Ending illiteracy begins with children seeing themselves in books

Sarah Myers Cornaby

Opinion - Children Thursday, 5th March 2020

As we enjoy World Book Day, it is time to reflect on the need to combat illiteracy round the globe, writes Sarah Myers Cornaby

As we celebrate World Book Day in the UK, our country's strong connection with children's books is clear to see. It is a reminder of how fortunate we are to have a strong children's book publishing industry, evident as schoolchildren mark World Book Day by dressing up as their favourite characters from Harry Potter to Paddington Bear. British children's authors have inspired young readers at home and abroad, creating lifelong fans of literature.

While a cause for celebration, World Book Day should also be a time to reflect on the urgent need to end illiteracy around the globe. There are over 700 million people in the world who are still unable to read and write, including 115 million young people. At Room to Read, we believe World Change Starts with Educated Children.

By educating children, we can empower communities to overcome their challenges, from poverty to climate change. We need children to fulfil their potential to create a safer and more prosperous world.

That is why we must redouble our efforts to end the damaging impacts of illiteracy. To achieve this, we need to think about deep and meaningful change, with a focus on publishing children's books.

Mirrors and windows

When Room to Read began our mission to end illiteracy, we soon discovered many communities lacked age-appropriate children's books and had no children's book publishing industries. This was a major set-back for
increasing literacy rates. We know the early primary years of school are the most effective time to teach literacy skills and that literacy is the foundation for all future learning.

That is why, just like in the UK, children around the world need books in their local languages that are written with the aim of inspiring a love of reading while supporting the development of reading skills. Children's books, while filled with exciting tales of magic and adventures, need to be crafted with children's interests and literacy instruction in mind. However, in many parts of the world, it is common to find libraries either empty or without any storybooks in the local language. This prevents us from ending illiteracy.

It is vital to develop and support children's book publishing industries in low-income communities. Room to Read trains local authors and illustrators to develop engaging children's storybooks. We combine the science of learning to read with the magic of loving to read, developing a generation of independent readers who are breaking the cycle of illiteracy within their own families. Since 2000, we have distributed over 26 million books in 36 different languages. The key learning we share is simple: books need to be both mirrors and windows to the world.

When children see themselves in books, their feel validation for their own experiences. These stories allow them to relate to characters who look and sound like them, who live out aspects of their daily lives. If these stories can be presented in a colourful manner, we are a step closer to inspiring a life-long reader.

This is when a book can be held up as a mirror. At this point, a book becomes a powerful tool that can help a child learn more about themselves and the world around them. In the communities Room to Read operates in, from Africa to Asia, children face daily struggles. Books can be a means of learning life skills to guide them. Children's books act as more than a means to educate or entertain. They have the capability to rewire our brains for emotional intelligence, allowing us to empathise and understand other people's feelings. Reading books serves as a way to understand emotions, and teach children to act with self-confidence and compassion.

Books offer an escape from their daily lives too. They need to see a world they could never imagine, filled with sights and creatures they will never see in their communities. The book now transforms into a window, transporting them to another country or even planet, where they can let their imaginations roam free. Best of all, they can learn about other communities, cultures and ways of life. These books can break down social divides and make a child in the most remote community feel part of a bigger and more connected world.

**A new generation of readers**

Ending illiteracy can be achieved in our lifetime, and while the mission is daunting, we know it's possible. Flourishing children's book's publishing industries, powered by local book creators, will play an important role in achieving this mission.

Our books serving as windows and mirrors will inspire a new generation of readers to fulfil their potential. A child equipped with emotional maturity, imagination and critical thinking skills has the ability to solve the challenges he or she faces.

On World Book Day, we must not forget our ability to spread the joy of learning and reading to children across the world. We must realise we have the solutions and potential to end illiteracy in our lifetime.

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