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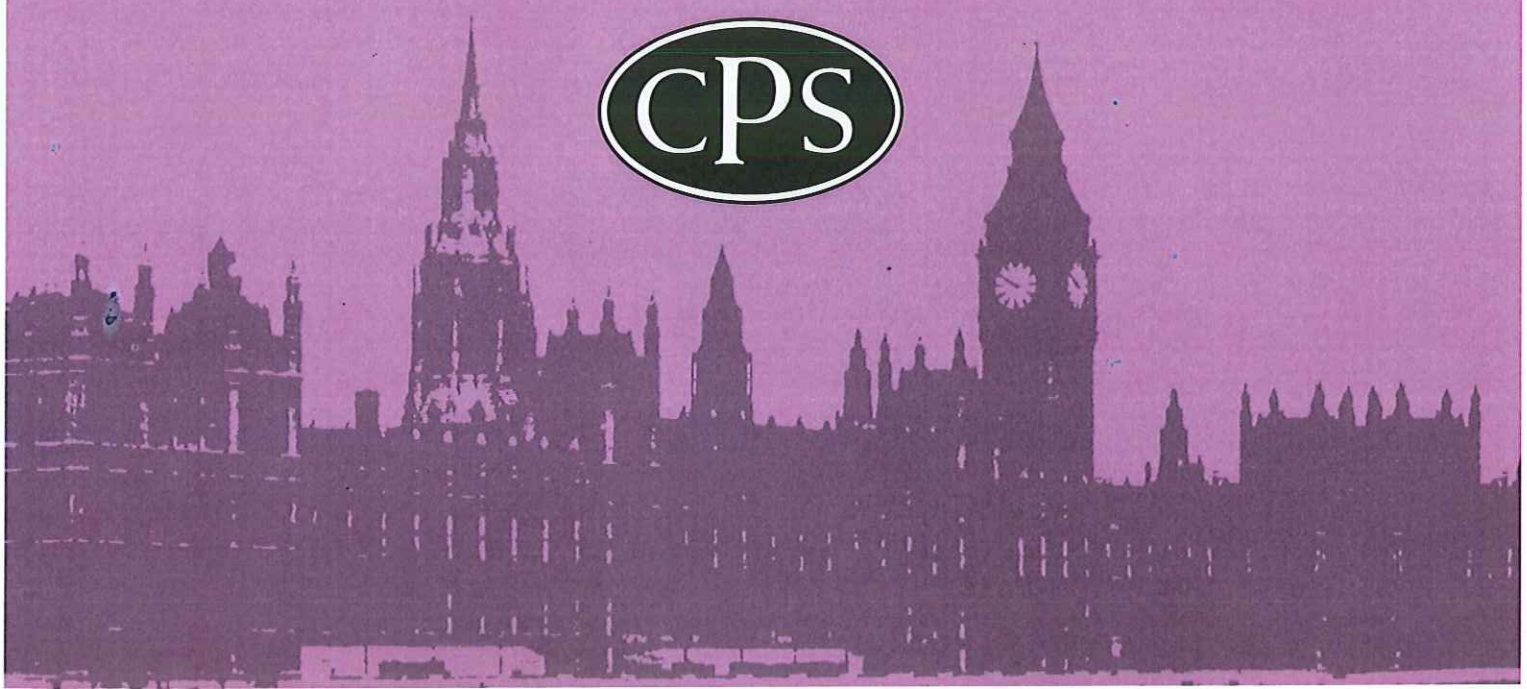
# POLICY CHALLENGE

*1996 Education Summer Series*

## Reading Fever

*Why phonics must come first*

MARTIN TURNER & TOM BURKARD





*The 1996 Education Summer Series*

# Reading Fever

*Why phonics must come first*

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TOM BURKARD

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1996



## THE AUTHORS

Martin Turner has been Head of Psychology at the Dyslexia Institute since 1991; before that, he was employed as an educational psychologist in local education authorities in Scotland and England for 15 years. Following his analysis of declining reading standards among seven-year olds in *Sponsored Reading Failure* (IEA, 1990), he was appointed to bodies including the School Examination and Assessment Council (1992-93); the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA, 1993-94); the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (1992-94); and SCAA English Test Review Groups for Key Stages 1 and 2. In 1992, Faber & Faber published a collection of his poetry, *Trespasses*; and in 1997, Whurr will publish his book, *The Psychological Assessment of Dyslexia*.

