



WHY READING MATTERS

Revitalising Scottish education

Sir Nick Gibb + Gillian Evans + Simon Knight | Edited by Stuart Waiton + Penny Lewis

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Contents

P 07	Foreword Stuart Waiton & Penny Lewis
21	Reforming Lessons Sir Nick Gibb
37	Why Scotland must rethink how children learn to read Dr Gillian Evans
47	<i>Which</i> reading matters Dr Simon Knight
53	References
55	SUE Manifesto for Scottish Education

Sir Nick Gibb has developed the ‘reading’ content presented in his and Robert Peal’s excellent 2026 book *Reforming Lessons: Why English Schools Have Improved Since 2010 and How This Was Achieved*, published by Routledge.

Dr Gillian Evans is a scientist and parent who argues that Scotland’s education system needs to return to a more rigorous, evidence-based approach to teaching children how to read.

Dr Simon Knight has a PhD in Education and explores *which* books we should be encouraging children to read, drawing from already published articles on the SUE Substack.

Foreword

Why reading matters

Reading is one of humanity's greatest achievements. It is the means by which each generation inherits the knowledge, experience, imagination and wisdom of those who came before it. Through reading, children are connected not only to the practical demands of modern life but also to a conversation that stretches across centuries. Reading allows us to transcend the limitations of our own time, place and experience. It gives us access to worlds we have never seen, ideas we have never considered, and possibilities we might never otherwise imagine.

It is difficult to overstate its importance.

Every aspect of education depends upon literacy. Children who cannot read struggle to access history, science, geography, mathematics and literature. Young people who leave school without secure literacy skills face diminished opportunities in employment, training and higher education. Literacy is not simply another educational outcome. It is the foundation upon which all other educational achievements rest.

Yet despite its obvious importance, Scotland finds itself in the midst of a reading crisis.

This pamphlet has a straightforward purpose. It seeks to answer three fundamental questions. First, why are increasing numbers of Scottish children struggling to read? Second, what can be done to reverse this decline? Third, what kinds of books should we be encouraging children to read once they have acquired the ability?

The chapters that follow address each of these questions in turn. Sir Nick Gibb examines the evidence surrounding the teaching of reading and explains why systematic synthetic phonics transformed literacy outcomes in England while Scotland increasingly moved in a different direction. Gillian Evans draws upon both research and personal experience to show how Scotland has ignored much of the evidence regarding reading instruction and highlights the consequences for thousands of pupils. Simon Knight considers a different but equally important question: what books are worth reading, and what responsibilities do adults have when introducing children to literature?

Underlying all these discussions is a larger issue. Reading matters because education matters. And education matters because civilisation depends upon the successful transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next.

The forgotten purpose of education

In recent decades, educational debate has increasingly become focused on issues that sit outside education itself. Schools are routinely expected to address poverty, inequality, wellbeing, citizenship, sustainability, identity, inclusion and countless other social concerns. Many of these issues are important. All deserve serious public discussion.

The problem arises when the educational purpose of the school becomes obscured.

In *Wasted and Power of Reading*, sociologist Frank Furedi argues that modern education increasingly lost confidence in its own mission.^{1,2} As a result, schools ceased to see themselves primarily as institutions charged with transmitting knowledge and instead become agencies tasked with solving wider social problems. The consequence was that educational achievement itself started to become a secondary consideration.

This shift has had profound consequences. Rather than asking whether children are learning important knowledge, educational discussions frequently revolve around whether pupils feel included, engaged or represented. Rather than asking whether children can read fluently, debates often focus on wellbeing, identity and experience.

One of Furedi's most provocative arguments is that reading itself has become the object of cultural suspicion.

Throughout history, from Socrates to the printing press, and from the Victorian anxiety about penny dreadfuls to the controversy around *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, what the 'lower orders' were reading was a repeated concern for elites. More generally however, in the past, books were assumed to enlarge the mind and civilise the individual. Today, it is not so much a traditional fear that people might be influenced by books that is the issue, rather there is a broader loss of confidence in the culture and educational value of reading itself. Many educational and cultural critics worry about books because they are considered potentially harmful, exclusionary, traumatising or insufficiently representative. The concern is less about protecting the social order and more about protecting emotional wellbeing and identity.

As a result, for many of our educational elites, reading is no longer presented as a route into a wider world but as an activity requiring safeguarding, mediation and therapeutic guidance. One result is that literature increasingly appears not as an inheritance to be celebrated but as a problem to be managed.

Children are consequently protected from intellectual challenge when they should be introduced to it.

Reading and self-discipline

One of the paradoxes of contemporary education is that while it speaks constantly about empowering the individual, it often neglects the habits through which genuine intellectual independence is achieved.

Reading is a case in point.

Serious reading cultivates qualities that are increasingly rare in contemporary culture: sustained attention, patience, perseverance, and a willingness to learn from voices other than one's own. To read seriously is to enter a world not of our making and to recognise that understanding often requires effort before it yields reward. Readers must temporarily suspend the assumption that their own experience is the measure of all things and become open to the possibility that an author, living or dead, may have something important to teach them.

Yet many contemporary educational philosophies encourage the opposite disposition, inviting children to see their own experiences, feelings and identities as the starting point for all learning. In such a climate, reading can appear less as a liberation than an imposition. The irony is that the habits developed through reading, self-discipline, perseverance and intellectual humility are the very qualities that make genuine autonomy possible.

A society that loses confidence in transmitting these habits will find it increasingly difficult to sustain a serious reading culture.

The diminished teacher

This shift has implications not only for pupils but also for teachers.

Increasingly, teachers are encouraged to understand their role in therapeutic or social terms. Teacher education and professional development frequently emphasise inclusion, emotional support and social justice, often at the expense of the distinctive educational mission of the school. As a consequence, teachers can come to view themselves as counsellors, facilitators, advocates or agents of social change rather than as educators whose primary responsibility is the transmission of knowledge.

Important though these wider concerns may be, they risk displacing the central purpose of schooling.

The cultivation of literacy depends upon teachers possessing the confidence to exercise educational authority, establish disciplined habits of study, and induct children into forms of knowledge that exist independently of their personal experience. A culture of reading requires adults who believe that some books are worth reading, some knowledge is worth acquiring, and some intellectual disciplines are worth mastering. It requires teachers prepared to teach rather than merely facilitate, to lead rather than simply support, and to introduce children to a world beyond themselves.

An increasing problem in schools is that teachers are encouraged to think about themselves and act more in accordance with our therapeutic culture than through a passion and belief in the importance of knowledge. However, the rise of our therapeutic culture did not occur in isolation. It emerged alongside earlier child-centred and progressive educational theories that had already

weakened confidence in the direct transmission of knowledge. As Sir Nick Gibb's chapter brilliantly demonstrates, one consequence was a profound shift in how children were taught to read.

Explicit, systematic instruction came to be seen as old-fashioned and increasingly gave way to approaches that assumed reading would emerge naturally through exposure to books, personal experience and self-directed learning. The result was that many children who could have learned to read successfully through structured teaching instead struggled to acquire the most basic literacy skills.

Good schools with good headteachers and teachers continued to operate but, as a whole, the standards, expectations and the very nature of education were being squeezed by the system itself. To a large degree, good schools could only exist by ignoring or paying lip service to the educational elites.

