

I Can See You

The teacher was stood on the table shouting commands to the children who were rowing across the Southern Ocean. He was pretending to be Ernest Shackleton and was shouting because the children making the “storm noises” were doing a good job! The class was retelling the story of how Shackleton’s leadership resulted in the rescue of every one of his men after their ship, Endurance, was lost in the ice.

Of course, they weren’t in the Southern Ocean, they were in an “area of severe social deprivation” and in Key Stage 2 of primary school. And, obviously, it wasn’t 1917. It’s 2020 and in the past year, they’ve missed six months of school.

Yesterday, Katie mastered long-multiplication. She was absolutely chuffed to bits! She learned this in her second language. She speaks two fluently, isn’t bad at a third and is learning a fourth with her mum.

Martha had asked to read to me again that morning. We went to a side room and read Harry Potter. She reads quietly, fluently and with intensity. We discussed what a “quill” is and why a penknife is so-named. Conor wanted to read with me too. He’s not such a good a reader, but he’s made massive progress this term. Neither child is read to at home.

It must have been my lucky day because Liam read to me as well! It was lunch time but he wanted to read to me before he went out to play. After reading and just before he went outside for some fresh air, he gave me his glasses to look after, so I zipped them into my coat pocket. I thought back to what an experienced social worker told me last year. He said, almost all of the children he works with have some Attachment needs (John Bowlby, Attachment Theory). If he has to leave them for a little while, he will give them a cushion or a toy to look after for him. “Hold that for me.” That way, the child knows that he is going to come back. I wondered if Liam was doing the same thing. Setting up the next encounter? Insuring against me not being there after lunch?

Maths and English. SATs. Are the children behind after 6 months off? Yes, of course they are! This area is notorious. People in the City look down upon it but perhaps they shouldn’t be so quick to condemn. Some of the children are read to and some of them returned from lockdown knowing their times tables and having not forgotten everything. And some didn’t. Some of them said they hadn’t used a pencil since March and some of them had to readjust to rules, boundaries and limitations.

The teacher, let’s call him Mr Shackleton, educated me. If this school lets them down, if they leave here with lower SATs marks than they could obtain, they will be put into lower sets at secondary school. Evidence and experience shows that they’ll stay there. So, if the brightest of children go into a middle set, their precocious intelligence is even less likely to translate to a graduate profession than it is already. And a middle-attaining child in Maths and English might be put in a bottom set. Maybe no pass at GCSE maths? Maybe a child and a cleaning job by the age of eighteen?

It all starts here, in primary education.

Allow me to present a few things that you already know! Firstly, we need to sort out a pandemic and make sure there isn't another one. We need sustainable energy generation and storage, to remove a lot of plastic from our oceans, find ways to improve air quality and boost biodiversity.

And I'm sure you also know that humans solve problems best when people from lots of different backgrounds can work together; their different perspectives boosting the collective creativity.

And yet, in a thousand, nuanced and practical ways, to grow up poor remains a massive barrier to a good education. Just 2% of the UK's top 10 universities are white, working class and male. 19% of UK school children live in food poverty. A child growing up in relative poverty has no view of university life nor what a university education could bring.

And nowhere on Campus is there a view of their world, either. So, you can't see Katie or Conor or Liam or Martha.

Where are all these children? Google the term: "social deprivation map cdrc" and click on the first link, "maps.cdrc.ac.uk". The red bits are the poorest. You might be surprised by how much red you see.

However, instead of looking at this on the screen of a computer, I wish more of the people who set the form and structure of our university admissions and education systems could meet some of the brightest children who live in our poorest places. I wish they could know their names, look after their spectacles or see the joy that follows conquering long multiplication. And, I wish they could find out why, in reality, it is so vanishingly unlikely that a really bright child they have grown to like and respect and call by name will go to university.

Because things would change then.

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