Promoting reading for young people

What does research tell us about promoting reading for and with young people in areas facing socio-economic challenges?

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An abridged version

This is an abridged version of the knowledge review *Att främja läsning för unga. Vad säger forskning om läsfrämjande för och med unga i områden med socioekonomiska utmaningar?* (Promoting reading for young people. What does research tell us about promoting reading for and with young people in areas facing socio-economic challenges?) (Schultz Nybacka and Nordin, 2024).

The purpose of the entire knowledge review is to create an overview, based on Swedish and international research, of the circumstances and forms of reading promotion among young people and young adults, in areas facing socio-economic challenges. This abridged version presents the key findings from the knowledge review in a concise and condensed format.

Areas facing socio-economic challenges

One in seven people in Sweden lives in an area facing socio-economic challenges. This is equivalent to 1.4 million people, or 13 per cent of the population (Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, 2021). Widespread and persistent segregation results in areas facing socio-economic challenges. The trend towards a segregated society has many dimensions, but stems from two factors: a widening income gap between high earners and low earners, and an increasingly ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous population concentrated in more or less homogenous areas.

The knowledge review uses the expression *areas facing socio-economic challenges*, with emphasis on areas. The rationale is that the problems relate more to the environment than to the individual, and more to limited financial resources than to limited capabilities. All in all, the expression "areas facing socio-economic challenges" emphasises the importance of people's circumstances – and indicates that social stakeholders are capable of changing them.

The low socio-economic standard of living is precisely what has a far-reaching impact on health and quality of life for young people and poses genuine socio-economic challenges faced by residents in these areas.

Language skills and linguistic status

Language skills are an important factor in both identity and reading. The demands on young people's language skills, communication and reading skills have increased with the rise of digitalisation

and the knowledge society (Hwuang et al., 2018). Socio-economic criteria determine different pathways for the many dimensions of language skills.

A four-year-old growing up in poverty has heard 30 million fewer words than their more affluent (Hart and Risley, 1995 in Pace et al., 2017). According to a body of international research, children and young people in low-income families have lower language skills than other children.

Language skills influence self-image among young people. Young people who are multilingual and whose native language is not the majority language often have negative language experiences even now. This is partly due to the fact that they are unable to use their native language in important everyday encounters, and partly because their second and third languages encounter criticism from the people around them (Hwuang et al., 2018, p. 92 ff).

Young people who are multilingual are in particular need of an environment offering socio-cultural support, with teaching in their native language, linguistically adapted subject teaching and teaching in Swedish as a second language (Axelsson, 2004 in Wedin, 2018). However, they rarely receive comparable teaching in reading and writing in their native language or first language (Wedin, 2018). Reading aloud is an excellent form of support for young people who are multilingual. It is important for the literature to be perceived as authentic; that is to say, that it is not fabricated for a teaching situation.

Research on the social and societal impact of culture supports good outcomes for the well-being of citizens. Overall, different models indicate the value of a long-term approach in respect of local communities and involvement of their residents.

Reading

Scholarly studies over time indicate that social class is one of the key explanations for young people's academic performance and social mobility. Researchers state that it is difficult to move from one class to another (Levy et al., 2014, p. 2). Over time, reading – and in particular, free reading during leisure time – has beneficial effects for individuals on a personal, intellectual and social level, and in terms of health. Reading also has a lasting impact on cultural, economic and social aspects (The Reading Agency, 2016).

Reading culture among young people

From a socio-cultural perspective, people's reading is shaped by societal norms and values. Reading behaviour among young people has its own criteria and circumstances, but it may also vary depending on socio-cultural background and ethnicity. In other words, the specific position held by young people in society also determines their attitudes towards literature and reading. When adults approach the issue of reading among young people, there is a risk of what is known as an *ethnocentric fallacy*; which is where librarians, teachers, literary critics and others with more power than young people work on the basis of their own norms and values, instead of understanding young people's reading on their own terms (Svensson, 1989). Young people also have a strong need to distinguish themselves from adults, ..., and view themselves from an "us and them" perspective. (Sandin, 2021).

It is now well known that young people with limited socio-economic resources do not read as much as other groups (Clark and Akerman, 2006), and that they show little motivation to read in their leisure time (McMullan and Sutherland, 2020). Studies of young people with limited socio-economic resources suggest that it is necessary to explain to them why reading is important

(Hughes-Hassell and Rodge, 2007; Clark and Douglas, 2011).

The body of research strongly supports the view that motivation is a crucial factor for engaging in reading. In other words, the issue is not cognitive reading ability, but the actual drive to read. The notion that such drivers provide the circumstances that allow action to be taken is a common yet controversial scholarly view.

Psychologists and educators usually divide motivation into two different drivers: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation to read

Intrinsic motivation to read refers to the inherent drive to read in order to achieve personal goals or satisfaction, for instance, and usually for pleasure (Conradi et al., 2014, p. 154). Intrinsic motivation to read also means that reading becomes enjoyable in itself – it generates the drive and energy needed for the reader to carry on reading. Intrinsic motivation to read can be simply expressed in terms of the desire to read.