Tom Burkard is working on a dissertation at the University of Wales on reading failure and juvenile delinquency. He is introducing a rigorous, phonics-based remedial literacy programme at Costessey High School in Norwich. Preliminary results indicate that this programme is more effective and less expensive than the Reading Recovery Programme (results for the first year of this programme will be published in the summer of 1997). His most recent publication is 'Phonological Training in Reception Year', *British Journal of Curriculum and Assessment*, 1996. He is Secretary of the Promethean Trust and will be inspecting schools for the 1997 *Telegraph* Schools Guide.

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## CONTENTS

Summary and Recommendations

### **Part One: Martin Turner**

1	Reading Fever	1
2	Reading and Research	2
3	The Failure of the Whole Language Movement	5

### **Part Two: Tom Burkard**

4	Teacher Training	12
	Appendix A: The Fever of Educational Debate – A Case Study	26
	Appendix B: Reading Lists at Teacher Training Institutions	32



## SUMMARY

The reading skills of primary school children in Britain have fallen over the last 20 years.

The decline in the reading skills of young children can be directly linked to the adoption of Whole Language teaching methods in primary schools (see Chapter 2 for a definition of Whole Language methods). This decline is not just limited to the UK but to other Anglophone countries in which Whole Language methods have been adopted.

Whole Language theories have been repudiated by all objective academic research into the teaching of reading.

Teacher training colleges and the 'education establishment' England and Wales appear to be unaware of the overwhelming weight of research evidence which shows that Whole Language (and Whole Word) methods of teaching reading are seriously flawed. Whole Language textbooks continue to dominate teacher training coursework.

A 'balanced approach' (i.e. a mixture of 'modern' and phonetic methods of teaching children to read) is not acceptable. Indeed, such an approach was recommended in the *Bullock Report* of 1975 (and thereafter implemented) and has been responsible for the resultant decline in reading standards.

The central issue is not *whether* phonics should be taught but *when* and *how*. Today, most primary schools still insist that children read commercially available storybooks ('real books') or 'graded readers' *before* they have mastered the alphabet. This is equivalent to asking children to add or subtract *before* they can count to ten. Those few primary schools which teach the basics of phonics *before* any other method are also those which are most successful in teaching children from all backgrounds to read.

'Modern' methods of teaching reading can have a damaging and permanent impact on children – especially those from relatively deprived backgrounds who do not receive significant additional help at home.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The bias in teacher training courses against teaching phonics must be reversed through an emphasis on phonics teaching in the Teacher Training Agency's proposed new 'National Curriculum' for teacher training.

Key Stage 1 teachers must be thoroughly grounded in the teaching of phonics skills. This implies a level of knowledge which is close to extinction in teacher training institutions. To revive such knowledge, educators will need to tap reservoirs of traditional knowledge about the English language and the initial teaching of literacy (such as can be found within the dyslexia and linguistics communities).

Authoritative primers for use by unskilled teachers, and reading and spelling texts for pupils, should be commissioned and distributed throughout all primary schools.

The use of reading schemes and real books should be encouraged only when basic phonetic skills are established and when reading for practice is desired.

The effectiveness with which literacy skills are taught in primary schools should be measured by externally administered reading and spelling tests at the ages of seven and eleven. Standardised tests must replace the cumbersome and unreliable subjective measures currently embodied in the National Curriculum. Should baseline testing be used, these tests must be formal, objective tests rather than informal assessments which have no reliability or validity in inter-school comparisons.

