

## Get London Reading



**David Cohen**  
23 Nov 2011

Recommend

**The head of the European Union expert group on literacy wants to use the Evening Standard's reading campaign as a springboard "to start to eradicate illiteracy in cities across Europe".**

Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, chairwoman of the High Level Group appointed by EU Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou to study best practice in literacy, said she had "literally jumped for joy" when she heard about our "groundbreaking" initiative.

Her group began examining our literacy model after Commissioner Vassiliou visited a school in Tower Hamlets last month to see it in action and hailed it "a potential blueprint for all of Europe".

"I have never seen a newspaper lead on literacy in this way," the princess said, in an interview at the Education and Culture building in Brussels. "You are not just a reporter of the news, but also an advocate for change. Yours is a fascinating model using hundreds of volunteers and the success you've had has caught the attention of Europe.

"I believe that Get Amsterdam Reading and Get Paris Reading and say to everybody, 'right, let's have a Europe-wide competition; in five years' time, who can be the first city without illiterate people?'"

The princess also hailed our "fantastic social experiment" to attempt to transform St Mary's Primary in Battersea with a small army of Evening Standard reading volunteers.

"The idea that you can turn a struggling school where half the children are failing into a successful one where 80 per cent are succeeding in one year, and for just £25,000 to £30,000 a year, really focuses the mind," she said.

"I salute St Mary's visionary headteacher Jared Brading, but he is right to reach for the stars because the latest research indicates that with high-intensity help, every single child has the ability to learn to read and write, even those who are dyslexic."

The 45-year-old princess insisted that near-zero illiteracy was an achievable goal for modern industrial cities. "We can learn from China - in the last half century, they have flipped their population from 80 per cent illiterate to 91 per cent literate. It's an outrage that 80 million people in Europe, including one in five 15-year-olds, cannot read well enough to function in society."

Married to Prince Constantijn, the third son of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, the princess is a graduate of three universities, including the University of London. She lived in London for six years and maintains strong links, not least because her brother, a banker with Morgan Stanley, lives here.

"London has become so much more cosmopolitan since I was a student at Queen Mary's College in Bethnal Green in the Eighties," she said. "I lived behind the Cromwell Hospital in Kensington and Chelsea, but London was more tea than coffee then, and there was only one place where I could get a proper cappuccino."

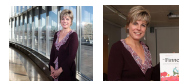
The mother of three children, all of primary school age, was appointed Unesco special envoy on literacy two years ago. She has also written a children's book, Mr Finney, that has sold 30,000 copies and been translated into several languages.

"Unlike the UK, in the Netherlands only the Queen, the Crown Prince and his wife get money from the state, so I have my professional life as an author and a strategic consultant, and we earn our own living," she said.



Pic: Matt Writtle

High praise: Princess Laurentien and fellow EU literacy experts are watching progress at St Mary's in Battersea



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Her involvement in literacy goes back to the mid-Nineties when she signed up as a reading volunteer to help Flemish adults in Brussels. "Working with illiterate people for two hours every week for a year changed my life because it allowed me to see the world through their eyes," she said.

"I'd rush out of my office at Edelman Worldwide, a top PR agency where I was the deputy managing director, and five minutes later I'd be sitting next to somebody for whom every word was a mountain. You saw how hard-won progress was, and how every step was a triumph.

"One day, some years later, I was asked to hand out literacy ambassador certificates to 10 formerly illiterate adults and there was so much emotion in the room. I realised that it was their first time on a podium, first time getting applause, first time being recognised. Learning to read meant so much more to them than just learning to read. It was the turnkey to unlocking their self-esteem."

Born Petra Laurentien Brinkhorst to a diplomat (her father was the Dutch EU ambassador to Japan), she was raised in a household "where public service ran in our veins". As a teenager, she experienced what it felt like to be "an outsider" because of problems with language. "When my father transferred to Japan, I went to the French Lycée in Tokyo, and for the first two months nobody spoke to me and I understood nothing. I felt totally excluded and lacked the confidence to make myself understood. I was lucky to have a very supportive home life, but that memory stuck with me, and it helped me empathise with people who live on the margins of society."

It was in her twenties while at University of California, Berkeley doing her dissertation, "Street Prostitution in San Francisco", that she first encountered illiterate people.

"I spent three days living on the beach with a community of homeless people who I felt deserved a second chance."

The princess formed the Dutch Reading and Writing Foundation in 2004, based on the principle that literacy is a human right. "At the time literacy was a non-issue in the Netherlands," she said. "People chuckled politely and said 'how nice', but nobody would face up to the problem."

Even today, two great misconceptions about literacy persist, she said. "First, people are shocked by the numbers and disbelieve them. Second, they think it must all be immigrants. Yet of the 1.5 million illiterate adults in the Netherlands, one million are Dutch-born. The proportion of [the one million] illiterate adults in London who are British-born is surprisingly high, too."

Last year the princess was asked to chair the EU High Level Group on Literacy, presiding over 11 experts from academia, politics and business. Their job is to scan the EU for best practice and come up with recommendations for governments. The group has met five times, and the Evening Standard, among others, has been invited to submit evidence.

"Our interim findings indicate there is no magic wand, no 'one-size fits all'. I see reading volunteers playing an important role, but as part of a wider approach in which we identify obstacles to literacy at all ages and mobilise key players to put it right.

"What the Evening Standard has done is open people's minds to the problem. You are engaging all of society, connecting adults who have skills and time with children who desperately need help. The St Mary's school project in Battersea is at the forefront and is something we vigorously support and will watch closely."

Indeed, the princess had a gift for St Mary's pupils, a signed copy of Mr Finney which she had inscribed: "Everything starts with reading and writing. It enables you to express what you feel, to connect with others, get and keep a job, be independent and take part in society. Good luck to you all, enjoy Mr Finney's adventures as he discovers the world by asking questions." She added: "I would love to visit St Mary's when I am next in London, and read to the pupils."

She laughed. "I fear I am so passionate about this that, as we say in my country, 'I have talked the ears from your head'. Ours is a shared mission - tackling the uncomfortable truth and unnecessary reality of illiteracy across Europe. Enough said - let us connect for maximum impact."

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Other cities don't need reading campaigns. They are needed only in London (and Reading) because only English has lots of spellings which have different pronunciations and make LEARNING TO READ EXCEPTIONALLY DIFFICULT: an/any/apron; on/only/once/other; should/shoulder/shout....

**- Masha Bell, Wareham, Dorset, England, 25/11/2011  
15:47**

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