

I'll spell it out: if children can't read, lives are ruined

Minette Marrin

This country's education system is a betrayal of this country's children. It blunts their intelligence, narrows their perspectives and blasts their future prospects. How often does that need to be said? Of course it is not universally true; many children defy the system, one way or another. But the point is that the system is bad. If the word "institutionally" means anything, this country's education system is institutionally unfit for purpose.

Those who assume that I am exaggerating, as columnists do, should consider the interim report published last week by the Cambridge Primary Review, the biggest independent inquiry into state primary school education in England for 40 years, led by Professor Robin Alexander. After three years of exhaustive research by his team, he says "our argument is that [primary school children's] education, and to some degree their lives, are impoverished if they have received an education that is so fundamentally deficient".

At last a knight in shining educational armour seems to have come galloping over the hill. His review finds that the curriculum has been politicised, that the education department and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority have been excessively prescriptive in their micro-management of schools, that their focus on "literacy" and numeracy and testing has squeezed out other learning, and that children are being denied a broad and rich curriculum - with history, geography, music, art and drama the greatest losses. Alexander insists the arts and humanities "help to hold the line between civilisation and philistinism" but "in these severely utilitarian and philistine times" this argument "no longer cuts much ice".

Fundamentally deficient. Impoverished. That's telling them. The government is understandably furious. However, the professor's armour is not quite so spectacularly shining as it might be. I feel he is missing some centrally important points. Of course we should return, as he says, to a broad, rich, varied curriculum tailored to the individual child and its ability. Of course it's wrong to harry children through a narrow and painful thicket of pointless and politicised exams. Of course it is a tragedy that we are becoming a nation of philistines.

However, there is no point in proposing a wide and imaginative course of study for children who cannot read well. A child who cannot read well cannot learn. He or she cannot possibly share the riches of a wide education or the freedom of the literate mind to teach and enrich itself when others can't or won't. And the reason our schools fail so badly, the reason teachers teach narrowly to the dubious "literacy" tests, is that they have failed to teach little children to read properly in the first place.

That failure is what originally prompted all the hated micro-management from both political parties. Politicians just wanted to stop the rot in schools. The cure - extreme interference and its unintended evil consequences - may have proved to be as bad as the condition, but both Conservative and Labour governments had good intentions. The Conservatives' national curriculum and league tables and then new Labour's minute-by-minute intrusion into every school and into every teacher's head were efforts to highlight and to resist the mysterious forces of educational failure.

These forces have somehow defeated the government's best intentions. Children are still leaving their primary schools without being able to read properly, which means they are ineducable. There is constant dispute about figures and definitions, but it's now commonly agreed that 20% of children leave primary school unable to read at the appropriate level for their age and that in many inner-city problem schools up to 40% of children arrive at 11 with a reading age of less than nine. It's like putting a child who can't swim into the deep end of a pool. Those who can't swim, sink, as we see.

Evidence that I am not exaggerating comes, again, from an earlier report put out under the umbrella of Alexander's Primary Review. In 2007 a study questioned whether the "massive investment" in national literacy and numeracy strategies for primary schools had produced value for money by raising standards. Professor Peter Tymms and Dr Christine Merrell, two researchers at Durham University, argued that the rise in standards claimed by the authorities could simply be the result of teachers tailoring their teaching to the test.

Worse still, the study suggested the results of the tests were often wrong anyway. As many as one in three primary school 11-year-olds (about 200,000 children) may have been awarded the wrong grade in their all-important maths and English national curriculum tests. This undermines the government's claims that standards in the three Rs have gone up.

To return to the central question, why do so many children read so little and so badly, there are some glaringly obvious answers. First of all they are not being taught to read - to decode - words in the quickest, most efficient, most teacher-proof way. Every child, apart from a minuscule minority with serious disabilities, can learn to decode words through any good system of synthetic phonics - CAT spells cat. The huge resistance to this idea in the educational establishment is a constant mystery to me.

Another reason for this failure is that teachers are all too often not taught in their training how to teach children to read. There are also some very poor teachers around. And as any head teacher knows, it takes a lot of time, courage, persistence, money and support from the LEA to sack them: there's every incentive to leave a bad teacher in place. But it takes only one bad

primary school teacher to ruin a child's chances for life. Last week the head of admissions at Cambridge University said very publicly that state school children are being handicapped academically by poor-quality teachers.

Finally, the government's many reading schemes are rather dubious. And the reason, once again, is the deeply ingrained resistance at all levels in the education world to phonics. The original national literacy scheme, with its literacy hour, was undermined from the start by those determined to use several different reading systems as well as phonics. The Every Child a Reader scheme and its vastly expensive Reading Recovery initiative (£5,000 per child per year) are very questionable. What's needed is a radical review of all these schemes. Until then, wishes for educational utopia will remain just that.

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your [advertisement](#).

Times Online Services: [Dating](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Property Search](#) | [Used Cars](#) | [Holidays](#) | [Births, Marriages, Deaths](#) | [Subscriptions](#)
News International associated websites: [Globrix Property Search](#) | [Property Finder](#) | [Milkround](#)

Copyright 2009 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

