but does not discuss how parents can be assisted through access to reading materials and by gaining an understanding of how certain books can make reading a more user-friendly experience for struggling readers (2011). There are also a variety of papers that present cognitive issues and learning difficulties that compound illiteracy in children, such as studies conducted by the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties (2019) and Frontiers (2016), but these findings are not presented from a publisher’s perspective. This article therefore aims to present the above issues in alignment with how publishers can tackle the issue of illiteracy in children.

Key findings of this article include the extent of the impact of societal and physiological elements on literacy in children. This article also discusses the importance of a variety of considerations that must be made by publishers at both the production and editorial stages if their intention is to assist struggling readers, such as through layout, font, and formatting. Although the article focuses mainly on practical elements within printed books, access to texts via digital means is also presented as being beneficial to readers who may not otherwise have access to books and media. It is also important to note the role that assistive technologies have in helping struggling readers. This is an area that will no doubt be further developed in the coming years by a range of publishers and software companies, which will in turn provide ample data for further study and discourse.

Illiteracy amongst the Young – A Cause for Concern

In *The Simple View of Reading*, reading comprehension is described as being “the product of two sets of skills: decoding, and linguistic comprehension” (Gough and Hoover 1990). Both elements are vital in understanding texts, and for a significant number of schoolchildren in the UK and beyond, these skills remain elusive for a variety of reasons.

The reading gap that exists amongst children in the UK has been of great concern for the last several years, and recently the evidence of its existence has been made yet starker. 'In 2019, only 73% of year 6 pupils reached "expected standard" for reading in the key stage 2 SATs (Quigley, 2020). This figure implies that, for the year in question, 27% of students entering secondary school education were not at the expected reading level of children of that age.

This issue has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of students in the UK entered secondary education without being able to read proficiently in 2021. Regarding the commencement of the most recent school year, government figures outlined that "more than 200,000 pupils will move from primary school to secondary school this autumn without being able to read properly" (Griffiths and Shipman 2021). In a report published by I CAN, it was also stated that "62% of secondary teachers surveyed believe that children moving to secondary school in September will struggle more with their speaking and understanding, in comparison to those who started secondary school before the COVID-19 pandemic" (2021).

Communicative and comprehension problems are prevalent in writing and reading, with reading assessments carried out in Autumn term 2020 and Spring term 2021 demonstrating an "increased learning loss in reading in pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds" compared to their more advantaged peers (National Literacy Trust, 2021). This is a problem that is deepened by many lower income families not having access to devices (such as laptops, home computers or tablets), Wi-Fi, and further resources. Parents may also lack the confidence to lead and support effective home learning for their children.

As well as environmental and circumstantial causes, there are a variety of developmental reasons as to why some children find reading so difficult. It is estimated, for instance, that "up to one in every ten people in the UK has some degree of dyslexia" (NHS 2018) - a condition that makes it difficult to comprehend words and sentences as presented on a page. Furthermore, a lack of phonological awareness inherited from communication issues formed at a young age is also impactful on literacy, and "difficulties in this area can often lead to reading and writing difficulties" (Child Development 2021).

Issues might also be rooted in language barriers caused by second language learning. In British primary and secondary schools, the number of children learning English as an additional language (EAL) is increasing. According to the Department of Education, "for the past decade, the proportion of EAL learners in primary schools in England has been growing steadily, currently standing at 21.2%" (2019). This creates an immediate issue with literacy and comprehension for students reading texts in English that are distributed in classes throughout all British schools. Such children start their school lives "with differing levels of English language proficiency and tend to underperform in relation to their non-EAL peers on measures of English oral language and reading" (Dickson, Fricke and Thompson 2020).

There are also societal issues that exacerbate the problem of illiteracy in children. For some, reading simply isn't a hobby that interests them. Children might view reading as being boring or not worthwhile having grown up in a home absent of books. The Literary Trust reported that "one in eight children in disadvantaged homes don't own a single book" (2017). Not having access to books would deprive children of the experience of reading and being read to from an early age, and so a love of books is something that would not have been instilled within them as might have been the case for children from more privileged households.

