

Reading Comprehension, Part 2

Read the following text, then choose the answers to questions 6–10.

Youngsters aren't illiterate, but they are not reading many books

If children are to capitalise on life's opportunities, they must be able to read. Traditionally, in both education and the wider culture, literacy means books. Much of what is most precious in our cultural storehouse lies between hard covers and schools have customarily laid great stress on encouraging children to discover books. But printed books have been available for only a few centuries and newer media like the internet could yet displace them from their pre-eminent place in the culture.

Certainly the results from the latest survey of teenage literacy by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development give out some surprising signals. This research, which compares levels of literacy among 15-year-olds across 43 countries, shows that Britain's secondary-school students spend less time reading books than those of almost every other country.

This sounds alarming, but another statistic from the same survey is more reassuring. British teenagers do well in international literacy tests, coming ninth out of 43 countries, comfortably among the top performing quarter.

But if our teenagers are not reading books, where are they getting their skills? Andreas Scheicher, head of analysis in the OECD's education division, believes teens are spending more time browsing through magazines, e-mail and the internet, and that this is not a particular problem.

"What matters is having a diversity of different reading materials", he said. "E-mail is a part of communication in the modern world and is therefore a valid way of spending your reading time."

So, does it matter if children aren't reading books? Francis Spufford, author of the *The Child That Books Built*, is passionately convinced that it does. "There is a difference between technical literacy, which is the ability to decode written language, and the rest of what the written word is capable of, to reach its emotional heights and sound its emotional depths and inherit all of the things that are coded into the written words", he said. "There are more codes there than just the alphabet. And books are more than just another technology for delivering writing in; they are other worlds, sometimes worlds that reflect our own, sometimes worlds that challenge our own, sometimes

worlds that provide an escape from our own. But they contain some of the most rich and densely imagined things of which humans are capable, and unless you learn to slow down and let books do their work on you, you are missing something enormous."

Spufford's point is echoed by Genevieve Clark, who manages the National Reading Campaign. She said, "One way of putting it is that they exercise the muscles of the imagination. They open all sorts of doors, they encourage people to see life through other people's eyes. So, yes, books will always remain special and we would always encourage people to realise that books can fit into their life."

Contrary to what the OECD research suggests, Clark maintains that books are still popular among young people. "Look at *Harry Potter*", she said. "Teenagers are still reading, and reading very broadly. We've got plenty of evidence from all sorts of things, for instance the BBC Big Read where the top 100 books were voted for by the public. A third of them were children's books." But plenty of indicators suggest otherwise, and if it is clear that books are important it is less clear how we persuade teenagers of this.

Spufford said, "Part of it is perhaps to do with the right children not finding the right book, because that is a process which depends to a remarkable extent on luck, the sort of lucky lightning strikes where the right kid finds the right page at the right time. It's hard to see how that could be systematised. On the other hand it may also be that the way we are teaching reading and writing in schools doesn't actually encourage children to see books as a source of pleasure, which is very important."

Clark said that children's existing interest in other kinds of reading could actually serve as a way in. "I think teachers, librarians, anyone who's involved with promoting reading, especially to those who think that reading is boring or just not 'cool', need to think quite broadly about how they encourage children into reading", she said. "If they are passionately interested in dance or fishing or computers, there might be magazines and websites that interest them, but there are probably books as well. What we try to do is encourage young people to see books as part of the mix."