

Dear Mr. Henley,

The Society of Authors welcomes the Independent Review of Cultural Education, which supports the assurance given by Nick Gibb in a letter to the Society's Chair last autumn that the government's intention is to allow schools 'more *freedom and time* to build on the core entitlement to provide a rich educational experience for all their pupils.' [our italics]

Given that you will receive many submissions outlining the ways in which culture and Britain's exceptionally rich cultural heritage matter to individuals and to the economy, we shall focus primarily here on the areas which we consider fundamental to a proper education: reading and writing.

The importance of building reading and writing into education

We have already raised with Michael Gove our concern about the reductive nature of the current examination structure. We believe that it should include a requirement for students to show that they have consulted a range of different sources; and that exam questions should be introduced which require longer, essay-style answers. Such changes would greatly increase students' breadth of learning and their literacy and communication skills. It is essential that, in addition to the core curriculum and studying of set texts, reading for pleasure and creative writing are included within education as cultural experiences.

Failure to engage in culture, and poor literacy and imagination skills, lead to a failure in empathy (a large proportion of the prison population is illiterate yet intelligent). A child can learn more about, absorb and empathise more closely with a country, race or religion, say, through half an hour's drama or fiction, than through a day of news reports or baldly didactic lessons. Books stimulate the imagination and independent thought in ways that the more passive act of watching TV or films simply cannot. Some provide pleasure, others - equally importantly - provoke, or unsettle the reader.

The benefits of the internet in education are substantial, and the government's initiatives in this area are much appreciated. In addition, the rise of social networking has given freedom to many children who might otherwise be trapped in a narrow and impoverished home environment. However, these advantages bring with them the danger that the new generation will grow up without any awareness of (let alone desire for) extended reading; or of research beyond keying questions into a search engine; or the ability to write a sentence more articulate than a text message or tweet.

At home, children increasingly derive their information from their peers and Wikipedia. Computer games, Facebook, DVDs on portable devices and texting have replaced reading in many of its core environments e.g. reading - and the delight of being read to - in bed, when travelling, and on holiday. Yet the ability to communicate effectively, employability, a background which might lead to the ability to sustain a career in anything from responsible journalism to scientific research - all these demand something more profound and reflective.

In schools, to quote a member of the SoA writing in the educational field: 'As a teacher I find students ever more unwilling to think independently because all they want is the answer.' The existing examination structure does little to encourage the habit of reading either for pleasure or for research; and neither expository nor creative writing are actively nurtured. (As an aside, the Literacy Hour increased pace and focus in literacy lessons, but the focus was on getting the right answers or mining an extract for adjectives and adverbs. Again, it did not offer the chance to explore whole texts, to see in context how a story builds, how to develop an argument or characters; the habit of extended concentration.)

As the government recognises, levels of illiteracy are alarmingly high. Progress in Literary Studies (PIRLS 2006) demonstrated that reading ability in UK schools was lower than that in many EU countries, and that reading for pleasure is declining (http://timss.bc.e06/intl_rpt.htmdu/pirls201). The UK's position in international reading rankings (PISA) fell from 7th in 2000 to 25th in 2011. The problem is by no means limited to school children but is widespread in the academic high ground of universities. This is confirmed in the report *Writing Matters* published in 2006 by the Royal Literary Fund (www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm). That the UK is now only 25th in international reading rankings is scandalous given that we are privileged as Britons, speaking English, to be heir to the richest literary heritage in the world. For children to have the skills and desire to access to that heritage (Shakespeare, Dickens, Milton... the roll call is immense) they need the building block of fluency in reading.

Reading and being read to for pleasure are habits which, increasingly, schools will need actively to instil in children. They can engender, better than almost anything else, an enquiring mind and a real capacity for deduction, empathy, extended concentration. Readers encounter information and perspectives beyond merely those being sought, an awareness of values beyond those of celebrity. Extended reading

encourages a critical faculty, independent thinking, the ability to be more discriminating, to assess things in their own right and realise the value of the source.

Lack of time and the burden of a demanding curriculum and administrative procedures mean that many teachers have abandoned the practice of reading an entire book aloud to children. The quiet listening to books is one of the enduring memories a previous generation had of school days. For keen readers it provides the luxury of being read to - sometimes from a book that they would not have chosen (the more challenging rather than merely formulaic and commercial titles). For those who find reading arduous it provides motivation to maintain the effort. If they never become good readers it will be their chance to enjoy literature. A member told us that 'I have read picture books to adults (men in a prison notably enjoyed *Where the Wild Things Are*) and they have been touched by the poetry and simplicity of some of these books.'

Communication skills are also important for self-confidence. The best way to nurture such skills is through the reading and writing of narrative non-fiction. One of the strengths of British children's publishing has been great, innovative non-fiction.

Writing for pleasure is perhaps the cheapest, easiest way to allow children the freedom of self-expression. It requires no expensive materials. It can often be cathartic; and fun. Writing a story or a poem can give a sense of identity and pride to those who are not brainy, sporty or wealthy; a voice to those who feel isolated or overlooked.