Boredom and short attention spans amongst children also lead to distractions, and an increasing number of children "are being turned off books by the end of primary school because of the influence of the internet and a lack of reading at home" (Paton 2012). According to an article written for the *Guardian*, "nearly twice as many five to eight-year-olds as 14 to 16-year-olds said they took pleasure from reading. Overall, just 53% of children said they enjoyed reading 'very much, or 'quite a lot' – the lowest level since 2013" (Ferguson 2020). Furthermore, an international 2019 study by the NICM Health Research Institute found that "the internet can alter different areas of cognition, including our ability to recall parts of our memory" (2019). It is imperative to therefore consider the influence that access to a constant and unending source of entertainment and distraction has on a young and developing mind, particularly when it pulls attention from the development of core skills of literacy.

How Publishers Assist Struggling Readers - Editorial, Design and Production

It is of significant interest to contemporary British culture that publishers enable a considered approach to texts for children who may have issues with reading. In supporting reading development from a young age, publishers inevitably gain more customers in the form of a maturing audience. It could also be argued that it is beneficial to the publisher from a marketing point of view if they play an active part in supporting children with literacy problems, as well as being philanthropic from a wider societal perspective.

There are various methods that children's publishers implement at the point of editing and production to assist a struggling readership. Story, for instance, is something that is of great importance when capturing the imagination of a young reader. Paying close attention to how a story is delivered is therefore vital when attempting to inspire the imagination and interest of a child. As Margaret Meacham writes, "when you really allow your readers to see the world through your character's eyes, mind and heart, you will have gone a long way toward capturing and holding your readers' attention" (2021).

It is also important to consider how characters are presented to young readers. Using names instead of pronouns, for instance, further assists comprehension. Language can also be altered and developed during the editorial stage to make a text more suited to children that may struggle with reading comprehension and literacy. It may be surprising to consider that "picture books contain more rare and complex sentence types, including passive sentences and sentences containing

relative clauses, than does child-directed speech” (Montag 2019) and as picture books are aimed at younger children, this approach to text should be further considered and addressed during editing. Additionally, the placement of illustrations should be carefully thought out, and should not disrupt the shape and rhythm of the text that compliments it.

Vocabulary and word choice are significant for young readers. “As vocabulary develops, teaching is most effective when all efforts focus on the words and concepts that are most relevant to each child’s particular life experiences rather than words that may or may not have real-life meaning to the child” (NCDB 2021). It is therefore essential that vocabulary is as reflective of a child’s first-hand experience with language as possible to aid understanding, which is a change that can also be made during the editorial process.

Comprehension and clarity for young readers can also be improved during design and production. The British Dyslexia Association encourages the use of “sans serif fonts, such as Arial and Comic Sans, as letters can appear less crowded” (2021). This is further supported in a report by dyslexic.com: “Serif fonts, with their ‘ticks’ and ‘tails’ at the end of most strokes (as found in traditional print fonts such as Georgia or Times New Roman), tend to obscure the shapes of letters, so sans-serif fonts are generally preferred” (2021). It is worth mentioning that this does create an issue for publishers in simultaneously meeting the needs of non-dyslexic readers for whom serif-styled texts aid the reading process. The decision of more accurately meeting the needs of one group over another is therefore something that must be addressed at the planning stage of editing and formatting for publication.

Additionally, as well as font, layout is an important element to consider when aiming to assist dyslexic readers. Allowing lots of space for text on pages allows the text to be more easily read by those with dyslexia: “inter-word spacing should be at least 3.5 times the inter-letter spacing, as larger line spacing improves readability” (British Dyslexia Association 2021).

Publishers in Focus – Barrington Stoke, Oxford University Press and Pratham Books

During her talk *Every Child Can Be a Reader* delivered at the 2021 Online Booksellers Children Publishing Conference, Alisa Bathgate, publisher at Barrington Stoke, outlined what they as publishers implement within their books in consideration of struggling readers. Bathgate discussed the power of story and the importance of engagement, particularly in shorter books, which are more accessible and appealing to readers with low confidence. According to their website, Barrington Stoke aim to tackle this issue by producing stories that are “hi lo (high interest, low ability), in which content is appropriate to the age of the reader but the text is edited to suit a lower reading age” (2021).