The findings of cognitive research should be widely promulgated in teacher training colleges. In particular, the proven fallacies of Whole Language methods should be widely publicised, and contrasted with the effectiveness of a phonetic approach.

## CHAPTER 1

### READING FEVER

ONCE UPON A TIME I wished to write a book called *Reading Fever*. The title alluded to the little earthquake of excitement that seizes children along with the insight that print consists of speech written down in a coded sequence of letters – and who then begin to read any and all print that swims into their ken: household packaging, street signs, newsprint. This phase may be observed in children at any age and is an encouraging sign of a happy breakthrough.<sup>1</sup>

The book was to have been dedicated alike to those parents whose children had enjoyed, and those whose children had not, this baptism of ardour. Unmistakable are the external signs of this rite of passage. The child enters a second, profounder universe, the world which can be studied and which has been studied, whose image and second self is the kind of universal library which recurs in the fiction of Borges: a transformable universe embedded with symbols, leaning forward to speak its mysteries but at the last moment possessed of reticence. As Rilke wrote in the guise of *Malte Laurids Brigge*:

One has no right to open a book at all, unless one is prepared to read them all. With every line one broke into the world. Before books came it was intact, and perhaps after reading them one would recover it entire again.<sup>2</sup>

But with the passage of events my title became ambiguous and could not be used. The healing fever of learning to read has been usurped by a fever of consternation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, D. Feitelson, *Facts and Fads in Beginning Reading: a cross-language perspective*, Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1988, pp. 117-8.

<sup>2</sup> R. M. Rilke, *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, tr. J. Linton, Hogarth Press, 1930, p.189.

<sup>3</sup> Should anyone doubt the passion which the debate on teaching reading engenders, a detailed Case Study on the response to an earlier pamphlet of the author can be found in Appendix A.



## CHAPTER 2

### READING AND RESEARCH

HOW DID THE TEACHING of reading come to be so controversial? To understand this, we need to see how the 'education establishment' has consistently ignored academic research to the proven disadvantage of children.

A lay person with a reasonably well-trained mind, but unfamiliar with reading research literature, starts with an advantage. A couple of hours in a university library should be sufficient to make out the principal features of the research landscape. Professional educators, embroiled in all sorts of consensual aberrations, would do well to take stock from such a position of innocence.

Educational research is less than a hundred years old. Nevertheless no aspect of education has received more attention than reading. As vivid accounts in Quintilian and elsewhere show, children have for many centuries been taught by alphabetic methods.<sup>4</sup>

When we are taught to read, we first learn off the names of the letters...then in due course syllables...and finally words...[W]e begin to write and read, syllable by syllable, and slowly at first. And when the lapse of considerable time has implanted the forms of words firmly in our minds, then we deal with them without the least difficulty...<sup>5</sup>

To this day, parents instinctively feel that reading begins with the sounds of letters, as for most of those who learned to read at their mother's knee it always did.<sup>6</sup> The method of teaching reading and spelling through understanding letter sounds, blending of letters and word building is known for convenience as *phonics*.

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<sup>4</sup> For the curious, H. Diack reviews some of the history of reading instruction in *In Spite of the Alphabet*, Chatto and Windus, 1965; for the teaching of writing, see A. Gaur, *A History of Writing*, British Library, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> This description by Dionysius of Helicarnassus from about 20 BC is quoted in D. Feitelson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Chew, *Professional Expertise And Parental Experience In The Teaching Of Reading (Or Mother Often Knows Best)*, Campaign for Real Education, 1994.