We believe the review should also consider, perhaps within the concept of citizenship, instilling in children an understanding of the value (artistic and commercial) of intellectual property rights. Knowing that they own copyright in what they have written, and what that means, can be a cause of excitement and pride in pupils; it increases a sympathetic awareness of value, and an understanding of the harm done by piracy.

Existing initiatives

There are many existing initiatives which have proved successful and which could be easily expanded, including the following:

The enduring success and popularity of writers visiting schools. Britain's children's writers are the envy of the world, and education should take full advantage of that fact. In a report in the TES (2 July 2010) Ian McNeilly, director of the National Association for the Teaching of English, said: 'it's a great shame if these visits are to be seen as a luxury. The impact of an author coming and reading about his or her work shouldn't be underestimated... These are the type of things that people talk about when you ask them what they remember about school.'

While David Reedy, president of the UK Literacy Association, said: 'money spent on bringing authors into schools who enthuse children to write is money well spent. We think it should be written into the curriculum as an entitlement for pupils.' The government's laudable desire to 'foster links with cultural organisations and artists' and 'to provide experiences for children in and out of school', sits poorly with the current cutbacks in author visits and the dwindling opportunities for links with libraries - which remain extremely cheap, extremely easy and extremely successful ways of meeting exactly those aims. The feedback from children is overwhelmingly positive. A leading children's writer said that when she was a teacher, she was able to build a month of lessons around a decent author visit. (We would be pleased to supply further information on writers in schools, and about the following schemes.)

Young Cultural Creators, which inspires young people's reading and creativity... through partnerships between schools and cultural organisations, including libraries, museums and archives, working with writers and artists (www.youngculturalcreators.com);

The Ministry of Stories, which aims to help young people write their own stories. Its mission is to inspire a nation of storytellers (www.ministryofstories.org), and other such initiatives e.g. the Reader's Digest 1,000-word story competition;

The Poetry Society's Poets in Schools project. Poetry is particularly good at expanding children's imaginations and appreciation of language. It also has dividends right across the curriculum particularly in terms of planning, drafting and revising work.

(www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/education/schoolpoet);

We support Michael Rosen's Just Reading Campaign which aims to encourage all schools to become reading schools

(www.justreadcampaign.co.uk), and there are a range of other - generally small and/or localised - initiatives in this area;

Book trade initiatives such as World Book Day, designated by UNESCO as a worldwide celebration of books and reading

(www.worldbookday.com);

The Arvon Foundation's residential creative writing courses specifically for school children (www.arvonfoundation.org and click on 'Young People');

The RLF Writers Fellowship scheme in universities (www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme);

The involvement of teachers, schools and children as voters, consultants and judges in children's book competitions develops a connection to literature and a sense of purpose and enjoyment;

School libraries and school librarians (both endangered species) are invaluable in fostering a love of reading, and their role will be even more crucial if the decline in public libraries continues.

Teachers

For far too long insufficient consideration has been given to the need to nurture teachers' own creativity. If teachers, harried by deadlines and a very prescriptive syllabus, are unable to develop their own imagination, how are they to enrich the imaginative life of their students?

Greater allowance in this regard would also have a potentially huge effect for good on the morale of teachers - another key element.

Teacher training (especially at primary level) should include a module about modern children's books. Teachers cannot pass on a love of books (fiction, non-fiction, or poetry) if they do not have a love and knowledge of books themselves. The demise of the School Library Service and school librarians has exacerbated the situation.

What is required?

To repeat Nick Gibb's assurance quoted in our opening paragraph: the key requirements are freedom and time.

Without time, even enthusiasm will struggle. In the schools system as structured, there is simply not enough time allowed for creative, independent reading and writing, whether in primary schools or in the sixth form of secondary schools. All that seems important is the answer that will secure success. Only freedom from the reductive nature of the current examination structure could allow children to explore on their own, for fun.

We would strongly urge the government to consider making libraries statutory in schools (as they are in prisons), and - for schools with above a certain number of students - make school librarians statutory also. The value of reading for pleasure, highlighted in a study on 'Family, scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations' published in the journal *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* (www.sciencedirect.com) makes the point that regular reading for pleasure is the single most useful and effective improver of educational achievement, and that having access to books can raise a child on average 3.2 years in education. Many homes are without books; many parents do not take their children to public libraries. The existence of school libraries manned by experienced librarians is an extremely worthwhile way of investing in education.

In addition, public libraries are also crucial. Schools should be encouraged to form strong links with local public libraries through initiatives such as the Summer Reading Campaign.

We suggest the introduction of tax breaks for companies sponsoring school trips. In particular, a foreign language is an increasingly essential requirement in the global economy. Immersion in the actual country, via school trips, exchanges etc has always been more effective than classroom lessons.

More widely, we believe that the habit of culture should be as much a fundamental aspect of the environment as is, for example, the country's architectural heritage. High street bookshops, local theatres, libraries all underline the importance of books, culture and learning. Many also willingly provide venues for education-related activities. The establishment of viable ways of facilitating e-book loans from libraries is a welcome development here, linking with the government's hope that school children become internet-savvy. Reading and writing benefit both those with very little basic understanding and those already highly literate and eloquent.

We would be pleased to supply further information on any of the above matters if that would be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Tom Holland