Bathgate explained that Barrington Stoke authors are asked not to tailor their writing for struggling readers, but once completed, their text is sent to specialists who look for elements that may cause problems for some readers. An example sentence given during the talk was as follows: “walking into the room, Susan smelt smoke,” and how in the editing phase, this may instead become “when Susan walked into the room, she smelt smoke”, which would be more easily read and understood by young children. In the edited version of this line, we know what is happening immediately, and it is a sentence that is more reflective of natural speech patterns.

Interestingly, across all Barrington Stoke publications, Bathgate claimed that text is written with a serif font which “helps the text hang together even if spaced out” (2021). Bathgate also claimed that Barrington Stoke employs this “unique, dyslexia-friendly font” as it has been “specially created to make reading easier.” Indeed, the publisher is achieving excellent results across its line, having produced reader-friendly texts for over 20 years, but it is worth noting that this approach is in direct opposition to the British Dyslexia Foundation’s recommendation of using sans serif fonts only.

Another reason why the publisher may utilise this font is that it also meets the needs of non-dyslexic readers for whom a serif-based font is more readable. It is, then, perhaps a well-balanced compromise regarding font that the publisher has found for its texts. Furthermore, there is no right-hand justification in Barrington Stoke books, as justified text can often be “distracting for people who have dyslexia and visual stress” (Cochran 2021).

Chunking – the grouping of words in a sentence – is also something to be wary of, and according to Bathgate, it is best to have “only five to seven words on a single line” (2021). Regarding production, the publisher opts for heavier tinted paper which reduces the glare of black on white and allows for less show-through. Bathgate claims that “heavier paper with a gentle tint reduces visual stress and encourages a smooth read,” which is beneficial in holding the attention of the reader and making the process of reading more enjoyable (2021).

The spread that forms Figure 1, taken from *The Small Things* by Lisa Thompson that Barrington Stoke released in 2021, illustrates Bathgate’s points. Note the use of simple sentence structure (Subject plus verb plus object, for instance), the use of Barrington Stoke’s own serif font, no right-hand justification, the tint of the paper, the amount of words per line (approximately 5-7 on average), and the avoidance of wrapping text around the featured image (Figure 1).

"Bye," I said.

I got out of the car and shut the door as the rain hit me in the face. I put my head down and trudged towards the gates. Behind me, I heard Mum shout out of the car window.

"Anna! The umbrella!" she said. I ignored her and kept walking.


I got to the playground and headed over to where Nia, Shavina and Erin sheltered under their umbrella. I stood behind them.

"It was incredible!" said Nia. "The slope was so high and it was real snow!"

Shavina and Erin gasped.

"Real snow?" said Shavina. "How can they use real snow?"

I remembered then that Nia had gone to an indoor ski slope at the weekend.



"Morning!" I said brightly. I hoped when they saw me they'd let me squeeze in under the umbrella. But none of them turned round.

"I don't know, but it was so cold!" Nia said. "It felt just like it did when we were in the Alps." She turned her head and spotted me. "Oh, hi, Anna," she said.

Fig 1. *The Small Things* extract. Barrington Stoke, 2021.

As well as Barrington Stoke, there are other publishers that currently implement a range of methods to aid young readers. As stated on their website, Super Readable Rollercoasters, an OUP line, aims to “encourage struggling readers and to allow them to develop into those that take active enjoyment from reading.” This selection of books covers “fiction specifically written for students with a low-reading age by award-winning contemporary authors, combining exciting stories with relevant issues to engage and motivate readers” (2021).

OUP is soon to publish a book by Sally Nicholls in partnership with Barrington Stoke as part of this Rollercoaster series. The title of this book is *Out of the Rubble*, and it is a publication that further provides examples of production elements that aid reader comprehension (see: Figure 2).

