

Opportunity

John and Fiona Earle

Please imagine John sitting at the dining room table writing a draft of this article. On the floor are a whole lot of misconceptions like so many broken light bulbs.

We thought that children leaving primary school would be able to read and write and that a large proportion of our vast population of prisoners suffered from mental ill-health with drugs as a relatively common case of the problem – or associated with it.

Not so. Three separate hours of television showed a school in Dagenham where about 20% of eleven-year olds were either totally unable to read, or way below the reading level expected of their age group. They were in the last chance saloon. For the eleven year old pupils, secondary school was a year ahead and unless they could read they would be completely unable to tackle secondary school work – if they attended at all.

The headmistress – lady head teacher – insisted they should all have an hour a day on reading. They would be in groups defined by ability, and regardless of age. They would all be taught in the same way: the old-fashioned way when you first recognise letters and the sounds they make. So CAT is Cuh Ah Tuh which links together as CAT, and there's the picture. The powers-that-be didn't approve of this system, but they couldn't stop her.

Almost everyone improved, but there was a small group who couldn't, didn't, and wouldn't improve. Perhaps they were rebelling against authority, certainly these were the children who behaved badly towards other children and did major damage – breaking glass – in school.

So the head brought in Benjamin Zephaniah. He is a poet who loves the sound of words. With dreadlocks, he looks nothing like a teacher and the children looked on him

rather as a funny friend and they learnt from him.

Just in time they were led away from their private prisons of illiteracy, where they knew they couldn't compete for jobs after leaving school – where they were no-hopers and knew it – and if that doesn't unsettle mental health, what does? They would probably look on drugs as a kind of parole from prison – made you feel great.

Let's leave them for a moment and go to a particular point in our recent Activity Day. John had written a short play about Aschiana with action, for example "We're in the street – STAMP STAMP". One of the mothers said her son was a slow learner. Even so he was switched on enough to do the "stamp stamp" and gave a huge smile when he suddenly realised that he could join in with the others rather than be excluded. It was quite a champagne moment to see that smile too.

One of the songs in the play included the lines:

"I want to read by myself, and turn the pages
Read the Koran –it's been out for ages"

Alison Walker asked if anyone had heard of the Koran and a few had. Her next question asked what the equivalent book in Britain was. Her meaning was clear and it was apparent that some children had NOT heard of the Bible.

We'll come back to the Bible in a minute, but for now let's think about stories. Surely these are a child's guide to the grown-up's world; a toe in the water, a bit of fun. Do you remember how Pooh visited Rabbit and ate honey and condensed milk at tea-time? He got so fat that he got stuck in the hole. So Rabbit made the best of a bad job and hung towel's on Pooh's legs and Christopher Robin read sustaining stories to the north end of

All Saints Alive

Pooh – and eventually they got him out with a combined pull.

There are also stories of desperate situations. Noah, the flood and the ark comes to mind. There is a twelfth century window in the north wall of Chartres Cathedral that shows the Lord telling Noah to build the ark and Noah (understandably) is holding up his hand in surprise. Stained glass was used as a visual aid by the priests and over the centuries, thousands will have learnt that there really are situations that call for a determined response. And now, in the UK, relatively healthy people come to NHS hospitals and die of an infection they caught there. The doctors wash their hands more and wear short sleeves but we still move patients from place to place to meet targets..... The figures are about 6,800 MRSA bloodstream infections per year and 13,000 with *Clostridium difficile* per quarter. In one hospital a recent outbreak caused 90 deaths.

In Holland, they check all patients before they are admitted as a routine and people admitted as emergency go into a single bed unit until they are proven to be bacteriologically clean.

We seek to reduce cross infection. They eliminate it.

So the thinking – or the drift – that has taken the Bible out of education also removes easy wide access to a huge stream of determined thought.

Confidence

On the Activity day, all the children read part of the play. Also Fabrizia (a friend of ours) taught synchronised movements – a form of dance – for 25-30 minutes and the children learnt it very well.

However, relatively few volunteered to act or dance. It was a big request; they had had little rehearsal, the church was unfamiliar and so were the adults. Even so, some stepped up cheerfully, but many did not.

A teacher may say that there are good years and bad years – sometimes there is a good cricket team, sometimes not. We may just have seen a 'poor year.'

On the other hand we may have seen just a few confident people.

Kipling wrote that if a child lives with encouragement he learns confidence. It seems this is also true of adults.

Do children who play team games, act, or perform music together learn techniques that improve confidence? (Yes! – Ed) It seems that a lack of confidence is a half brother of anxiety, and that can certainly breed aggression. The figures vary from place to place but – oversimplifying – we seem to have become a more fragmented and violent society in recent years.

"Tough on the causes of crime" said Tony Blair some ten years ago. In Dagenham, the damage to the school caused by the pupils was clearly linked to their inability to read and write, and reading improved together with behaviour.

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It is now 2007; about 1400 years since the Venerable Bede was working in Monkwearmouth, and the monks there were copying out texts and making a few spelling mistakes Alcuin (trained in York) was head-hunted by Charlemagne as the Tutor of Europe. Amazing times.

We still haven't settled on a tried-and-trusted way of helping poor readers. We mustn't be hasty, but maybe there is a sub-sub-committee that might be thinking about improving literacy and reducing the prison population.

Careful, careful. That might threaten the jobs of the Prison Officers. Much better to build more prisons, and tax the builders.

Do what you know.....