As the overall educational outcomes deteriorated, the subsequent growth of therapeutic culture added a further layer of confusion. Difficulties that might once have prompted questions about teaching methods, curriculum content or educational expectations increasingly came to be interpreted through the language of vulnerability, wellbeing and diagnosis. Genuine learning difficulties undoubtedly exist and require specialist support, yet too often educational failure ceased to be understood as an educational problem.

As confidence in knowledge, cultural inheritance, and the transformative power of teaching declined, schools became more comfortable identifying needs than addressing their causes. The consequence was a paradoxical situation in which educational institutions expanded their therapeutic ambitions while lowering their intellectual ambitions. A loss of cultural

confidence ultimately undermined both the expectation that every child could master literacy and the commitment to induct children into the intellectual inheritance that literacy makes possible.

Schools exist to teach.

At their most fundamental level, schools exist to ensure that children acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for participation in society. Reading is therefore not one educational priority among many. It is the gateway through which almost all others must pass.

When children are not taught to read effectively, no amount of discussion about inclusion, empowerment or wellbeing can compensate.

Reading as cultural inheritance

If reading were merely a technical skill, none of this would matter quite so much.

The reason societies have invested such effort in teaching children to read is that books open doors to forms of experience, knowledge and beauty that would otherwise remain closed.

Reading provides access to humanity's accumulated intellectual inheritance. Books allow individuals to enter into dialogue with people who lived centuries ago and in societies radically different from our own. Through reading we encounter ideas that challenge assumptions, expand horizons and deepen understanding.

Reading therefore performs a uniquely democratic function.

A child growing up in a housing scheme in Glasgow can encounter Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, Burns, Orwell, Tolkien or Solzhenitsyn just as readily as the child of a professor

or judge. Books make available experiences and forms of knowledge that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

Historically, this capacity transformed societies. The great reading revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries opened access to literature, science, philosophy, theology and history on an unprecedented scale. Reading helped create the modern world because it expanded people's capacity to think beyond the immediate circumstances of their lives.

People did not learn to read simply so they could decode words on a page. They learned to read because books connected them to larger worlds of meaning.

Literacy mattered because what people read mattered.

Beauty, wonder and the imagination

Reading also allows children to encounter beauty.

Long before they possess the vocabulary to explain it, children recognise beauty in the worlds created by great authors. They encounter it in the loyalty of Sam Gamgee, the adventures of Bilbo Baggins, the friendship of Rat and Mole on the riverbank, the wonder of Mary Lennox discovering the hidden garden, or the courage shown by countless heroes and heroines of children's literature.

Such experiences are not educational luxuries. They are part of what it means to become fully human.

Great books introduce children to excellence, humour, courage, tragedy, sacrifice, love and joy. They enlarge the imagination by taking young readers beyond themselves and offering glimpses of ways of living, thinking and acting that are greater than

their immediate experience. They help answer life's enduring questions: What is worth admiring? What is worth striving for? What sort of person should I become?

A society that neglects reading therefore loses more than literacy skills. It risks depriving children of one of the most powerful means through which they come to understand both the world and their place within it.

Scotland's paradox

What makes Scotland's current difficulties particularly frustrating is that many of the solutions are already known.

Indeed, Scotland played a central role in generating the evidence.

The Clackmannanshire research conducted by Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson demonstrated the effectiveness of systematic synthetic phonics more than two decades ago. The study became internationally influential and helped shape literacy policy elsewhere. England increasingly embraced evidence-based approaches to reading instruction and implemented reforms that placed phonics at the centre of early literacy teaching.

Yet Scotland largely failed to follow through on its own discoveries.

As Gillian Evans demonstrates in the chapter that follows, the result has been increasing inconsistency in reading instruction, weaker assessment practices, and a growing number of children arriving at secondary school without secure literacy skills.

This is not simply an educational problem.

Children who cannot read fluently struggle to access the wider curriculum. Educational inequalities widen.

Confidence diminishes. Opportunities narrow. What is often described as a social problem may, in many cases, begin as an educational one.

There will always be children with genuine learning difficulties who require specialist support. However, when extraordinarily large proportions of pupils are classified as having additional support needs, we should at least consider whether the issue lies not primarily with the children but with the system responsible for teaching them.

If large numbers of pupils are failing to acquire basic literacy, the first question should not be ‘What is wrong with the child?’ but ‘How are we teaching them to read?’

The challenge of the digital age

The urgency of the reading question has been intensified by broader cultural changes.

Writers such as James Marriott have suggested that we may be entering a post-literate era.³ Children and adults increasingly consume information through screens rather than books. Long-form reading competes with social media, streaming platforms, computer games and endless digital distractions.

There is growing evidence that fewer children read for pleasure than in previous generations.

This matters because reading develops habits of mind that are difficult to cultivate elsewhere. It requires concentration. It encourages reflection. It teaches readers to follow complex arguments, appreciate nuance, and engage with unfamiliar perspectives.

Books slow us down.

In an age defined by speed, that may be their greatest virtue.

Reading encourages us to encounter ideas rather than merely react to them. It creates a space between stimulus and response. It rewards effort. It develops judgement. It invites us to wrestle with complexity rather than retreat into slogans.

These are not merely educational virtues. They are civilisational virtues.

A society capable of sustained and thoughtful reading is also more likely to be capable of serious discussion, reasoned disagreement and democratic self-government.

Which books matter?

The crisis facing reading is therefore a double one.

Many children struggle to acquire reading skills in the first place. Others learn to read but encounter few books worth reading.

The question of content matters.

One of the assumptions that has become increasingly common within education is that texts should prioritise relevance, accessibility and immediate personal connection. The belief is that children will engage more readily with material that reflects their own experiences and identities.

Yet if education simply reflects the child's world back to them, it fails in one of its central purposes.

Education should expand horizons rather than mirror experience.

Children already know their own world. The purpose of reading is to introduce them to worlds they do *not* know.

The enduring works of literature survive not because they are fashionable but because they continue to illuminate fundamental aspects of the human condition. They connect us to experiences that transcend time and circumstance.

A good education introduces children to this inheritance.

That does not mean treating a literary Canon as sacred or closed. Traditions evolve. New voices enrich existing conversations. But meaningful innovation depends upon understanding what already exists.

Children deserve access to the best that has been thought, imagined and written.

The challenge is not to make reading easier. It is to make reading worth the effort.

Behind the reading crisis lies a deeper loss of cultural confidence. A growing scepticism towards knowledge, authority, and the intellectual inheritance of the past encouraged child-centred approaches that reduced the role of the teacher and weakened commitment to explicit instruction. In reading, the consequences were profound. Methods that assumed children would discover literacy for themselves often displaced those that systematically taught it.

When difficulties emerged, therapeutic culture increasingly recast educational failure as a question of diagnosis and support rather than teaching and knowledge. What began as a loss of faith in the authority of the past ended by weakening our

confidence in the capacity of the next generation to master it. In this sense, a cynicism about the past helped to undermine the future.

The stakes

The issues discussed in this pamphlet extend far beyond educational policy. They concern how a society understands itself and what it chooses to pass on to future generations.

A civilisation survives because it successfully transmits knowledge, skills, values and cultural achievements. Reading has historically been one of the most important mechanisms through which this transmission occurs. Each generation receives an inheritance and bears responsibility for passing it forward.

When literacy declines, that chain weakens.

When serious reading becomes rare, cultural memory contracts.