## READING AND RESEARCH

In the 1920s and 1930s, a new 'enlightened' orthodoxy took hold of the educational establishment: the *Whole Word* method of teaching reading.<sup>7</sup> This involves getting children to recognise whole words by their shape, rather as if they were pictures. It is often combined with limited teaching of initial letters only. If there is a single 'mixture of methods' at work in British primary schools today, it is Whole Word teaching reinforced in reading schemes,<sup>8</sup> with remedial phonics for those who fail to learn in this way. Unfortunately the failure rate is unacceptably high with Whole Word methods; even successful readers will need to be taught spelling *de novo*; and all children seem to reach a plateau at around the age of eight in their reading development.<sup>9</sup>

Between *phonic* and *Whole Word* methods, fierce controversies raged and still rage amongst educationalists – despite the fact that, *within the academic community*, the argument has been settled. The most authoritative and least dogmatic account of the effectiveness of the two schools of thought was in Jeanne Chall's classic work, *Learning To Read: The Great Debate*.<sup>10</sup> Chall, subsequently education professor at Harvard, reviewed the already extensive literature of method comparison studies and visited numerous schools as an observer, including some in England and Scotland. Her conclusion was that *code-emphasis* teaching (i.e. a phonetic approach) conferred on pupils an advantage in reading and spelling, by comparison with *meaning-emphasis* teaching (i.e. a Whole Word approach). Nor did a code-emphasis approach entail any loss of motivation, interest or comprehension on the part of the pupil. This conclusion, confirmed in another large study published in 1967, was too late to be included in Chall's review.<sup>11</sup> But it was consolidated in a revised and updated edition of her book which brought the literature survey up to date in 1983, and was firmly rooted in the findings of experimental psychology by Marilyn Adams' extensive study of reading processes in 1990.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As for instance in Britain in the influential teaching of Fred Schonell. The story in the US is taken up in S. L. Blumenfeld, *NEA: Trojan Horse in American Education*, The Paradigm Company, 1984.

<sup>8</sup> A 'reading scheme' is a series of instructional books produced by commercial publishers intended to serve as a structure for the teaching of reading. Though easier books precede harder books, and titles may be graded, such texts often include much repetition of common words and are therefore suitable only for the practice of reading, once already taught. No major reading scheme currently available supports the phonic teaching of letters or *parts of words*.

<sup>9</sup> B. Byrne, P. Freebody, and A. Gates, 'Longitudinal data on the relations of word-reading strategies to comprehension, reading time and phonemic awareness', *Reading Research Quarterly* vol. 27, pp. 142-151, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> J.S. Chall, *Learning to Read: the Great Debate* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), McGraw-Hill, 1996 (1967).

<sup>11</sup> G.L. Bond, and R. Dykstra, 'The co-operative research programme in first-grade reading instruction', *Reading Research Quarterly* vol. 2, pp. 5-142, 1967.

<sup>12</sup> M.J. Adams, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*, MIT Press, 1990 is the



## MARTIN TURNER

In this sense it cannot be said that the method of teaching reading has been *academically* controversial for nearly 30 years. But unfortunately college teacher-trainers and local authority inspectors do not seem to have read such literature. To complicate matters further, during most of this period a third school of thought in the teaching of reading has emerged: the *Whole Language* movement. This is hostile both to the Whole Word approach and, more particularly, to phonics. Indeed, the Whole Language movement has rekindled a romantic and liberationist spirit in the teaching of reading, perhaps as a rearguard action against the gradual 'scientisation' of everything precious. Whatever the historical explanation, the Whole Language movement has made conquests in all English-speaking countries in defiance of the more realistic – and far more rigorous – findings of science.

Essentially the tenets of the Whole Language movement have been that language cannot be split up into pieces, that learning to recognise words out of context offends against the wholeness of the text, and that top-down processes, moving from comprehension of the whole to deciding what individual words might be, placing meaning at the centre of the enterprise, are of paramount importance. Such an emphasis upon hallucination rather than evidence readily identifies itself as belonging to the intellectual milieu of the late 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

The influence of Whole Language policies is highly visible. Schools are ideologically sensitive institutions and reproduce errors faithfully and with enthusiasm. History is likely to judge severely what has been going on during these decades in a country in which education functions as a one-party state; and in which, as Derek Walcott wrote in a poem dedicated to Joseph Brodsky,

...mastodons force their systems through the snow.<sup>14</sup>

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landmark in its generation of books about reading.

