

Reading: the golden key

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Reading is the golden key to accessing the school curriculum and a lifetime's opportunities.

Yet in our wealthy nation, with its long history of free education, we still have one in four of our 11 year-olds not meeting expected national standards in reading - and a similar percentage not achieving a grade 4 in English GCSE.

And what will months of interrupted schooling mean for all children and young people with their reading development?

The linguist Noam Chomsky identified that every human has an innate language acquisition device. Only in rare circumstances do humans not learn to speak, and this is true across cultures. The psychologist Steven Pinker remarks that while children are wired for sound, print is an optional accessory that must be painstakingly bolted on.

I began my working life in education in H.M. Prison Brixton. All educators should spend time in the education department of one of Her Majesty's prisons. It is a poignant reminder that basic literacy is a birthright that should be denied nobody.

In my time subsequently at the National Literacy Trust, I used to give talks entitled 'Have you ever met a mugger who's read *Middlemarch*?' This was my way of affirming that whatever else we do for children and young people in classrooms, we must give them the *dignity* of being able to speak, read and write with fluency to make their way in an endlessly fascinating global society.

A UK political leader once said that the word 'priority' should not be used in the plural. In that spirit of just *one* catch-up priority for schools at the start of 2021, we must break this cycle of a section of the young population growing up with faltering language skills.

Let us be properly ambitious emerging from the 2020 interruptions to schooling. Set the goals and see where we get to.

- Every primary school to say to itself: almost all children will, at age 11+, have a reading age which matches at least their chronological age. *And track reading ages from the early years to Year 6.*
- Every secondary school to say to itself: no matter the child's starting point, almost all will achieve a grade 4 in English at 16+. *And track reading ages from Year 7 to Year 11.*

So what's to do?

An easy reading agenda

First, schools need a rigorous approach to word recognition: enabling children to use a phonetic approach, to divide words into syllables for pronunciation, to have a knowledge of prefixes and suffixes.

Second, a planned approach to vocabulary development: learning new words, keywords and concepts, technical abbreviations and etymology, symbols and formulae - through regular and consistent use of a dictionary and a thesaurus.

Third, a systematic engagement with comprehension and organisation of text: summarising what has been read, distinguishing essential from non-essential, fact from opinion, drawing inferences and conclusions, noting cause and effect, reading between the lines.

Fourth, a programme to promote reading interests: voluntary reading for pleasure, reading for personal information, developing a passion for particular subjects, the use of the school library, the downloading onto the iPad of a favourite biography.

Fifth, a whole-school approach to study skills: sitting still long enough to read, using skimming for different purposes, reading maps and graphs, learning how to take notes, reading more rapidly with adequate comprehension, forming the study habit.

Reflecting on the five points above, skilled practitioners will not make the mistake of adopting simply an age-related approach to the teaching of reading. Rather, they will select what works for a given child or group of children at a particular point in their reading journey. Fluency is the goal.

Teachers and tutors must be driven by the belief that every child *can* tackle texts with confidence, whether on the printed page or the Kindle.

And for the already confident reader, read (again) *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. History has a lovely way with patterns: on the eve of a predicted 21st century Roaring Twenties, 'The Great Gatsby' came out of copyright on 1st January 2021.

Roy Blatchford's forthcoming book 'Equity & Excellence' will be published in April 2021.