When educational institutions lose confidence in knowledge itself, something more significant than examination results is at stake.

The debate about reading is ultimately a debate about what kind of society we wish to become.

Do we believe that children should inherit the intellectual achievements of previous generations? Do we believe that knowledge matters? Do we believe that schools should introduce young people to ideas beyond the limits of their immediate experience? Do we believe there are books worth defending, traditions worth preserving, and achievements worth transmitting?

The chapters that follow answer these questions with a resounding yes.

For unless children are taught to read, they cannot become educated. Unless they encounter worthwhile books, literacy itself becomes impoverished. And unless societies remain committed to transmitting knowledge, culture and wisdom from one generation to the next, they risk losing the very foundations upon which civilisation rests.

Reading matters because education matters. And education matters because civilisation matters.

For Scotland, that inheritance is a remarkable one. This was a nation whose parish schools became famous throughout Europe, whose universities helped shape the Enlightenment, and whose writers, philosophers and scientists transformed the modern world. Scotland's achievements were inseparable from a culture that valued literacy, learning and intellectual ambition.

The challenge today is not simply to improve reading standards. It is to recover confidence in the idea that knowledge is worth transmitting and that every child deserves access to humanity's intellectual inheritance. If Scotland wishes to renew its educational tradition, it must begin by teaching children to read. The future of Scotland's intellectual life depends upon it.

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01

Reforming Lessons Sir Nick Gibb

The scourge of illiteracy

It is often said that literacy is not a part of a child's education, but a precondition. If a child does not master the ability to read and write early on at school, all other aspects of the curriculum remain out of reach. In 1999, the Moser Report found that 6 percent of Britain's adult population had a 'very low' literacy level, and a further 13 percent had a 'low' literacy level, defined as below that expected of an 11-year-old child. In practical terms, this meant that one in five British adults could not, for example, use a telephone directory to locate the details of a plumber.^{1, p.16}

It was during the 1990s that organisations began conducting international surveys of education attainment, which now play such a significant role in today's education debates. In 1997, the OECD conducted a small-scale survey of literacy levels in 12 different countries. A forerunner of the PISA reports, it placed 23 percent of British adults in their lowest category for literacy. This was ahead of only Poland and Ireland and well behind the likes of Australia, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands.^{1, p.17} Education reformers who focus on basic skills such as literacy are often accused of being reductionist. Once I became Schools

Minister, I was frequently told that education is about so much more than learning to read. It is, of course. However, one should never forget the pain of being illiterate in the modern world. It is a miserable fate for any individual to suffer, bringing with it embarrassment, low self-esteem, and severely curtailed employment prospects. For a developed nation such as the UK to have millions of functionally illiterate citizens is an unforgivable waste of human potential. During the 1990s, the effect of this failure could be seen across British society, from classrooms to job centres, to jails – where surveys still show that well over half the inmates are functionally illiterate.

Concerted actions to address the issue were carried out by the then (Labour) Secretary of State, David Blunkett, but in 2003 there were still more than 150,000 children leaving primary school each year unable to read at the expected standard despite five years of energetic and costly reform. As I became more and more preoccupied with discovering the root cause of this failure, the same name kept coming up as someone I needed to meet: a primary school headteacher who was achieving extraordinary things in one of the most deprived areas of London. Her name was Ruth Miskin, and she was using an approach called phonics. I arranged to have tea with Ruth in January 2004, and it would prove to be the most consequential meeting of my career. Looking back, my journey towards being an education reformer began that afternoon.

Ruth Miskin

As a young teacher during the late 1970s, Ruth Miskin had followed the prevalent method of the day for teaching reading, known as *whole-word*. This method involved teaching children to memorise words by sight with little attention to letters. As such, children learned through ‘reading schemes’, which were made up of books with a steadily increasing number of words,

books such as *Peter and Jane* or *Roger Red Hat*. Having been appointed deputy headteacher of a Dorset primary school in 1982, Ruth, along with many others, fell under the influence of the American psycholinguists Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman, who promoted a ‘real books’ approach to teaching reading. This approach rejected the whole-word reading schemes as dull and advocated that pupils learn to read through generously illustrated ‘real books’ instead. In theory, through multiple readings of these stories, children would learn to read words by internalising their meanings, and eventually, their understanding of the role being played by individual letters would emerge. In practice, pupils were memorising the stories but not learning to read the words. Consequently, Ruth saw reading scores for pupils at her Dorset school plummet following the introduction of this approach.

Ruth progressed to headships in Plymouth and Leeds, and at each school she was concerned about the number of pupils who left each year still unable to read. Some of these pupils were being diagnosed with learning difficulties such as having special educational needs (SEN), but Ruth suspected a more accurate diagnosis for many of these children might be ABT – ‘Ain’t Being Taught’. After seven years in primary education, they were being failed in the most basic way possible.

In 1994, Ruth was appointed headteacher of a new primary school in Tower Hamlets, a deprived borough in London’s old East End with a predominantly Bangladeshi population. It was named Kobi Nazrul Primary School after the national poet of Bangladesh. At Kobi Nazrul, 95 percent of the pupils spoke a language other than English at home, the majority a Bangladeshi dialect called Sylheti. Ruth knew the sooner she could get her pupils reading with fluency, the sooner they would read independently and gain a thirst for learning. However, for such

pupils, learning to read could not be left to trial and error, and their parents would struggle to help at home. If these pupils were going to succeed, they needed to start reading via the surest route possible. Ruth began to supplement the reading schemes used in her previous schools with whole-class teaching of the alphabetic code. She was aware that this approach – known as ‘phonics’ – was once used in primary schools. However, having trained to teach during the 1970s, she had never actually seen a phonics scheme in practice. So, she began creating her own.

The English language has 26 letters and 44 different sounds. There are over 100 common ways of representing these sounds using different combinations of letters. For example, the sound ‘j’, can be written with ‘j’ in *jam*; ‘ge’ in *George*; ‘g’ in ‘gym’; and ‘dge’ in ‘budge’. This makes English a most difficult alphabetic code to learn, compared to languages such as Spanish, where the correspondence of sounds to letters is straightforward. The entire way in which teachers of Ruth’s generation had been trained was based on the belief that pupils’ understanding of these letters and sounds would emerge through reading schemes or, latterly, real books. She came to realise that this belief, though well-intentioned, was ill-founded.

Ruth developed a teaching scheme which gave the children at Kobi Nazrul an intensive introduction to the relationship between letters and sounds and how to blend those sounds into words. This introduction was approached in a structured fashion, starting with single letters, then letter pairs such as ‘ch’, and ending with more complex graphemes, such as ‘igh’. Once this was complete, pupils would be ready to move on to read simple, easily decodable books to fit with pupils’ level of phonic knowledge. As Ruth developed her approach to teaching reading, her pupils’ pass rates in reading assessments and – more importantly – confidence as readers began to turn a corner.

As a new school, Kobi Nazrul grew from the ground up one year at a time, giving Ruth and her team the perfect opportunity to develop a scheme for teaching phonics in a methodical fashion. By the time the first cohort of Kobi Nazrul pupils left the school in 2001, every single one of them had reached the Department for Education's expected standard of reading. This was a significantly higher proportion than at Ruth's previous school, in a middle-class suburb of Leeds, demonstrating one of her key convictions – social deprivation need not be a barrier to becoming a proficient reader.