Extrinsic motivation to read

Extrinsic motivation to read involves being motivated by external factors such as avoiding punishment, or obtaining recognition or rewards in more constructive ways. Reading competitions of all kinds, reading challenges and offers are common forms of extrinsic motivation to read.

Interactive motivation to read

There is another basic form of motivation that organisational researchers Alvesson and Kärreman (2019) refer to as interactive motivation. Interactive motivation takes place in the interaction between oneself and others and shapes a shared culture. Reading can be made pleasurable by reading literature together in book circles and by means of Shared Reading and other reading promotion methods (Schultz Nybacka, 2022).

Cai Svensson's research on reading among children and young people (1989) emphasises social motivation: "vara tillsammans med andra människor, vinna deras gillande, ha roligt tillsammans med dem, tävla med dem, stärka självkänslan och den egna identiteten i samvaron med dem och genom dem" (being with other people, winning their approval, having fun with them, competing with them, reinforcing self-esteem and your own identity through them and by spending time with them) (p. 41). Typically, young readers are expected to be even more socially motivated than others.

Lack of motivation to read among young people

Theories in respect of intrinsic motivation to read as an ideal have certain limitations when it comes to explaining why different groups and individuals do not choose to read.

A lower proportion of people driven by an intrinsic motivation to read can be found among young people in areas facing socio-economic challenges. Arguments about the impact of reading on self-awareness, creativity and imagination are usually based on people who are already active readers. However, young people who do not yet perceive themselves as readers need more support to help them understand the tangible and practical benefits that reading can bring over time.

Future opportunities for reading promotion methods for young people and young adults in areas facing socio-economic challenges need to utilise young people's extrinsic motivation more extensively than was previously the case. They need a clear vision, tangible requirements, attractive

rewards and greater recognition for their efforts and achievements.

Moreover, future methods could develop interactive motivation among young people by creating social activities relating to reading and literature.

Other appropriate methods with good results may include reading role models with whom young people are able to identify.

Literature for young people may itself highlight important role models with whom they can identify. That is why it is imperative that young people and young adults in areas facing socio-economic challenges are depicted and represented in the various genres of young adult literature; not only in destructive environments or in the form of negative experiences, but also in everyday joys and tales of hope that are perceived as authentic.

Methods can also be used to provide better responses to the varying needs of young people for information. Addressing young people's different information needs through different types of reading (non-fiction, digital sources, etc.) may, in the longer term, help them to develop more of an interest in reading, improve reading attitudes and pave the way for greater intrinsic motivation to read.

The role of public libraries

According to section five of the Swedish Library Act (2013:801), people who speak a national minority language or have a native language other than Swedish are a priority target group for libraries. According to the eighth paragraph, public libraries shall "ägna särskild uppmärksamhet åt barn och ungdomar för att främja deras språkutveckling och stimulera till läsning, bland annat genom att erbjuda litteratur utifrån deras behov och förutsättningar" (shall pay particular attention to children and young people in order to promote their language development and encourage them to read by offering literature according to their needs and circumstances). Young multilingual people thus constitute a group for whom libraries have dual priorities.

A society is built on a social infrastructure that includes libraries. Public libraries offer support to young people and young adults when it comes to developing autonomy and independence. Young people have their own library cards and access to a free selection of literature, magazines, media and services that they are able to use freely. They learn to take responsibility for books and other things that belong to a public facility that is shared by all (Klinenberg, 2018). They have access to technology to assist with their studies and social contacts, and they are entertained (Dalmer et al., 2022).

According to the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), libraries' work on youth participation is primarily driven by libraries themselves. In other words, library staff seek feedback from teenagers who want to express their opinions about the books on the shelves and the library space. Participation takes place in formal groups of young people with predefined activities based on the library's current services.

According to YALSA, libraries of the future need to respond to young people's participation through what are referred to as participatory design and action research. Participation must not be limited to formal groups, but also involve informal meetings, both online and face-to-face, and be targeted at both individuals and groups. All young people need to be encouraged to participate in the development, implementation and evaluation of library services and programmes (Braun et al., 2014, p. 16).

