

Speech: Nick Gibb: reading is the key to unlocking human potential

Teaching children to read is the key to unlocking human potential. It is the cornerstone of education. Infinite worlds are laid at our feet; from Charles Dickens's portrayal of ambition and lost values in 19th century England in 'Great Expectations' to Ishiguro's subtle portrayal of repression in the dying days of Britain's great houses in 'The Remains of the Day'.

Reading emancipates us from the everyday. It liberates us to pursue our interests in non-fiction and it introduces us to the great heroes and anti-heroes of the ages. Through the canon, we are invited into the conversation of humankind.

From musing the plight of the human condition to learning about the majesty of space-science, reading is the foundation from which we build knowledge.

That is why improving literacy has been at the heart of the government's drive to improve standards in England's schools. One of the most controversial education reforms introduced by the Conservative-led Government in 2010 was our decision to require schools to use phonics to teach children to read.

In the years just before we came into government in 2010, we knew something was wrong with the way our primary schools taught reading; England was stagnating in the international league tables. The international data also showed a wider gap between top and bottom performers than in most other countries. England was well known for its 'long tail of underachievement'.

I vividly recall visiting classrooms around the country where pupils were being failed; too many were unable to read. Effectively, locked out of achieving their potential. This was not through lack of effort from them or their teachers, but because of a dogmatic romanticism that prevented the spread of evidence-based teaching practices.

Those who stood in the way of evidence-based phonics reaching England's classrooms are responsible for stifling human potential and negatively affecting the life chances of countless children.

We are the only OECD nation where literacy is no better amongst the 16-24 year olds than amongst the over 55s. What more stark statistic could there be to exemplify the damage dogmatists have inflicted on our education system?

Prior to our reforms, schools were using variations of a method called 'look and say' to teach reading, in which children encountered frequently used words over and over again until they were recognised automatically. Where schools were using phonics they were mixing and matching with these other methods, which significantly inhibited its effectiveness. Contextual clues encouraging children to guess at words – rather than sound them out – were

widely encouraged, breaking the link between the alphabetic code and spoken language.

The theory was that this was an easier way to learn to read than learning the 44 sounds of the alphabet and how to blend them into words. In reality, there was no evidence to support the 'look and say' approach; it was simply in keeping with the philosophical opposition to formal instruction, which was so ubiquitous in teacher training colleges and education faculties.

The trouble was that this method was letting down too many children, particularly the least able. Decades of evidence from around the world – including the influential longitudinal study from Clackmannanshire in Scotland – pointed to systematic phonics as the most effective way to teach children to read.

Phonics teaches children to sound out words sound by sound and then 'blend' these sounds together, unlocking the code of written English.

When we came into office in 2010, therefore, one of the first things we did was to strengthen the National Curriculum, explicitly requiring schools to teach reading using phonics. We funded training and phonics materials and books for schools. And, most controversial of all, we introduced a test for all six-year-olds, called the Phonics Screening Check.

This test consists of a list of 40 words that the child reads to their teacher. Half the words are ordinary words and the other half are made up 'pseudo-words', which are demarcated by a cartoon alien so that children are not confused by these unfamiliar words. The inclusion of these pseudo-words is important, as it is impossible to guess how to pronounce them, ensuring children have been taught to decode words using phonics rather than learning words by sight.

In 2012, the first year of the Phonics Check, just 58% of six-year-olds reached the pass mark of 32 out of the 40. This year, 81% of six year olds reached that standard, with 92% of children reaching that standard by the end of year 2.

Reading is the fundamental building block to a successful education. Securing the mechanical ability to translate the hieroglyphics of letters on the page into words is a necessary component to achieving fluency in reading; allowing children to build their speed of reading, their comprehension and to develop a joy and habit of reading for pleasure.

And this is not an un-evidenced assertion. This is a statement backed up by decades of research. Consider the conclusions from the longitudinal study carried out in Clackmannanshire:

- Improvements in word reading had grown from 7 months ahead of chronological age in Primary 1 to 3 and a half years in Primary 7;
- A similar gain was seen in spelling, with pupils increasing their advantage over the expected chronological age following the use of systematic synthetic phonics, bucking the trend for the effects of

education interventions to 'wash out' over time; and

- Reading comprehension scores were still significantly above the expected standard for chronological age by the end of primary school.