Speaking to Ruth over tea that afternoon in 2004, I kept on asking her why this patently successful approach was still so rare in our primary schools. Her response was one that I would hear again and again – it was quite simply 'not allowed'. Thus began my education about the 'reading wars', which had been raging through the education sector for over half a century.

Reading wars

The rival approaches of whole-word versus phonics teaching date right back to the early twentieth century. By the middle of the century, the consensus among primary-school teachers appears to have been that both approaches had their relative merits, and a mixture of whole-word and phonics teaching was the best means of ensuring all children in a school learned to read. As the *Plowden Report* observed in 1967:

Children are helped to read by memorising the look of words and phrases, often with the help of pictures, by guessing from a context which is likely to bring them success, and by phonics, beginning with initial sounds. They are encouraged to try all the methods available to them and not to depend on only one method. Instead of relying on one reading scheme, many teachers use a range of schemes with different characteristics, selecting carefully for each child.^{2, p.212}

However, as *child-centred* teaching became an orthodoxy in English schools, the phonics component of teaching children to read was increasingly dismissed. Phonics teaching is unavoidably teacher-led, often involving teachers holding up flashcards and asking a whole class of pupils to repeat them back as sounds. During the 1960s, this led phonics teaching to be criticised as boring, and it was often caricatured as asking rows of children to ‘bark at print’. In addition, whole-word advocates argued that the phonetic code in English is so inconsistent that learning to read through phonics can be confusing for children. Words such as ‘once’ or ‘tough’ are challenging to decode using phonics, and – it was argued – much better to be learned as complete words.

The whole-word approach was far better suited to the child-centred temperament of the times. Instead of a classroom of children looking up at a teacher and their flash cards, you could have a classroom scattered with children working out how to read at their own pace from their own picture books. Freed from the central authority of the teacher, children would learn not only how to read but how to love reading. By the time Ruth trained as a primary teacher during the late 1970s, the whole-word approach had become an orthodoxy, and phonics teaching something of a lost art. By the 1980s, it was the more radical successor of ‘whole language’, which was gaining popularity in the schools where Ruth worked, with its focus on pupils learning to read from real books. As such, Ruth’s experience was not exceptional. In 1991 the National Foundation for Educational Research conducted a survey entitled *What Teachers in Training are Taught About Reading*, where they reviewed the core reading lists of 92 institutions of initial teacher training in Britain. Out of the 30 most popular books, 29 advocated a ‘whole-word’ approach, or that of its many successors – such as ‘whole language’, ‘look-and-say’, ‘onset and rime’, and ‘real books’.⁵

Ruth was not alone in her attempt to develop new reading schemes based on phonics. Others were doing similarly, such as Sue Lloyd, who developed 'Jolly Phonics' at her Suffolk primary during the 1980s, and Irina Tyk, who developed 'Butterfly Phonics' while working as headteacher of Holland House School during the 1990s. These phonics pioneers and their acolytes often had to pursue their work in the face of opposition from local authority advisers, school inspectors, and university education departments. They would joke that it was only when the door was closed, the blinds were down, and the corridors were empty that they felt able to take out their phonics flash cards. To support each other, this dissident group of phonics teachers created a campaign group known as the Reading Reform Foundation (RRF).

One of the key functions of the RRF was to popularise research evidence in favour of phonics which, although overwhelming, had been conspicuously absent from their own training. Much of this originated from the USA, where the Carnegie Corporation funded a systematic review of half a century of research into literacy teaching as far back as 1967. Led by Harvard Professor Dr Jeanne Chall, the final report, *Learning to Read*, came out in favour of phonics over whole-word approaches. Similarly, in 1990, the US Department of Education commissioned the cognitive psychologist Marlyn Jager Adams to provide a synthesis of all available evidence regarding the competing methods of teaching pupils to read. It also came out in favour of phonics. Regardless, the British education establishment remained wedded to the whole-word approach. As the educational psychologist Martin Turner, whose advocacy for phonics led him to lose his job at the Croydon Education Authority, wrote in 1996, 'Writers and lecturers genuinely seem never to have considered scientific evidence and, given a choice, always to prefer sentimental excitement'.^{4, p.9}

By the time David Blunkett became Education Secretary in 1997, the RRF had enough clout for its members to advise on his landmark National Literacy Strategy (NLS). They pushed hard for the strategy to stipulate teaching phonics ‘first and fast’ but were unable to win the argument. The Teaching Framework that was distributed to schools in 1998 was a whole-word approach, with aspects of phonics to be used as a supplement – an approach often termed ‘mixed methods’, and similar in spirit to the extract of the 1967 Plowden Report quoted previously.

In doing so, the designers of the NLS chose to try to please all the different camps of the reading wars over what was proven to work best. The result was, in the words of the teacher and phonics advocate Tom Burkard, ‘a dog’s breakfast of competing and often contradictory strategies, which leave many children hopelessly confused’.^{5, p.6} As Ruth Miskin later explained in her oral evidence to the Education Select Committee in 2005:

[As a child], if you have to work very hard at reading every single word that you come across, asking yourself ‘Shall I use a picture cue? Shall I use a context cue? Shall I use a picture cue with a letter cue? Shall I read on a little bit and try to work out what the word is in the middle?’ the child cannot make that decision while they are reading. The children who are at the lower end find that almost impossible to do, so they then get the image of themselves as not very good readers.

In the same evidence session, Ruth set out the approach she believes most effectively teaches children to read.

*We taught children [...] basic letter sounds really, really quickly, so that they could read them effortlessly and then they could read some words effortlessly and the impact that can have, the empowering effect on children who may have been considered in the past not to be able to read, or hard to teach to read, was massive. [...] If a child can decode a text effortlessly, it means all their resources, all their energies go into working out what the book is about.*⁶

Following the launch of the NLS, Ruth brimmed with frustration that hundreds of millions of pounds were about to be spent on a government strategy that did not take an evidence-led approach. She told officials that at Kobi Nazrul, she would refuse to adopt the National Literacy Strategy, continue to teach using phonics, outperform the national average for pupil achievement, and tell the press how deficient she believed the NLS to be (all of which she subsequently did).^{e.g. 7}

Clackmannanshire

As my interest in the reading debate snowballed, I became friendly with leading lights of the RRF, such as Debbie Hepplewhite, Jennifer Chew, Elizabeth Nonweiler and Sue Lloyd. Back in the early 2000s, they were all speaking with excitement about events north of the border, where a seven-year investigation into teaching reading was reaching its conclusion in Scotland. Clackmannanshire is an area of social deprivation situated in Scotland's old industrial heartland. To combat widespread pupil illiteracy, its council launched an Early Learning Initiative and – employing a level of evidential rigour that was rare in education reform at the time – conducted a controlled trial of three different reading schemes. Carried out across 19 local primary schools by two academics – Rhona Johnston of Hull University and Joyce Watson of St Andrew's University – it was one of the most authoritative trials of reading schemes ever conducted in Britain.

Around 300 children in their first year of primary school were divided into three groups. One group would be taught using an analytic phonics method with a whole-word basis, similar to the NLS.* The second group would be taught using the same analytic phonics method but supplemented with some direct teaching of phonemes. The third group would be taught using a 16-week systematic synthetic phonics programme.

