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An open letter to the Prime Minister

The Rt Hon. Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
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13 April 2021

Dear Prime Minister,

Millions of children, particularly those from the poorest communities worst hit by the pandemic, are missing out on opportunities to discover the life-changing magic of reading – one that OECD research suggests is a key indicator in a child's future success. How can a child become a reader for pleasure if their parents or carers cannot afford books, and their primary school has no library, or that library is woefully insufficient?

I am writing – with the support of former Laureates, literacy organisations, and publishing industry leaders – to ask the Government to help reverse the spiralling inequality in education by putting primary school libraries at the heart of our long term response to the pandemic with a ring fenced, yearly investment of £100m.

The Government has committed to levelling up this country and so I know will be interested in this way of creating a fair playing field for *all* children. The Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, has acknowledged that we should look beyond the recovery support package to do this. The devastating impact on the most disadvantaged school children is not going to be remedied with a quick fix. We must properly invest in their future at this pivotal moment.

Decades of research show a reader for pleasure is more likely to be happier, healthier, to do better at school, and to vote – all irrespective of background. According to the OECD, reading for pleasure is a bigger indicator of a child's educational success than their parent's socio-economic status. OFSTED has recognised the vital role that reading for pleasure plays in improving literacy levels. School libraries are an essential tool: in 2019, the National Literacy Trust and Nottingham Trent University found that children using their school library were more likely to read for pleasure and had better reading and writing attitudes – this difference was especially marked for those eligible for free school meals.

Since 2013, the PE and sport premium - allocated directly to primary schools and ring-fenced to improve physical education - has helped ensure that all young people can experience the numerous benefits of physical activity. **Surely the opportunity to become a reader for pleasure is just as important? How is it fair that some children are being given this immeasurable advantage in life, but stark book poverty means many more are denied this same chance to change their future?**

I have visited primary schools across the country over my twenty-year career as a children's author-illustrator and it is heart-breaking to see just how unevenly this fundamental opportunity is distributed. So often the children who need books the most are in schools that cannot provide them with even an *adequate* school library, let alone a good one.

There is vast inequality in the current primary school library provision. In 2019, the Great School Libraries report found a lack of space, resource and expertise, and that libraries are deteriorating. Whilst every prison has a statutory library, one in eight primary schools has no library space at all.

Worse still, schools with a higher proportion of children on free school meals were more than twice as likely not to have access to a designated library space.

These children from the poorest communities will be the most impacted, with reports such as from the Sutton Trust warning that they are going to fall further behind. It is these children, and their families, whose voices are not always heard, and I am using my platform as Waterstones Children's Laureate to speak out on their behalf. This is not something that can wait. We must act now.

I know that the Government is looking for practical solutions for the problems caused by the pandemic: placing primary school libraries at the heart of our long-term education recovery would change lives, and level up this country. By supporting primary school libraries with a yearly, dedicated boost of £100m, we can help children whose future now lies in the balance.

Over time, £100m a year would enable every primary school in England to invest in the key areas of library excellence - books, expertise, space - that their pupils so urgently need. For example, a boost of £28m could enable the one in eight primary schools without a library to develop space, buy stock, develop expertise and access a school library service; £75m per year would employ a part-time, expert librarian; and £60m per year allows schools to purchase one new book a year for each child.

Teachers, librarians, parents and MPs have been working tirelessly to mitigate the huge problems caused by the pandemic. For my own part, I am launching the 'Life-Changing Libraries' project not only to draw attention to the consequences of immense unfairness in primary school library provision, but also to showcase the transformative impact a well-resourced library has on a child's life opportunities.

The gap in educational attainment and opportunity remains stark, worrying and urgent.

I urge you to take this positive step to invest in our children's and our country's future.

Put simply, libraries change lives. Literacy changes lives.

I look forward to hearing from you and would be pleased to discuss this call for support.

Yours sincerely,



Cressida Cowell MBE, Waterstones Children's Laureate 2019-2022