However, looking beyond the printed book is a prerequisite if young people and young adults with limited socio-economic resources are to acquire reading skills and develop their reading over time. One common factor in the research is the fact that motivation to read and reading materials differ among young people who do not engage in reading of their own accord. The target group needs reading material in a variety of media and formats. A broadened concept of text – in other words, a broadened meaning of what can be regarded as text to read – also means reinterpreting young people's literacies in terms of reading and information practices. All in all, multilingualism may need to be emphasised: not as a limitation among young people and young adults, but as a resource.
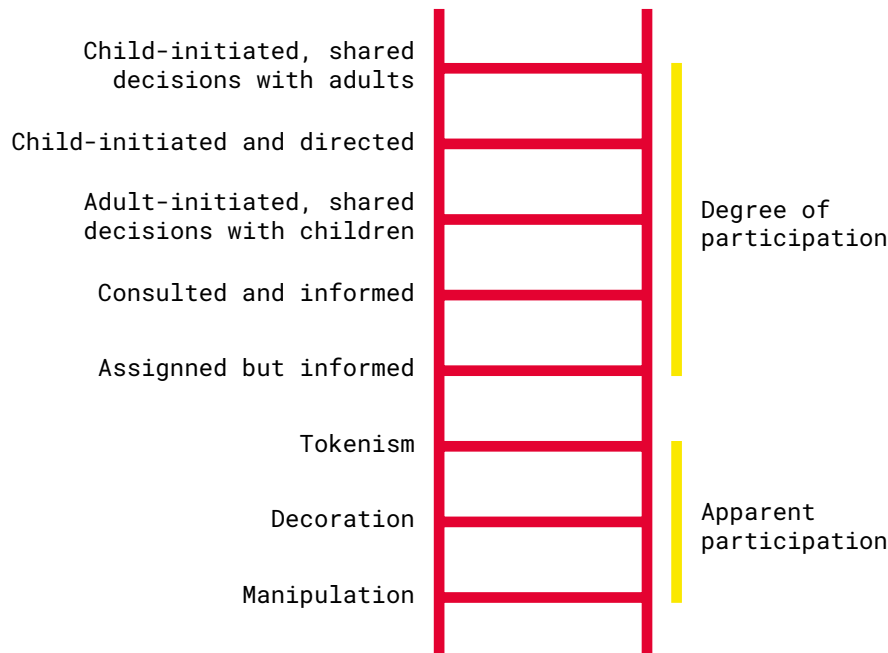
Opening up to young people's perspectives

Hughes-Hassel and Rodge (2007) present a number of points which will allow libraries, schools and others to support reading among young people, based on insights into the reading habits of young people in areas facing socio-economic challenges. A selection of points of relevance to public libraries and library staff are presented here.

- Talk to young people! Find out what they are interested in reading, and be open to new topics, themes, etc.

- Be passionate in your love of reading. Show them what you are reading at the moment, and talk about your reading practices and literature selections in various situations.

- Encourage young people to read during the summer and holidays. Increase access to books and other reading materials in areas facing socio-economic challenges. Keep libraries open – put together reading packs and ask patrons for funding for gifts of books. Set up book clubs with young people, and create programmes where young people can interact with authors who can talk about their lives and introduce young people to the writing process.

- Provide young people with reading material that they prefer. Visual genres are popular among young people – comics, manga, graphic novels. You could include magazines, especially those aimed at target groups with different ethnic backgrounds. (The authors refer to magazines such as *Black Beat, Teen en Español, Urban Latino* and *XXL* in an American context.)

- Respect the culture and heritage of young people. Let the literature stock reflect the worlds in which young people live: focus on contemporary books set in a multicultural or intercultural context. Such narratives can challenge stereotypical expectations about people living in areas facing socio-economic challenges. Invest in reading material in young people's first language – this can reach out to young people while also paving the way for discussions about reading with parents who may not speak another language as yet.

Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation model was developed by Roger Hart in 1997. This can be used as a basis for communicating on participation and initiatives among young people, and also as a tool for evaluation. A number of municipalities deploy this model in their work with children's rights issues. One advantage is that it also addresses young people's own initiative. The model is made up of eight levels, the top five of which denote increasing levels of participation. The three lowest levels denote apparent participation.

Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation.

	Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults
	Child-initiated and directed
	Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children
	Consulted and informed
	Assignned but informed
	Tokenism
	Decoration
	Manipulation

Degree of participation

Apparent participation

Source: Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2023.

However, Hart's model does not address how young people are recruited to participation and influence.

The models for young people's participation, such as the Ladder of Children's Participation, can be used to distinguish genuine participation from apparent participation. What constitutes the highest form of participation – independence or partnership with adults – can be usefully determined in discussion with young people, and adapted according to the situation.

More evidence needed

The following are needed for future research on the situation for young people in areas facing socio-economic challenges:

- more evidence about what is known as a socio-spatial perspective on literacy (Mills, 2016).

- greater emphasis on geographical factors.

- more studies on how young people in areas facing socio-economic challenges present their own reading habits, motivation to read and limitations.

- more systematic and critical scrutiny in respect of diversity and representation in Swedish statistics and analyses of literature for children and young people.

Reading is reliant on a kind of infrastructure and a literary system. Access to literature is based on collaborative efforts between civil society, the business community, central government and municipalities (Nordlund and Svedjedal, 2020).

Reading can boost young people's self-esteem by shifting the perspective on young people and young adults in areas facing socio-economic challenges, from a passive inadequacy perspective to an active participation perspective. Reading can increase motivation to learn and develop, as well as improving language skills and communication with others.

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