The pupils taught using the synthetic phonics programme pulled ahead immediately. At the end of the first 16 weeks, they were reading words around seven months ahead of their chronological age, while the two analytic phonics groups remained at their chronological reading age. In addition, the systematic, synthetic phonics group's spelling was seven months ahead of chronological age, some eight to nine months ahead of the other two groups.⁸ Anne Pearson, headteacher of Park Primary School, Alloa, reported, 'The children are a year ahead of their chronological age. They have done two years work in one year. It is fantastic.' She added, 'This is the most deprived school in Clackmannanshire. The teachers have learned you should not put a ceiling on children's learning abilities'.⁹

** Confusingly, by the time of the NLS, many fundamentally whole-word approaches had taken to calling themselves 'analytic phonics', because they were designed for pupils to read words analytically and then link phonics with sounds. This led to a common misunderstanding that the NLS heralded a 'return to phonics'. To combat this misunderstanding, phonics advocates rebranded their favoured approach systematic, synthetic phonics to distinguish themselves from the analytic phonics camp.*

The Clackmannanshire study went public in November 1998 and was widely reported. 'Scots throw down literacy gauntlet', wrote the *TES*, adding, 'Pupils taught using the new method did far better than those following the one advocated by the Government'.⁹ An editorial in the *Scotsman* dubbed systematic phonics 'the holy grail in education'. Its author suggested the success of this phonics scheme might spur an embrace of whole-class, teacher-led lessons more broadly but was clearly aware of the strength of ideological opposition. They sagely observed: 'The modern orthodoxy of child-centred education is a phrase with great power [...] even though the Clackmannanshire and other research begs the question of whether this method actually delivers'.¹⁰

As was predicted, the anti-phonics lobby dismissed the evidence from Clackmannanshire, claiming that the early advantage gained by pupils in the synthetic phonics group would be ‘washed out’ by the time they finished primary school. It was said those learning through other approaches would eventually catch up. To test this hypothesis, Joyce Watson and Rhona Johnston returned to the schools in question six years later, in 2004, when the pupils involved in the original trial were about to leave for secondary school. Far from being washed out, the early advantage of systematic, synthetic phonics had compounded over the years. Now aged 10 to 11, these pupils were three years six months ahead of their chronological age in word reading, one year nine months ahead in spelling, and three and a half months ahead in reading comprehension (a less dramatic increase, as comprehension relies on general knowledge as well as the ability to read words). These results suggested that systematic phonics gave pupils early confidence in reading which helped them improve at a faster rate throughout primary school. In addition, systematic synthetic phonics teaching had narrowed the gap between Clackmannanshire pupils from disadvantaged homes and their peers, and – unusually for primary-age children – boys were outperforming girls.¹¹

2005 phonics campaign

As a member of the Education and Skills Select Committee, I was electrified by the results of the Clackmannanshire study. Evidence of the effectiveness of phonics was mounting. In 2000, a multimillion-dollar National Research Panel established by the United States Congress to investigate the teaching of literacy completed its work. The final report concluded that ‘Findings provided solid support for the conclusion that systematic phonics instruction makes a bigger contribution to children’s growth in reading than alternative programs providing unsystematic or no phonics instruction’.^{12, pp.2-92} Five years later, a report by

the Australian National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy reached the same conclusion in favour of direct systematic instruction in phonics.¹³

Even more pleasingly, teachers who used phonics schemes were becoming more vocal back home. Speaking to the *Guardian* in 2005, Shahed Ahmed, the head of Elmhurst primary school in East London, praised Ruth's Read Write Inc programme. With 950 pupils, 25 languages spoken at home, and 40 percent of pupils on free school meals, Elmhurst was the sort of school where 20 percent of children would regularly leave each year below the expected standard. But systematic phonics teaching was ending that record. 'It is these struggling children who are making the most progress', Shahed reported, 'The change in self-esteem has been enormous'.¹⁴ Shahed would go on to become a good friend and trusted adviser.

With increased national attention on phonics, I persuaded the Labour Chair of the Select Committee to hold an inquiry into the teaching of reading. It took place between November and December 2004, with both Sue Lloyd and Debbie Hepplewhite of the RRF giving evidence, as well as Ruth Miskin and Professor Rhona Johnston, the coauthor of the Clackmannanshire Study. The Select Committee's report, published on 31 March 2005, recommended that the government review the National Literacy Strategy. During Prime Minister's Questions that week, I asked Tony Blair on the floor of the House of Commons whether he would ask his new Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, to follow our recommendation. Perhaps knowing this was coming, Kelly had written an opinion piece for the *Guardian* defending the NLS the previous day. She argued that phonics must not be seen as a 'magic bullet' for illiteracy and concluded, 'we are clear that the way forward is not a prescriptive and reductionist approach to phonics, to the exclusion of all else'.¹⁵ The anti-phonics lobby

clearly had her ear, as this was one of their common lines of argument. Phonics advocates never insisted that literacy teaching should end with phonics; of course, reading books for pleasure would follow. But we did insist literacy teaching should start with phonics, ‘first and fast’. This insistence led us to be accused of dogmatism, while our opponents could occupy the perceived moral high ground of pluralism with their arguments for ‘mixed methods’.

However, these arguments were crumbling in the face of evidence. A general election was held that summer, and Conservative party leader Michael Howard made phonics a campaign issue, pledging to stipulate synthetic phonics teaching in all primary schools.¹⁶ Three days before the election, on 2 May 2005, the *Times* leader celebrated that there was ‘evolving acceptance’ in both the Labour and Conservative parties of the importance of phonics, and attributed this development to ‘the crusading efforts of one Tory MP, Nick Gibb’.¹⁷ Labour won the election, but I won my own small battle. The following month on 3 June, Ruth Kelly launched a review of how reading is taught in England’s primary schools. The government announcement stated that ‘the debate now centres not on whether to teach phonics but how’.¹⁸ The former Director of Inspection at Ofsted, Jim Rose, was appointed to conduct the review.

The Rose Review reported its findings in March 2006. Although the language was at times ambiguous, Rose clearly recommended that a new NLS should have the discrete teaching of phonics at its centre. It was my first real victory, and the campaign had taught me two important lessons. Firstly, the importance of following the evidence, even when opponents within the education sector insist ‘the research’ is on their side. Secondly, and more pertinently, it taught me the importance of forming relationships with members of the profession. Having never been

a teacher, many sought to caricature my phonics campaign as the obsession of a nostalgic, backward-looking Tory. However, the knowledge that I was helping to give voice to teachers with decades of experience, such as Ruth Miskin, Sue Lloyd and Shahed Ahmed, gave me the confidence and courage to push on with our campaign.

Backlash

As soon as Jim Rose's interim report was published in December 2005, the anti-phonics lobby took up arms. For the first time, I saw the full force of the education establishment at work, as teaching unions, university academics, local authorities, and even government agencies tried to derail the Labour government's backing of phonics. The General Secretary of the NUT, the UK's largest teaching union, set out his opposition, telling the *Guardian* that teachers should not be made to follow a single technique, concluding: 'They know that to teach reading effectively there must be a range of strategies to hand.' The ATL union followed suit, stating, 'Teachers and children do not need a new literacy strategy that dictates what to do on a daily basis'.¹⁹ In December 2006, some 100 experts, including union leaders, university academics, national advisers, heads and teachers, signed a joint letter to the *TES* expressing grave concern at the government's backing of phonics.²⁰ Most worryingly, officials at the government's own agencies worked to undermine the push on phonics. Mike Lloyd Jones was a former primary headteacher and Regional Director for the National Literacy Strategy at the time and saw this process from the inside. He wrote in his 2010 book *Phonics and the Resistance to Reading*:

The Labour Government had allowed an extraordinary position to develop in which a range of publicly funded bodies seemed able to pursue individual policies orthogonal to national policy. In some educational quangos – for example the chronically-dysfunctional Qualifications and Curriculum Authority – individual officials

*behaved at times as though they believed that they were entitled to issue whatever guidance they pleased.*²¹

Lloyd Jones went on to describe how responsibility for implementing the new National Strategy was given to local authority advisers and school improvement partners, who were ‘actively opposed to phonics and colluded with poor teaching and low standards’.²² It was an instructive, if depressing, lesson on how challenging it can be to achieve alignment when pushing against an orthodoxy.

