

Past, Present, Future...

‘The Secret of Personal Happiness and National Well-Being’ – The Hadow Report: *Books in Public Elementary Schools (1928)*

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The history of libraries in schools is both significant and complex.

Looking Back

From the mid-19th century onwards, subscription libraries began to be set up by religious organisations such as the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the Religious Tract Society. They produced Catechisms and Abridgement books based on scripture in order to impart moral messages to working-class children. In

1847, not surprisingly, these were declared unsuitable for schools by the Committee of Council on Education, as they failed to interest the children in reading and promoting a life-long love for books.¹

The issue of what was considered to be interesting to the child is contentious but the resulting stagnation in literacy rates was blamed both on the 'quality' of material available to children and the rigid teaching of the '3Rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic). It was thought this deprived the child of reading for pleasure or pursuing knowledge for personal interest.² Professor Simon Laurie, who held the Chair of Education at Edinburgh University in the late 19th century, wanted more than just quality material; he wanted a system that would 'develop in children the nobler feeling of human nature: love, tenderness, sympathy, a desire for approval, and a spirit of sacrifice'.³ One way to do this was to introduce literature into the curriculum, which, as the Chief Inspector of Elementary Schools, Mathew Arnold stated was 'the greatest power available to education'.⁴

Arnold had a great influence on the broadening of the curriculum to include literature after the 1870 Education Act. It is at this point that school inspectors began to attach importance to elementary school libraries. *The Revised Instruction Issued to Her Majesty's Inspectors, and Applicable to the Code of 1896* saw a shift in thinking – the main object of the school library now was to teach children to regard books 'as a never-failing source of pleasure and profit' for this would instil 'a greater likelihood of a permanent retention of the habit of reading beyond the years of school attendance'.⁵ Teachers were encouraged to familiarise themselves with the nearest public library and ensure that the pupils were taken there on school visits.⁶

In a parliamentary address in 1917, H. A. L. Fisher (President of the Board of Education) emphasised the importance of children having access to libraries of books both for enjoyment and for ensuring the permanence of democracy. Libraries, he said, would also allow for 'opening the treasure of the mind ... [and provide] refuge from the hardships of life spent in the midst of changing machinery in our hideous cities of toil'.⁷ After the passing of the 1919 Public Libraries Act, ten counties in England established libraries in Public Elementary Schools, with head teachers taking on the role of librarians.⁸ This suggests a somewhat nebulous connection between public and school libraries, but despite this, educators were encouraged to develop children's research skills as early as 1922.⁹

In 1928, the fourth of the six Hadow Reports was published (so-called as the consultative committee set up by the government was chaired by Sir William Hadow, an influential education reformer and Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University from 1919-1930). *Books in Public Elementary Schools* was seminal in progressing the establishment of school libraries, which set out forty-three recommendations relating to the expenditure, quality, quantity and administrative arrangements for books in elementary schools. It was noted that greater expenditure was required for schools and that teachers should receive training and advice in the important matter of book selection. Furthermore, 'every school should have a library with adequate accommodation' as 'children should learn to admire what is admirable in literature and acquire a habit of clear thought and lucid expression'.¹⁰ The Committee did not expect children to become 'omnivorous readers' but believed it was important for children to perceive books as 'individuals, with a personality of their own' and 'helpful assistants' that provided 'guidance and enlightenment'.¹¹ This was the 'secret of personal happiness

and well-being' and the 'key to civilization'.¹² The ideas expressed in this text were congruent with the progressive educational discourse of the period.

Perhaps of greater importance was the Committee's understanding that libraries were more than the books they held. They believed children should be taught how to 'use different books rightly – how to extract their information and appreciate their beauty, how to study, digest and select' content.¹³ Therefore, the selection or evaluation of information required pupils to be able to 'read sensitively and critically'. Teaching children to discriminate between 'quality' and 'popular', between reliable and unreliable sources of information became increasingly significant in the 1930s, most prominently in F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson's *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (1933).¹⁴ By 1937 an independent School Library Association was established with the remit to ensure that professional librarians were employed to select quality materials which would enhance the learning and development of children.

Moving Forward

Since austerity measures were imposed in 2010, there has been a sharp decline in the number of school libraries,¹⁵ and a corresponding decline in the number of books borrowed by children.¹⁶ In parallel, the closure of over 450 public libraries during this time has had a devastating impact on poorer children who mostly attend schools in economically deprived areas which do not have their own libraries.¹⁷ They do not even have access to public libraries which has robbed them of the benefits of books and reading, as described by Hadow and others a century ago. In accepting that the modern library is as likely to be a focus for information literacy as for accessing books, there is a pending crisis for England has one of the lowest literacy rates among young people – one in five children have not reached the government standard in reading by the age of 11 and 17% of 15 year olds do not have a minimum level of proficiency in literacy.¹⁸ Recent studies have demonstrated that exposure to libraries can raise literacy levels and information skills,¹⁹ as well as enrich lives and contribute to personal well-being.²⁰ As the British novelist and journalist Matt Haigh states,

... school libraries and librarians are the perfect gatekeepers to help cultivate and sustain that early passion for books. Libraries turn a love of reading into something communal and their value is social and even psychological as well as academic. A good library is the beating heart of a school.²¹

Given this, the questions we must ask are, what will school time look like without libraries and how will children develop their imaginations, and critical skills – which are crucial for their well-being and happiness in the 21st century?

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