

## **RESOURCE READING TO BOOST THREE R RESULTS**

Much hot air is being ventilated about youngsters' literacy and numeracy skills when what is needed is a little more resource from Government to help schools develop the reading habit that is at the root of all learning.

The CBI's disturbing findings on the skills crisis facing employees and the claims from the Prince's Trust that thirty thousand youngsters leave school every year with nothing to show for 11 years at school are not that surprising.

Last autumn we heard that 250,000 youngsters were starting secondary school each year with such a poor mastery of reading, writing and maths that they could not cope with the curriculum.

That statistic, which the Government disclosed after an enquiry from opposition politicians, provoked angry headlines about the betrayal of primary pupils and showed that the problems of the three Rs start very early indeed.

As someone who visits hundreds of British primary and secondary schools every year to coach on reading motivation and measurement methods, I repeatedly find pupils whose reading age is well below their chronological age.

I also find dedicated teachers who are anxious to get reluctant readers to read and to develop a school-wide reading culture, yet who struggle to give pupils individual attention on reading, and who have to rely on guesswork on individual reading ages.

It is known that a child that cannot read, cannot learn; that strong reading skills are the key to success in all subjects, including science and maths, and that children perform better in schools that buy plenty of books than in those that do not.

So why is there so little focus on resources and support for reading in the school system? Why are secondary school staff forced to sneak reading practice time into the over-crowded curriculum?

Why do so many schools struggle with under-stocked libraries? The work that I do, which works on turning pupils into voracious book-readers, has revealed the bleak reality: most schools lack the number of books per pupil that educationalists recommend, with heads forced to beg books from parents.

If we are urging schools to get back to basics, let's give them the basics: a good stock of books at the right level of interest to stretch boys in particular, a qualified librarian and a daily period of guided silent reading going right up into secondary school.

And why wait for months or a year in a young boy's life to know if he is developing reading skills when we have technology to track that around the clock, and track it by group and by individual? These tests reveal insights that a teacher might use to change their methods, or identify who needs attention - the struggling pupils getting left behind or the gifted, easily-bored child who needs a quick steer to a new reading target.

Yet many schools lack the resources to measure regularly or accurately if an individual's reading age is above or below average, relying on annual high-stakes information which gives too little, too late, or expensive paper tests that take time to administer and mark.

At the same time overloaded teachers freely admit to me that it is impossible to really teach reading skills on an individual basis, knowing they will not have the time to measure and focus on individuals. They are forced to teach to the average ability of the class, even if that class contains special needs and gifted pupils.

By motivating pupils to read and having good data on outcomes we know that schools can achieve an average two years' reading growth in one year, with some showing much more growth. This can turn around performance, improve attendance and discipline and create a climate for learning. Surely, that is worth a bit of extra resource?

*James Bell is director of professional services at Renaissance Learning. He is coordinating a number of research projects involving the NFER to help teachers raise reading standards across 39 UK schools, testing the impact of Renaissance's Accelerated Reader on reading development.*

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