This chapter is an edited extract from Nick Gibb’s book: Gibb N, Peal R. 2025. *Reforming Lessons: Why English Schools Have Improved Since 2010 and How This Was Achieved*. London: Routledge. (pp 24–36)

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Editors’ Note:

The significance of the Clackmannanshire research lies not only in what it revealed about reading instruction but in how differently England and Scotland responded to its findings. Ironically, some of the most influential evidence supporting systematic synthetic phonics emerged from Scotland itself. Yet while England increasingly embraced the evidence, culminating in the Rose Review, the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check and a nationwide commitment to systematic synthetic phonics, Scotland moved in a different direction. Greater emphasis was placed upon local flexibility, child-centred approaches, and the broader philosophy of Curriculum for Excellence. As a consequence, the educational trajectories of the two nations gradually diverged. England’s reforms produced significant improvements in international literacy rankings, while Scotland experienced declining attainment and a weakening position in international comparisons. What makes this especially striking

is that Scotland largely ignored educational evidence generated on its own soil. The country that helped demonstrate the effectiveness of synthetic phonics became increasingly reluctant to adopt it consistently, while England implemented the lessons and reaped the benefits. The result was not merely a divergence in policy but a divergence in outcomes.

02

Why Scotland must rethink how children learn to read

Dr Gillian Evans

Why this brief matters

Scottish education has been through repeated reform and major investment over the past twenty years. Yet outcomes in the most basic areas, particularly literacy and numeracy, have not improved. In some cases, they have declined. At the same time the number of pupils recorded as having additional support needs has increased sharply.

Public debate often attributes these trends to poverty, social pressures or pressure on teachers. However, the evidence suggests a different explanation.

Before the Curriculum for Excellence, most schools followed broadly similar approaches to teaching reading. Since its introduction, schools and local authorities have been given much greater freedom, which has led to wide variation in how reading is taught across Scotland. At the same time, fewer diagnostic assessments are used to identify the causes of reading difficulty, and teaching methods are rarely adjusted when children struggle.

When systems operate this way, it becomes difficult to identify problems and even harder to correct them.

A personal journey into the evidence

I am a scientist and former clinical research professional.

For nearly thirty years I worked in pharmaceutical research, where decisions must be based on evidence and reliable data. The statistician W. Edwards Deming famously said:

*Without data, you're just another person with an opinion.
In medicine, ignoring evidence costs lives. In education, ignoring
evidence costs children their futures.*

I never expected to apply my scientific training to the education system.

In 2008 my husband and I had twins, a boy and a girl. As they grew older I began to notice differences between them, particularly in my son's speech and language development.

In 2012 we moved back to my hometown in South Ayrshire because we believed Scotland had a strong education system. From the first day at school my very bright son struggled to learn how to read and became very distressed in the classroom.

It took three years for the school to acknowledge that my son had dyslexia.

Even after five years in a school described as 'dyslexia friendly', he still could not read basic words. His difficulties were repeatedly explained away, 'boys take longer than girls', 'if only he could focus more'. The teaching method used by the adults was never questioned.

By 2018 he had suffered an emotional breakdown. At that point I withdrew him from school and began teaching him to read myself.

Using a systematic synthetic phonics programme based on well-established reading research, he finally learned to read. That experience led me to investigate why Scotland's education system was failing so many children.

Learning to read must be taught

Reading is not a natural process. The human brain is designed to learn spoken language, but reading is a manmade skill that must be taught through instruction. To read, the brain must learn how written symbols represent the sounds of speech.

English contains around 44 speech sounds but only 26 letters. Children must learn how letters and combinations of letters represent these sounds. This process is called decoding, and it forms the foundation of reading.

Research shows that the most effective way to teach decoding is through systematic synthetic phonics. In this approach children are explicitly taught how individual speech sounds correspond to letters and letter combinations, and how these sounds can be blended together to read words.

Well-designed phonics programmes introduce the 44 speech sounds and their common spelling patterns within the first 16 weeks of instruction. Children then practise reading words using specially written decodable books which contain only the sound patterns they have already been taught.

These programmes follow a clear and structured sequence of lessons over approximately two years and provide teachers with

step-by-step guidance on how to teach each stage of reading. During this period children gradually learn more complex sound and letter patterns and develop fluent reading. By the end of this structured programme most children should be able to read independently and access written learning across the school curriculum.

Around 20 to 30 percent of children, particularly those with dyslexia or weaker early speech and language development, require this type of explicit and systematic instruction in order to learn to read successfully.

Research also shows that simple early assessments can identify children who are likely to struggle with reading. However, these types of diagnostic assessments are not widely used across Scottish schools.

As a result, many children who need early support are not identified until several years after they start school. By this stage they may already be falling behind and losing confidence. Many begin to believe they are ‘stupid’, even though reading difficulties are not related to intelligence but to the development of decoding skills.

Scotland ignored its own research

Scotland was once a global leader in reading research.

In 2000 researchers Rhona Johnston and Joyce Watson conducted the Clackmannanshire study, which compared systematic synthetic phonics with approaches that taught children to read using whole words and sentence context. The study showed that systematic synthetic phonics was significantly more effective, particularly for children who might otherwise struggle with reading.

England acted on this evidence. Structured phonics teaching became a central part of early reading instruction and all primary schools are expected to teach reading using systematic phonics programmes. Children's decoding skills are checked nationally through the Year 1 phonics screening check. This short assessment helps identify pupils who are struggling with decoding so they can receive additional support.

Research on reading instruction has continued to develop internationally. In the United States, researchers and educators have refined systematic phonics programmes, producing highly structured teaching programmes with detailed lesson guidance and carefully designed decodable reading materials.

Since the Clackmannanshire study was published twenty-five years ago, Scotland has not adopted either the national phonics approach used in England or the more advanced systematic phonics programmes developed through international research. Methods used to teach reading therefore vary widely between schools and local authorities, and there is no national check of children's decoding skills.

As a result, some pupils, especially those who depend on structured phonics programmes, do not receive effective instruction and can leave primary school unable to read well enough to access the secondary curriculum.

Delayed identification of reading difficulties

Highly structured systematic synthetic phonics programmes also make it easier to identify children who are struggling to learn to read.

Because the teaching sequence is clearly organised, teachers can quickly see when a child is having difficulty learning particular

sound and letter patterns. Early assessments can then be used to confirm whether the child is developing decoding skills as expected.

When difficulties are identified early, the pace and intensity of instruction can be adjusted. Some children simply need more practice and additional teaching time in order to master the skill.