<sup>13</sup> The tenets of the Whole Language movement have been repudiated by the entire academic psychological community and courteously refuted in M.J. Adams, 'Why not phonics and whole language?' in W. Ellis (ed.), *All Language And The Creation Of Literacy*, Orton Dyslexia Society, 1991. See also K.E. Stanovich, 'Romance and reality', in *The Reading Teacher* vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 280-291, December 1993-January 1994. The era of the 1960s is still celebrated by some: Professor David Bridges, of the University of East Anglia, remembers the teacher education community of those days as 'open to radical ideas and quite unselfconscious and uninhibited in their pursuit', *Times Educational Supplement*, 16 February 1996.

<sup>14</sup> D. Walcott, 'The Forest of Europe' in *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, 1979; reprinted in *Collected Poems 1948-1984*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux (The Noonday Press), 1986.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE FAILURE OF THE WHOLE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

IF WE ACCEPT THAT some decline in reading achievement among seven-year olds took place in the late 1980s (the most tenuous and popular level of acceptance), then we may ask whether there is an increased number of children with reading difficulties. For instance, a child just seven in 1990 might complete his or her statutory education in 1999; an older child, aged seven in 1985, might by now be two years out of school. Is there a visible bulge of children with literacy difficulties?

Such a view has cropped up repeatedly, notably in those who speak for the secondary schools which are, in a sense, the *customers* of the primary schools and must receive their *products* – that is, the pupils with either adequate or inadequate reading skills). Recently a survey by the Secondary Heads Association (SHA) of 455 secondary schools found that:

...in two-thirds of comprehensive schools and one-third of independent schools, the measured attainment of pupils has fallen in recent years.<sup>15</sup>

Individual heads contacted drew the conclusion that 'children are not mastering the core curriculum in primary school'. The decline was said to be most marked during the period 1993-95. Pupils aged eleven in 1993-95 were aged seven in 1989-91, a period thoroughly implicated in the decline described above.<sup>16</sup>

There are two problems, however, with this thesis. The first is that where longer datasets were available in 1990, the decline in reading attainment at the age of seven can be seen to have begun in 1980 or thereabouts. Three local authorities, Kent, Surrey and Essex, for instance, had been testing this age-group since the early 1970s, with a decline apparent only during the second decade. The other problem is that the scores

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<sup>15</sup> SHA Survey, 27 November 1995. The reference here to independent schools is clarified, perhaps, by the further detail that the ratio of those saying standards had *fallen* to those saying they had *risen* was 24:1 in comprehensive schools, but only 2:1 in independent schools.

<sup>16</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 28 November 1995.

## MARTIN TURNER

of eleven-year olds on comparable tests show a similar decline to that of seven-year olds *over the same period*.<sup>17</sup> On the NFER Reading Comprehension Test DE,<sup>18</sup> for instance, first year secondary pupils in Essex showed a significant, if less precipitous, decline in mean scores over the 1980s:

### Essex County Reading Test Means

	Age Seven	Age Eleven
1980	107.71	103.18
1990	100.20	100.21

The tests given to both age-groups were administered to about 23,000 pupils each year. Small variations in mean standard score<sup>19</sup> are highly significant with such large numbers. This evidence would favour a view of widespread decline in reading abilities at all age-levels and over a decade or more, as against one of a particular but limited *bulge* working its way through the system.

Children by the age of seven, it is said, learn to read or they learn to fail. Both cycles are self-reinforcing. Just as exposure to print leads to more practised reading skills, so the experience of failure leads to expectations, on the parts both of the teacher and the child himself, of more failure. Do children recover from such experiences? Do they do badly on tests at seven, which are anyway disfavoured in Whole Language doctrine as 'decontextualised' and unfair, but learn gradually but more effectively thereafter?

