



A Comment on the Cuts

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Richard Bourne takes an objective look.

More cuts on the way. Inflation eroding what we have got. Frustration, anger or gloomy acceptance in every staffroom.

Is there a silver lining?

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Where does the school bookshop figure in all this?

We asked **Richard Bourne**, a journalist who has written widely on education, to take an objective look at the picture and, with bookshops in mind, make

A Comment on the Cuts

In all but a few lucky counties and boroughs the allowances for school books and materials will be lower this year than last. And, as everybody knows, the allowances were not too generous in most places last year anyway. The sight of dog-eared, old-fashioned books being dished out produces a weary depression in teacher, child and parent. No wonder literacy is such hard graft nowadays: at least most things a child will watch on television look well-made and up-to-date.

In this shiver of the educational ice age I've been asking around to see what school bookshops might do. With library allowances being slashed, the school bookshop may find itself carrying the banner for new books in general: it may be the only place that many children will actually see and browse around the new titles issued for them in 1980. Not only that, but in secondary schools or where parents are also encouraged to buy books, it may provide a surprisingly rare opportunity to look at new adult fiction and non-fiction. (For unhappily it is not only school libraries that are buying less, the same is true of public libraries too.) It must therefore be *lively* and *active*. By being positive, by using their imaginations, those who run bookshops can raise the morale of all around them and increase the chances of getting help from others.

Call for reinforcements

And this brings me to the first principle for the fightback against cuts and general melancholia: school bookshops should bring in parents wherever possible. Parents to serve behind the counter. Parents to get leaflets about new books in stock. Parents to help put plastic backs on worthwhile second-hand books (of which more later). Parents to buy for their children and *for themselves*. Parents to observe the taste of children the same age or a little bit older than theirs. Parents to take part in exhibitions related to a particular bookish theme. Author parents to come in and talk and sign copies. Printer parents to come in and explain how a book is set and bound. Parents to list new books in stock in their newsletter, and to order new ones at publication. Parents to help organise book token schemes, or pocket money savings cards which will give children the resources to choose and buy their own books.

This principle is not designed to take away in any respect the prime purpose of a school bookshop - to be a place where, for pleasure and education, *a child* can buy his or her own book to read. What it does however, is to bring in the organisational and financial muscle of parents *to help the teachers*. The best, most natural example of reading is the example set a child by the rest of the family. And even where a school has no particular desire to be a community school it is likely that the PTA or Friends' Association will do what it can to support a school bookshop if the school makes the invitation.

A case of practical conservation

The second principle which I have gleaned from talking around is that no school bookshop should be shy of running a second-hand section, given the economic climate and the price of new books. 'I give a 5p credit for any book that is brought in and resell second-hand books for 5p or 10p,' one school bookshop organiser at a large South London secondary school told me. A lively second-hand trade can give children who may have little possibility of buying many new books with their own money the pleasure of choosing, buying, owning and indeed reselling the stories that appeal to them. It is a case of practical conservation. And it may even be a way in which children can be encouraged to respect books: those in better condition can be bought back at a higher price. Wherever possible books should be resold with a durable protection for their covers.

The third general principle which seems to apply at the present time is that the school bookshop should be determinedly eclectic -aiming to serve all age groups in a school, with both fiction and non-fiction. Some secondary bookshops, I know, do a trade in set books but I am not referring to that. Many bookshops in secondary schools really only serve the first and second years - and that I think is a pity. The range of books should be wide because young people should be encouraged to experiment and develop their taste. I was talking to a book publisher recently who was very worried about the immediate outlook for book publishing in Britain. But he felt that a good story could be as popular today as it was 100 years ago. For his firm he felt that survival lay in being more aware of the interests of the market - more willing to offer books as entertainment, and less keen on being didactic. He was also less interested in publishing books just for the sake of it: he felt fewer books could be better books.

The needs of older teenagers

I am sure that this awareness of a child's need to enjoy books, to be entertained as well as stimulated, lies behind the success of many school bookshops. It is the reason why children queued up at the counters of bookshops in the 1940s to buy Enid Blyton at a time when some high-minded public librarians were refusing to stock her. But there is also continuing scope for 'finding out books', descriptive and non-fiction, both among primary age children and teenagers. Here too the school bookshop is important because it can go on obtaining new books, and it is these kinds of books that date fastest.

Some of the liveliest school bookshops are in primary schools, but more needs to be discovered about the requirements of older teenagers in secondary schools. It may be that they are using outside bookshops for new or second-hand books, or are adequately provided for by public libraries. But I have a nasty feeling that 14 to 18-year-olds do less reading for pleasure than one would like and, if this is confirmed by English departments and school librarians, I would hope school bookshops could make an effort here.

No back-up and no escape?

Those then are my three general principles - useful at any time but perhaps highlighted by the effects of the cuts. There is, though, someone else to consider - the teacher who runs the bookshop. Anyone responsible for a school bookshop needs to be an ideas person, not easily down-hearted and with a capacity for drawing in parents and others to help. But I wonder whether schools sometimes take advantage of the teachers who run them, allow them to go on too long and become disenchanted? Particularly at the present time, when teachers are tending to lose their auxiliaries and back-up materials for their class teaching, it would be disastrous if running the bookshop was seen as a chore one could never get out of. Would it be unreasonable to suggest that no one should be expected to run the bookshop for more than three

years unless he or she had specifically volunteered to continue?

The cuts in perspective

There is no doubt that the present cuts in educational provision are inspiring a do-it-yourself spirit in schools, and a new willingness by teachers to see parents as vital partners. It is important, though, not to get the cuts out of proportion, not to get too demoralised: a fair bit of the build-up of resources and new buildings of the 1960s and early 1970s remains as a bonus to be shared among a falling child population, and the teacher-pupil ratio is considerably better than it was a decade ago. One always sees immediate price rises or economies in technicolour terms when they happen, but they have a habit of fading in retrospect. The general experience of schooling, both for teachers and pupils, has been steadily improving since 1945 in spite of the economic stop-go along the way: it would be most surprising if the present cuts were to usher in a period of continuing decline in standards of provision. (Education *has* taken a smaller proportion of the gross national product over the last three years but that in itself is not alarming - the GNP has been growing and the school population has been falling.)

I do not think the greatest possible efforts by school bookshops should inhibit lobbying to persuade local authorities to restore book and library allowances to a satisfactory level next year. This lobbying must go on. But in the meantime I believe that the school bookshop has a more important contribution to make than ever before.

Richard Bourne A former Education Correspondent of the Guardian, Richard Bourne has also been Assistant Editor for New Society and Deputy Editor for the London Evening Standard. He has written several books and is co-author of the centenary history of the National Union of Teachers, *Struggle for Education, 1870.1970*. He is married with three children at ILEA schools.

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