Extraordinarily – despite all of the evidence in favour of phonics – we faced opposition from various lobby groups: those opposed to testing; those professors of education who had built a career on teaching teachers to use the 'look and say' approach; and the teaching unions.

We pressed on nonetheless, confident in the evidence base and encouraged by the thousands of teachers who had embraced and supported this method of teaching children to read and who could see the results in their classrooms.

Today, we received the first set of international evidence that confirms that our approach is working. The international study of 9-year-olds' reading ability in 50 countries showed that England has risen from joint 10th place in 2011 to joint 8th place in 2016, thanks to a statistically significant rise in our average score.

Perhaps most importantly of all, today's results show reading has improved for pupils from all backgrounds, but it is the low-performing pupils who are gaining most rapidly. The tide is rising, but it is rising fastest for those who need it most.

Slowly, but surely – thanks to the government's relentless focus on rigour – England is dealing with the 'long tail of underachievement.'

The pupils who took part in the international survey were the first cohort to have taken the Phonics Screening Check in 2012; the cohort to have been taught to read after we changed the law requiring schools to use phonics.

The details of these findings are particularly interesting; I hope they ring in the ears of opponents of phonics whose alternative proposals would do so much to damage reading instruction in this country and around the world.

For example, the data is clear on the role that the phonics reforms played in these results:

The characteristics that were most strongly predictive of PIRLS performance included prior achievement in the Year 1 Phonics Check, followed by resources at home, both in terms of educational resources (e.g. the number of books the pupil has in their home) and socioeconomic status (as determined by historical free-school-meal eligibility).

Teaching children to decode is crucial to reading comprehension. And the detail of the relationship between pupil scores on the Phonics Screening Check and pupil scores in the PIRLS tests bring this to life:

Pupils who scored full marks in the phonics check were also the

highest scoring group in PIRLS 2016, with an average overall PIRLS score of 617. In contrast, pupils who did not reach the 'expected standard' in the phonics check (score below 32) performed below England's overall average, with lower phonics check scores being associated with increasingly lower average PIRLS scores.

These results are stark. They stand in defiance to those who still choose to ignore the evidence.

But the argument of those opposing the use of phonics has always relied more heavily on emotion than evidence. For years, proponents of evidence-based approaches to reading have been wrongly accused of making children 'bark at text', ignoring the importance of reading for meaning and damaging pupil confidence and love of reading.

Whilst the evidence from the PIRLS data demonstrates that phonics has improved reading comprehension levels, there is also data that dispels their other tawdry myths about pupil confidence:

A higher percentage of pupils in England were categorised as being 'very confident' readers (53%) compared to the international average (45%). Pupil confidence in reading was strongly associated with average performance in PIRLS, with the most confident readers in England scoring over 100-points more than those who reported the lowest levels of confidence.

These results are a vindication of the government's boldness in pursuing the evidence in the face of ideological criticism. They are a tribute to the hard work and dedication of primary teachers who have quietly revolutionised the way children are taught to read in this country. And they promise even more in the future.

The 5000 nine-year-olds in England who took part in this international study in 2016, all took the Phonics Check in 2012 when just 58% passed nationally. Future international studies will be of children taught even more effectively as the proportion passing the Phonics Check has risen steadily year on year.

This year, thanks to the government's continued drive for phonics, 154,000 more 6 year olds were on track to be fluent readers than in 2012. Last year, 147,000 more 6 year olds were on track than in 2012. In 2015, that figure was 120,000. These numbers show the trend, but every single one of them is an individual child given a better start to their education.

They show that the government is building a Britain fit for the future, where every child is afforded the best start in life.

And they are a reminder of the damage that can be caused when dogma flies in the face of the evidence.

Slowly but surely, the education sector and the teaching profession are

embracing evidence and raising academic standards for all.

Thank you.