In Croydon in 1989 the first group of children given the Neale<sup>20</sup> passage test at seven in 1985 had subsequently sat a quite different reading comprehension test, the

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<sup>17</sup> At the time this more sparse evidence was ignored in favour of a systematic focus upon seven year olds, seven being the age of decisive impact of success or failure in reading upon the attitudes of children: see J.W. Chapman, R. Lambourne and P.A. Silva, 'Some antecedents of academic self-concept: a longitudinal study', *British Journal of Educational Psychology* vol. 60, pp. 142-152, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), *Reading Comprehension Test DE*, NFER-Nelson, 1976.

<sup>19</sup> A standard score has a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. Different tests of different skills can be given to different age-groups and the results, expressed in this common metric, legitimately compared.

<sup>20</sup> M.D. Neale, *Analysis Of Reading Ability* NFER-Nelson, 1958.



## THE FAILURE OF THE WHOLE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

Hunter-Grundin,<sup>21</sup> at eleven in 1989. Many children pass in and out of a single local education authority, especially in London, as their families move house. But for 2,000 children records of scores of reading tests on both occasions were available. The correlation between the two sets of scores was 0.725. This level of correlation is highly significant for a sample of this size and, in social science terms, is an unusually large effect. Indeed it is little different from the size of correlation that is obtained if children are given two different reading tests *at the same age*. In other words, it demonstrates that children are unlikely to alter very much their relative status in reading skills over the four junior years: the poor readers remain – relatively – poorer.<sup>22</sup>

### Whole Language's golden grave

That the astonishingly destructive phenomenon of Whole Language policies on the teaching of reading remains largely in place in colleges of teacher education is the responsibility of the Teacher Training Agency.<sup>23</sup> The original National Curriculum English Order, which mentioned 'story' or 'stories' nine times in the first three levels of Attainment Target 2, Reading, but 'letter' or 'letters' only once, has now been revised and presents a more realistic, rounded view of the initial teaching of reading. National Curriculum testing of reading for Key Stage 1 (i.e. for children aged six and seven), has been based on the reading aloud to the teacher of selected passages from commercially-available storybooks, varying in difficulty and so essentially unstandardised. A Whole Language-inspired 'miscue [i.e. mistake] analysis' has been the methodology imposed for five years upon all infant children in British state schools. Many millions of pounds have been spent generating information which is imprecise and unreliable. This 'running method' however, is now, in 1997, to be supplemented by a mandatory reading comprehension test for readers at all levels. This is a test capable of yielding useful information.

In 1990-1991 the link between falling reading standards and Whole Language methods assumed the status of an unproved and notorious hypothesis. As can be seen from the Case Study in Appendix A, a major damage limitation exercise was mounted to protect what had become an establishment orthodoxy. Jobs, reputations and

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<sup>21</sup> E. Hunter-Grundin and U. Grundin, *Hunter-Grundin Literacy Profiles*. The Test Agency, 1980.

<sup>22</sup> A longer continuation of data would have revealed whether the growing proportions of poor readers at seven translated into similar proportions at eleven; but the test series was broken, using as an excuse the introduction of National Curriculum testing.

<sup>23</sup> The first swallow, however, of a phonic Spring – some mention of phonics in initial teacher training courses on reading – has been sighted by Dr Rhona Stainthorp of Reading University Department of Education. *The Economist*, 10 February 1996.



## MARTIN TURNER

investments<sup>24</sup> were at stake. What has become obvious is that the decline in children's reading skills in the late 1980s and early 1990s is inexorably associated with the teaching methods and classroom policies of the Whole Language approach. The core cognitive component for the future survival of our children in the knowledge economy had been dismantled.

### **The international experience of Whole Language teaching**

The evidence on the harmful effects of the Whole Language teaching is not limited to the experience in this country.