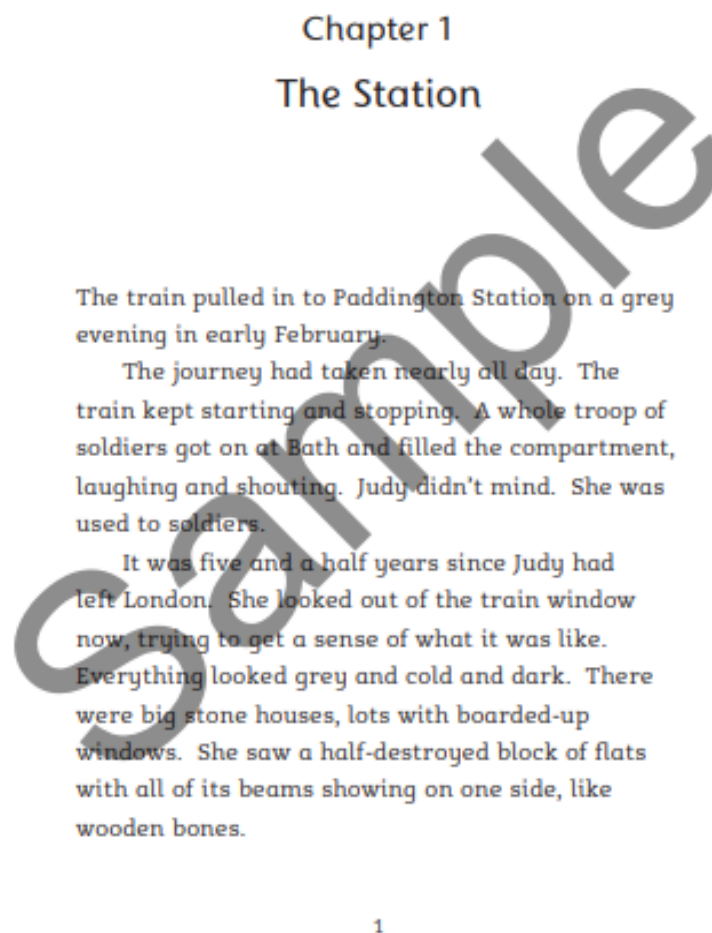


Fig 2. *Out of the Rubble* extract. OUP, 2022.

The book’s opening is written in simple sentences that describes the direct experience of the protagonist: “The train pulled into Paddington station on a grey evening in early February”. This is easier for young readers to understand than a more complex and indirect alternative (“on a grey evening in early February, the train pulled into Paddington station,” for instance). With the former, the reader knows what is happening immediately, and it is a line that is more reflective of normal speech patterns.

In terms of design, a sans serif font is used for the chapter heading and a serif font is used for the main text - reflecting Barrington Stoke’s in-house font design - with distinctive spaces between each line and on average approximately eight words per line. Each of these editorial and design elements would have been carefully considered by OUP and Barrington Stoke to best achieve the goal set out by the Super Readable Rollercoasters brief on their website: to present “engaging, clear, and reader-friendly texts to children whose literacy skills may still be in varying stages of development” (2021).

The issue of illiteracy in young people is not only a British concern. Smit Zaveri of Pratham Books, a not-for-profit publisher of children’s books dedicated to promoting literacy across India, spoke during a seminar focusing on her role of Children’s Editor of “45% of class 5 students - children that are approximately ten years old - not being able to read a class two book in the English language (aimed at six-to-seven-year-olds)” (2021). As in Britain, this issue has been further impacted by the pandemic, with the *Times of India* stating that as of September 2021, “Only 34% of Class 5 students can read Class 2 books” (Ullas 2021).

Like OUP and Barrington Stoke, Pratham Books implement various tools and techniques to aid young readers. Rather than specific ages or class numbers, content is based on stages of reading. They are a digital-first publisher; all Pratham books are uploaded onto their platform and can be accessed for free and downloaded by anyone. This addresses the issue that is also apparent in Britain of a lack of access to reading materials widening the reading gap for some households.

Pratham also aims to address the same issue faced by some British students - that of texts written in what is for them a second language. They ensure everyone has access to books as free, downloadable eBook files that are automatically translated from English into five Indian languages, and into other languages as per the reader’s requirements. Some books are published bilingually to bridge the gaps between learning curves, as some Indian languages are only spoken by a few thousand people. This ensures that language learning forms less of a barrier in reading comprehension.

