

Visiting a local primary school and Memory Lane

On my recent visit to a local primary school I asked about progress with teaching reading and writing English. I had on my mind Nick Gibb, Schools Minister for most of the last decade until the reshuffle. He is a tireless campaigner for using synthetic phonics as the best method to teach reading, and has had some success with the profession in getting this more widely adopted with some good outcomes. Standards of reading and writing have been rising. The school confirmed they used the method and were pleased with the results.

When I was preparing for the visit I allowed myself a rare trip down Memory Lane to recall how I thought as a primary school child. I had enjoyed my mother reading to me before I was old enough to go to a state primary. I had puzzled over the shapes of the words and felt frustrated that I could not read them for myself. I often asked for a favourite book and could remember enough to gently complain when my mother skipped a sentence or two because she was so bored with the same story. I still could not read the words I knew were missing.

Being introduced to the sound based alphabet was a revelation. Suddenly as I mastered abc as a set of sounds I held the magic key. I could venture a pronunciation of new words that I had not met before, and could read aloud the words I understood and were part of my personal dictionary of the mind. It was one of a few key gifts or statements during my education that made a huge difference to how I learned and progressed.

It was as big a breakthrough as my first day at primary school, when I was delighted to find a world that was my size. After five years of living in a land of giants where every chair was a mountain climb and every piece of furniture a huge and unmoveable obstacle, I was in a classroom with chairs and tables that fitted me and my classmates and I could move if necessary. Primary schools are gateways to a bigger world. At their best they give children the power to understand so much more and the confidence to go on their own personal journeys.