

If I were King for a day: my big issue [proxy title]

If you're finding it easy to read this copy of *Big Issue*, then you're not one of the 5 million or so in the UK who are functionally illiterate - able to read a bit, but uncomfortable with anything that goes beyond the level you'd expect of a 10-year-old. That's an amazing figure. It's almost 10 percent of the population.

Did you know that in this country, 10 percent of all households have fewer than 10 books in the house? And 1 percent have no books at all? Did you know that schools aren't obliged by law to have a library? Prisons are, but not schools. And did you know that almost half the children in the UK don't go to a public library?

What are the consequences of poor literacy? A huge cost to industry: poor literacy loses businesses £5 billion a year. A huge cost to society: sixty percent of young people who pass through Young Offenders' Institutions have language difficulties. And a huge cost to the individual: without reading, the mind lacks its daily exercise, and the imagination grows flabby.

So, if I were King for a Day, I'd try to change all that.

I'd make it obligatory for schools to have a library, well-stocked with books of all shapes and sizes - and mediums, for ebooks are just as valuable in promoting literacy as traditional books.

I'd arrange for quality books to be available cheaply in as many outlets as possible, and especially in supermarkets. Sweets by the till? Why not books?

I'd fund projects to show how internet and mobile technology can be a hook to get everyone reading - in any language, not just English.

And I'd start a national campaign to get the core message across, that reading is cool. It's the first step that's critical. As soon as kids discover that books are brilliant, they want to read more of them.

Some people are already trying to improve things. The National Literacy Association is about to launch a manifesto in which these points figure prominently. It's aimed at everyone involved with literacy: government, employers, parents, carers, teachers, publishers, booksellers - and children themselves. I applaud the initiative. For me, as a writer, it's the biggest of issues.