Furthermore, an audio “read along” is provided with each book, being a spoken word replication of the text that children can listen to while reading. This ensures that children who can’t read can still follow the story, accompanied by audible pronunciation and sounded phonemes of the words in the text itself. This is an important component of comprehension for young readers: “Phonological awareness is a critical early literacy skill” that can be continually developed by children, helping them to “recognise and work with the sounds of spoken language” whilst reading (Reading Rockets 2021).

Additionally, some of the publisher’s content is also accompanied by GIF versions of the books and moving images representative of the text allows further comprehension of what is happening within the story. Pratham books deliver all content through Storyweaver, which is available for all publishers to use who are willing to allow free access to their titles. Such generosity may be an issue for some publishing companies when considering their bottom line, however, and it is worth noting that “85% of money made by the publisher (Pratham) is generated through fundraising” (Zaveri 2021).

Publisher Literacy Initiatives – Beyond the Written Word

In addition to the materials they publish, and reminiscent of Pratham’s Storyweaver platform, many publishing houses are also helping to tackle the issue of illiteracy through a variety of campaigns and initiatives. The International Publishers Association, for instance, provides access to literary materials for large numbers of readers. Their Book Aid International programme “provides around one million brand new books to thousands of libraries, schools, universities, hospitals, refugee camps and prisons around the world” each year, “where people would otherwise have few books, or no books at all” (Tweed 2021). Furthermore, their largest educational programme, Inspiring Readers, has put over “372,473 brand new, publisher donated books into the classrooms of over 290,000 African primary school pupils in Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Zanzibar and Zimbabwe and funded the purchase of 50,237 locally published supplementary books for schools” (2021). It is initiatives such as these that assist in overcoming a key cause of illiteracy: having access to literary materials owing to cultural or financial restrictions.

The National Literacy Trust organisation also works with a variety of magazine publishers with the aim of tackling illiteracy, helping to distribute “over 30,000 magazines for all ages” across 11 dedicated literary hubs as of June 2020. The magazines in question “aim to encourage everyone in the family to read for enjoyment”, as research conducted by the trust shows that “magazines are one of the most popular reading materials for children aged 9 to 18, with 1 in 3 reading print magazines at least once a month” (National Literacy Trust 2020). Furthermore, the National Literacy Trust is a key supporter of the government’s Hungry Little Minds program, designed to boost early language, literacy, and communication in young children. The trust works with magazine publishers through its Small Talk campaign, encouraging the promotion of three key areas – “chat, play and read” – that aim to support the development of children’s literacy skills at home (2020). Publishers that the NLT works with include Redan Publishing, Egmont, Kennedy, National Geographic Kids, Immediate Media Company and DC Thomson, amongst others.

As well as working with larger organisations, publishers also establish initiatives of their own with the aim of alleviating illiteracy and providing access to books for disadvantaged readers. HarperCollins, for instance, is particularly active. In 2019, the publisher donated £1 million worth of Collins Big Cat books to schools as part of a campaign that reached “one-third of Primary Schools across Scotland”, and in 2020, it partnered with the *Sun* newspaper to provide “20,000 primary schools across England, Wales and Northern Ireland with packs of over 100 books” (HarperCollins 2021). It also provides its own volunteers that have previously visited schools and colleges “as part of the National Literacy Trust’s Words for Work programme to support students as they prepare to leave school” (2021), aiming to address potential literacy problems some students may encounter in the transition between primary and secondary education.

Conclusion

As evident from the research and analysis conducted throughout this article, children’s publishers can put into place a variety of procedures with which to help struggling readers and assist in alleviating the issue of illiteracy. This includes employing practical elements considered at the design, production, and editorial stages of their books, and through participation in charitable schemes and initiatives that provide access to texts for disadvantaged children and help encourage reading amongst young people. In further analysis, the impact of rapidly-developing technology in publishing and how elements such eBooks and online platforms can help with dyslexia and learning difficulties can be examined. This is a part of publishing, as well as broader society that is continually changing, so updated research into these fields would be warranted in future studies.

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