

Reading

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!
In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel!
In apprehension how like a god! – Hamlet

Nearly two centuries ago, a group of reform-minded individuals set out to transform the lives of people on the margins of Britain. They reported on their work in a book called *Moral Statistics of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (1826), and this is what they said about their motivation in the introduction to that work:

The mere art of reading, ought not, perhaps, in strictness, to be held as education; yet the power which this art confers, of applying to our own use the wisdom and knowledge of every age . . . renders it alone the most effective instrument of moral improvement. Whether or not instruction in this art should be made universal is, we believe, no longer in debate. . . . Our arts and institutions, our noblest distinctions, and most refined enjoyments – all are the gifts of education, without which, we descend almost to the level of “the beasts that perish”.

To read is to have access to the store of human knowledge. In reading we encounter not just knowledge, but the mind that recorded it, with its experiences and biases, its insights and perceptions.

Reading creates empathy. In reading we project ourselves into others’ experiences, and come away from them changed. In reading we see past ourselves and our immediate experience; we understand the world is ever wider, and to ourselves we become ever smaller, yet ever more complex. When I read I feed my mind and strengthen it; I use it and train it; I can grow, and compare points of view, weigh up competing ideas, and arrange the store of knowledge that reading allows me to possess. To read is to have the power to learn regardless of the school I attend or the teacher who teaches me.

In reading I have the opportunity to master language. I hear the voices of others, and I can imitate them, blend them, and absorb them into my own voice. In reading I encounter thousands upon thousands of words I may never come across in daily speech, and with the words come thoughts and ideas I may never encounter on my own. To develop such capacities enables me to communicate in ways I could not have dreamt of without reading.

In short, reading is so essential to the transmission of culture that to be without it is to be, in every sense of the word, marginalised.

All this, of course, is agreed with by educators everywhere; we see great hand-wringing by politicians, foundations and trusts; we see sponsors lining up to support charities that seek to foster a love of reading; we see much

made of disorders and disabilities, and great soothing oceans of sympathy for the afflicted.

And all this is a sham. The great scandal continues, and our multi-billion pound education system continues to churn out tens of thousands of students every year who cannot read or write adequately. What the educators and the sponsors, by and large, do not seem to understand is what it is like to be fourteen and unable to read.

To be unable to read is to be locked out, to be isolated from discourse, to grasp the edges of conversations, to be without the knowledge of one's companions. It is to be terrified of failure, and haunted by its presence. It is humiliation and frustration, and it builds into anger, or despair. It is loneliness and a formless sense of injustice. It is to be without the words to evince my despair.

And that is why I know the educators and the policy-makers do not understand. Because if they did, they would ensure that in all the billions of pounds spent on education, enough was used wisely to ensure that no one leaves school unable to read. It must be that they believe that some people are destined to fail, and they must feel that this is somehow acceptable, whatever their speeches and sound-bytes may say. It must be that because they were privileged enough to learn to read, they do not understand the despair that is the heritage of the excluded. If they understood, they would invest in solutions, not sticking plasters. They would understand that imposing silent sustained reading on children who cannot read does not promote a love of reading, but an aversion to it.

After the division of the curriculum cake, (normally about 5% of a secondary school's operating budget), after the funding of 'innovative' projects, we waste money on interventions that babysit failure, or label students instead of helping them, or that entertain them with a computer for an hour of wasted learning that they will never get back. Is this how education should work?

Is it not the truth that for many school managers, it is not the daily pain and frustration of the struggling reader that bothers them, but the negative impact on the school's attainment targets? Is it not the truth that for most school leaders, their knowledge of reading problems amounts to a few well-worn myths about dyslexia, and a handful of well-advertised programmes? Is it not true that they would rather spend money on a computer programme than train staff to do what needs to be done?

Consider: what you would want if you were the child who cannot read?

You would want someone to teach you, and teach you well.

It is not a lot to ask.