In Scotland, however, these types of diagnostic assessments are not used consistently. As a result, children who struggle with reading are often not identified through their decoding difficulties in the early years of school.

Instead, they may later be classified as having additional support needs, often under broad categories such as dyslexia or literacy difficulties. The number of pupils recorded with additional support needs has therefore increased significantly.

In many cases the support provided focuses on helping pupils cope with reading difficulties rather than addressing the underlying problem. Support may include additional assistance in the classroom or adjustments to learning tasks, but not the intensive reading instruction required to develop decoding skills.

Without explicit teaching to build these skills, many pupils continue to struggle with reading throughout their education and may carry these difficulties into adulthood, affecting their confidence, employment prospects and participation in society.

Weak national data and a warning that was ignored

Scotland has weakened its ability to monitor reading outcomes.

In the past many councils used assessments developed by the University of Durham. These assessments measured reading age

and provided a clear check of children's decoding skills. Because they were used in both Scotland and England, they also allowed meaningful comparisons of reading standards between the two education systems.

North Lanarkshire Council used the Durham assessments when pupils entered secondary school. The results were striking. Around 21 percent of pupils were found to be functionally illiterate, meaning they could not decode words well enough to access the secondary school curriculum.

The problem was not comprehension or motivation. It was a basic failure in decoding skills.

At the time North Lanarkshire had introduced its own literacy programme which did not teach the full set of 44 speech sounds in a structured sequence during the early stages of reading instruction. As a result many pupils had not developed secure decoding skills.

Despite this evidence, the reading programmes used in schools were not changed.

Instead, the Scottish government introduced the Scottish National Standardised Assessments in 2018 and funded their use nationally. Because these new assessments were centrally funded, many councils stopped using the Durham assessments locally.

Unlike the Durham system, the national standardised assessments do not measure reading age or provide a clear check of decoding ability. Instead, they report the level a pupil is achieving within the Curriculum for Excellence. Because they are based on Curriculum for Excellence levels, they do not allow direct comparison of reading standards between Scotland and England.

Parents are therefore not given clear information about how well their child can read or whether they have mastered the decoding skills needed for fluent reading. Many parents can see that their child is struggling to read, but they are not provided with clear information explaining the reason.

As a result, Scotland now has less reliable information about children's reading ability than it did before the national standardised assessments were introduced in 2018.

Policy recommendations

Scotland should adopt a clear national goal for early reading.

At least 95 percent of children should be able to read at or above their chronological reading age by the end of Primary 2.

This goal is achievable when children are taught through structured systematic synthetic phonics during the first years of school.

The target should include children who enter school with a higher risk of reading difficulty. This includes children with genetic dyslexia, children with weaker early speech and language development, and some boys who may develop reading skills slightly later than girls.

These children should receive earlier identification, additional instructional time, and more intensive teaching so they are able to master decoding skills during the early years of school.

The aim is not to exclude children from the target but to ensure that the education system provides the teaching and support needed for almost all pupils to become independent readers in the first years of primary school.

To achieve this goal Scotland should take the following steps.

1. Adopt a nationally approved systematic synthetic phonics programme

The Scottish government should approve a small number of internationally researched and evidence-based systematic synthetic phonics programmes. Approved programmes should be available in every primary school.

2. Introduce a national check of decoding skills in the early years of school

Children's ability to decode words should be assessed during the early years of school.

3. Provide additional instructional time for pupils who need it

Children who are identified as struggling with decoding should receive additional structured phonics instruction. The pace and intensity of teaching should be adjusted until the child has mastered the required skills.

4. Restore clear national measures of reading ability

National assessment should include measures of reading age and decoding ability so that reading standards can be monitored across Scotland and compared over time.

5. Provide clear information to parents about reading development

Parents should receive clear information about their child's reading ability, including whether they have mastered decoding skills and whether they are reading at the level expected for their age.

6. Strengthen teacher training in the science of reading

Initial teacher education and professional development should include structured training on how children learn to read and how systematic phonics instruction supports early reading development.

03

Which reading matters

Dr Simon Knight

Reading has become a preoccupation for us at the Scottish Union for Education. As such, we have published on our Substack a number of brilliant writers' thoughts on the subject. This short article deals not so much with *why* reading matters, but *which* reading matters. Which particular texts should we be placing in front of our children?

As adults (parents, teachers, librarians), we have to remain vigilant as to what texts we give children to read. If, as we are claiming, a child's love of reading will retain its positive influence over them throughout their life, an embedded responsibility falls to adults to ensure that what we place in front of them is suitable for their age and ability, and of the best quality that humanity can offer.

Humans are not naturally disposed to reading. It is an ability that no other animal possesses and one that has to be learned. Reading is not an intuitive skill, and as such, among other things, it has to be learned and mastered. The ability to read – or not – also sets up a restricted gateway to content that adults deem unsuitable for children to have knowledge of. Mastering the complexities

of reading is both technical and intellectual. Children not only need to be equipped with skills but must also have the maturity of experience to make sense of what is presented to them. Being able to absorb meaning from text is also reflexive and is central to motivating them to wish to read more.

As adults then, we task teachers – specialists in their field – with the responsibility for teaching children how to read. In recent years the roles of teacher or librarian, curators of which books to present to children, has become a political minefield. Material needs to be age-appropriate and of good quality. Some great books are too complex even for senior-school pupils, while others, which are judged as ‘correct’, are demonstrably not very good. There should be no compulsion to teach poor but politically fitting texts to children.

The demigod of ‘relevance’ that curriculum leaders feel all teachers must bow to in order to ‘connect’ with their pupils leaves children where they are. And to a great extent, it allows poor teachers to get away with mediocre lessons utilising low-quality texts that are all too easily understood. The syllabus of Higher Grade in English can now include ‘watching’ (films or TV) as a valid source. It seems to me that ‘watching’ is the very opposite of reading. When adults responsible for teaching children how, why and what to read on a voluntary basis push ‘watching’ – the antithesis of reading – as an option, we are truly lost. That gateway to unsuitable material is also thrown open when children can passively regard and internalise material.

Which of any of the ‘great’ books is void of being able to connect to modern-day children if taught with enthusiasm and panache? The Canon, inevitably as we move forward through time, is vulnerable to ‘dating’. Does a dated text become irrelevant, lose its universalism, purely by being old? What seems to be less

clear is when a writer's quality and longevity mean that they are added to the Canon and thus judged to be of high-enough quality to make them suitable to be taught to children. One might consider the significant role played by J. K. Rowling in re-establishing reading as a popular activity for children, despite her subsequent vilification for not holding 'correct' opinions. When I managed a children's home, even the kids there were reading the latest Harry Potter book.

We want our children to enjoy the experience, but not at the expense of learning discipline and perseverance. Enjoyment of reading – not just of the process but of the intellectual activity – should generate enough enthusiasm to last them a lifetime, therefore quality and content do matter. A child is never just learning a skill in some abstract isolated way. When they read, they are never just practising their literacy skills. This is why we have to pay attention to content. From the teacher's perspective, the child is learning to read fluently; from the pupil's perspective, they are learning what the world is like – what is true, what is good and admirable, what is permissible, acceptable and desirable. They are answering the questions 'What should I be' and 'What can I be?' It is absolutely never enough for a child to read a book and decode the phonics fluently. The content of that book needs to be profitable.

Finding good books...

