

Friday 1 October 2021

Dear everyone

Headline: winter coats. Be prepared, and you can find them on the school uniform list.

Today, in assembly, we talked about libraries. What they are, what they represent, who has access to them and so on. In the room (we were in the science lab, broadcasting to the rest of school) I had a lively Year 4 group.

Here is my library. Well, half of it. The other half is on the landing at the top of the stairs, and other bits of it in piles all over the house. Many of us enjoy peering at people's book shelves and then coming to a view about their tastes, interests and values. Parker enjoys chewing at the bottom shelf.



Libraries, I suggested, are not just a window on their owners, but a metaphor for communities of people. In my library, I alighted on Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative*, a personal account of the 18th century abolitionist and former slave. I read it when I was about 11. And, Chinua Achebe's response to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a powerful account of a powerless man witnessing the ruin of his people, and earned Achebe the title as father of African literature, a title he resisted.

Neither books are suitable for very young readers, I suggested, but an awareness of literature other than the western canon is important. Although, one might argue that both these texts are now firmly embedded into western as well as world literature. Today, in any

case, marks the beginning of Black History Month, hence my selection for assembly. I could have mentioned authors like Maya Angelou, too, also on my shelves. The celebration of Black History Month was launched by Year 7 children in their assembly yesterday to great effect.

Libraries are a perennial reminder of all that brings us together as people in all our wonder and difference. Libraries, from the point of view of history, have been the preserve of the church, aristocracy and the rich more or less until the 19th century. The combination of mass, cheaper printing and near universal literacy, and the establishment of public lending libraries democratized access to books, and ideas.

Afghan women and girls had found sanctuary in libraries across Afghanistan. The Taliban has been ransacking and closing libraries, and they are no longer safe spaces. Reported in the FT last weekend, *Masuma Nazari, the former director of the National Archives, told me [Richard Ovenden]: "In Afghanistan, libraries are safe and good places for girls and women. Families allow their girls to visit libraries to read, meet and talk to their classmates and friends. In addition to reading and learning in libraries, they can laugh, cry and share their life experiences together. If this time the Taliban increase restrictions on girls and women, they lose this safe place, as happened in the first period of Taliban rule. Libraries should not be taken from Afghan girls."*

In the UK, in the last 10 years, we have lost 20% of our public libraries, not because of the rise in digital print, or any particular attack on gender or ethnicity, but because of cuts to funding. A kind undermining by stealth of learning for everyone.

I urged our children to join their local library, if they haven't already. Not just for their sake, but to help keep libraries alive for everyone.

Here's the founder of the Hip Hop Shakespeare company, Akala, in his Ted Talk, where he asks us "who is going to be the custodians of knowledge? [...] education, who does it belong to?"

Every minute of his talk is worth it, and an ending that will bring a smile.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSbtkLA3GrY>

Have a great weekend.

Simon