It is difficult to find good books for children today. Many books are works of propaganda, lacking truth. Others are bad books in the sense that they are overly mundane and they have nothing deep or beautiful within their pages. They have nothing in them to nourish the thirsty soul of a child. The language they use, the artwork, and the story itself often have a casual feeling about them. There is no evidence that the authors of such books put their best selves into writing them. These books harm children

because they bore their souls to death. Children's time is precious. They are looking to know, and it is our responsibility to show them the goodness and beauty that give life its essence.

There is a crisis happening. Books are everywhere, they are promoted in every corner of our life, and yet most of them are not suitable for giving to a child. And yet, throughout history, thousands of excellent children's books have been written.

A good friend of SUE's, Dr Fotini Hamplova, started putting a lot of effort into finding 'the good books' for our children. With care and great effort, she dug them out of 'throwaway' piles at bazaars, spent hours researching them online, picking them out of secondhand shops or from people's personal collections. She found a great number of wonderful books and realised that it takes a lot of time and dedication to identify which books are worth reading. That is especially true today, when propaganda is cleverly worked into books of every genre.

Fotini decided that she would make her list of good books available to families. She set up a website that is basically an archive of curated books that can truly enrich young minds. It lists only good books for children from infancy to the age of 20 for anyone who wants to get a book for a child. People can freely go there and search according to age or category of interest and find a selection of books where each and every one has something particularly wonderful about it.

You can find the list here: [Search Good Books](#)

And perhaps this points us towards a final truth about children's reading. The best books are rarely those written to flatter children or mirror their immediate experiences back to them. They are the books that invite children out of themselves and into a larger world.

This is one reason why so many older children's books still endure. They were often written with a confidence that childhood was a stage of growth, not a permanent identity to be affirmed. Their authors sought to elevate the child, to stretch their vocabulary, challenge their understanding and broaden their horizons.

By contrast, many contemporary books seem constrained by the desire to be immediately accessible, instantly relevant or socially instructive. Too often they are written not out of a sense of wonder but with a lesson already attached. The result can be books that are quickly consumed and quickly forgotten. They speak in the language of the present moment and so become trapped by it.

The great children's books of the past have survived precisely because they speak to something more permanent. They deal with the universal experiences of fear, hope, love, loss, courage, duty and discovery. They offer children not simply information or affirmation but nourishment. They help young readers imagine a larger life than the one they know and, in doing so, they prepare them to become thoughtful, resilient and cultivated adults.

Children's literature continues to occupy an important place in cultural life, producing works that are read and cherished across generations. While the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are often associated with giants of the genre such as Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson and Enid Blyton, contemporary authors have shown that such achievements are not confined to the past. J.K. Rowling, in particular, has attained a level of popularity, influence and international recognition comparable to that of the great children's writers of earlier eras, demonstrating that children's fiction remains capable of capturing the imagination of millions and leaving a lasting literary legacy.

Old or new, to place a truly great book in the hands of a young person is not a small act. It is an act of cultural inheritance. It is a way of saying: here is something beautiful, something tested by time, something worthy of your attention. Through such books, each generation passes on its wisdom, imagination and humanity to the next. That is why *which* reading matters every bit as much as reading itself.

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The SUE Manifesto for Scottish Education

The Scottish Union for Education believes our education system needs radical reform. We have a crisis in schools and colleges that won't be solved by rebranding quangos, changing ministers, or more breakfast clubs. What we really need is a major cultural shift to roll back the radical teaching reforms that have taken place over the past two decades. We need to return to a system which places knowledge at its heart.

KNOWLEDGE IS OUR INHERITANCE

Knowledge is not, as the radicals suggest, simply about filling children's heads with facts, or as the neuroscientists argue, extending their long-term memory. Knowledge is our inheritance, everything we have learnt in the arts, humanities and sciences and everything we have added to the world that is innovative, beautiful and meaningful. Introducing our children to this common resource is the purpose of education. We need to revive this knowledge-based approach, and to reject the soft skills and wellbeing agendas that currently shape our education. This radical reform is urgently needed to provide young Scots with the abilities, and understanding, they need to make their way in a changing world.

A KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY IS DEMOCRATIC

So much of Scotland's cultural inheritance is bound up with an enthusiasm for learning and intellectual curiosity. In *To a Louse*, Robert Burns wrote about the great gift of seeing '*ourselves as others see us*'. It was a celebration of our capacity to make judgements without personal bias, emotion or self-interest, the idea that we could all be objective, given a good education. With objectivity came a serious expansion of human knowledge, the extension of the right to vote and the idea that *everyone* could contribute to public life. Until very recently we had one of the best education systems in the world because, as a society, we placed a high value on reason and imagination. Our forefathers took science, literature and history seriously and recognised their importance in all aspects of life, from national economics to personal development.

THE CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE CUT OUR CONNECTION WITH THE PAST

When Scotland introduced the Curriculum for Excellence in 2010, it abandoned that precious legacy. This is not an overstatement; we should not underestimate how impoverished and mechanistic our education system has become. Today's school leavers seem to know much less than their parents and grandparents. Their learning is narrow and yet unfocused; their homework is dull and formulaic. Teachers complain that they are encouraged to 'teach to the test', rather than risk introducing children to potentially redundant 'information'.

OUR CHILDREN ARE NOT INSPIRED

The fact that such large numbers of children are absent from school suggests that the education system, without knowledge at its heart, has lost its core sense of purpose. School seems to have left Gen Z less curious, and more anxious, than preceding generations. It would be easy to blame war, technology,

politicians and mobile phones for this motivational crisis. Society, families, and changes in technology undoubtedly play a role, but Scotland needs to take a long hard look at its education system and the flawed theories on which it is based.

OUR SCHOOLS ARE BEING POLITICISED

The SNP government has used the absence of curriculum content to politicise schools and universities. School values are no longer related to education and personal development, but the government agendas. The General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCs) now argues that Social Justice – trans ideology, Critical Race Theory and zero-carbon agendas are professional ideals. Under the cover of professional standards, ethics and inclusion, many PGDE teacher training courses operate a McCarthy-like culture that demands political conformity. Trainees are still, despite the Cass Report, being ‘taught’ that it’s OK to hide the social transitioning of a child from their parents.

OUR HISTORY IS BEING REWRITTEN

Not satisfied with training the next generation to ‘toe the party line’, there is a growing trend to rewrite history and to condemn previous generations for their attitudes on women, race and sexuality. Our common history is rarely treated as a source of inspiration, but understood instead as a realm of abuse and violence. This contempt for our predecessors is a deeply destructive cultural phenomenon.

Restoring a culture that places a high value on intellectual curiosity and wants to learn from the past, will not be easy. Change is something that must begin with parents and teachers rather than with politicians.

SEVEN CHANGES THAT COULD TRANSFORM SCOTTISH EDUCATION

- [1] Dump the Curriculum for Excellence and put knowledge back at the heart of education.**
- [2] Drop all policies that undermine the authority of the teacher and their expertise.**
- [3] Create a system of standard assessment, particularly for reading ages.**
- [4] Outlaw McCarthyism in the General Teaching Council for Scotland and PGDE courses.**
- [5] Support our libraries, museums, theatres and galleries to give children an inspiring introduction to the achievements of past generations.**
- [6] Stop teaching transgender ideology and critical race theory to children.**
- [7] Give Parent Councils power to hold schools to account.**

Please share this manifesto with your friends and family and discuss it with anyone interested in the future of education.



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