For example, in Canada, a 1993 survey by the Canadian Psychological Association found that the Whole Language approach was the main method of teaching reading in British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland/Labrador, Ontario, Prince Edward Island and Quebec. In Ontario's Oxford County Board, when a phonics-based series, *Language Patterns*, was used by 84% of grade one (or first year) teachers, grade two (or second year) children's mean scores on reading tests rose during the period 1972-76 from below grade two level to grade three or higher. But language guidelines for the province of Ontario were rewritten in the early 1980s to make only Whole Language texts acceptable. The head, Ada Kallio, of one school, St Francis of Assisi in Stroud, Ontario, had her purchasing power removed by school-board superintendent Margaret Nelson, a Whole Language advocate, to prevent her buying copies of the phonics primer by means of which 90% of her grade one children were reading at grade two level.<sup>25</sup> The London Board of Education in Ontario found that reading comprehension scores among fourth graders dropped from 1988-1991, while the number of poor readers climbed from 5% to 22% of the school population. The 1994 results of British Columbia's grade four reading tests were suppressed altogether since too many children failed to complete two-thirds of the questions or obtained scores of less than 25%, thus negating valid comparison with 1988 results.<sup>26</sup>

California is the largest, most prosperous state in the United States of America, with an economy eight times the size of India's. Every lifestyle, every fad, every experiment in

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<sup>24</sup> Publishing programmes, for instance.

<sup>25</sup> The attack upon standards by the protagonists of the Whole Language movement has often been as direct as this

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Nikiforuk and Deborah Howes, 'Why Schools Can't Teach', *Saturday Night*, September 1995, pp. 22ff. This phenomenon, surprisingly, is not confined to an English-speaking world influenced by North American psycholinguists. In France an official report aimed at abating Whole Language extremism was published in 1992: Ministère de L'Education Nationale et de la Culture, Direction des Ecoles, *La Maîtrise de la Langue - L'École*, Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique (Savoir Livre), 1992.

## THE FAILURE OF THE WHOLE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

living is played out there. In 1987 Whole Language policies were officially mandated across California through a curriculum document, the *English-Language Arts Framework*. As a result Whole Language policies were implemented to a greater extent than in any other state, according to the federally-funded National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Seven years later, in late 1994, the NAEP, applying national tests and criteria of reading competence, found that Californian children were the least competent readers in the USA. Nearly 60% of fourth graders (nine- and ten-year olds) read so poorly that they could not gain even a superficial understanding of their school books.<sup>27</sup> The excuse of a relatively high enrolment of minority pupils was inadequate: white students were the least competent readers of their racial group in the US.

In March 1995, a 27-member 'reading task force' was convened to 'act quickly to resolve [the] crisis'. That September, it issued a report, *Every Child A Reader*, which opened:

There is a crisis in California that demands our immediate attention. National and state reports indicate that a majority of California's children cannot read at basic levels. This reading failure begins in the early grades and has a harmful effect for a lifetime. Only a call to action at the highest levels, one that can marshal both human and fiscal resources and bring this story to the public, can be expected to address this crisis.

The language, unusual in a government document and quite beyond a British parliamentary committee,<sup>28</sup> communicates something of the scale of the disaster. Moreover the connection with Whole Language policies is repeatedly and explicitly made:

The Task Force concluded that the 1987 *English-Language Arts Framework* did not present a comprehensive and balanced reading programme and gave insufficient attention to a systematic skills instruction program.

The remedy, a revised and balanced, but still inadequately phonic, reading curriculum follows 11 pages of recommendations. The contrast with responses in the UK is nowhere sharper than in two sentences of the Conclusion:

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<sup>27</sup> Even on Whole Language-inspired 'tests', the dimensions of the disaster were clear: on the specially designed, 'authentic' California Learning Assessment System, 77% of these same fourth graders obtained scores of 3 or below on a 6 point scale.

<sup>28</sup> As can be seen by the report issued by the House of Commons' Education, Science and Arts Committee (see Appendix A).



## MARTIN TURNER

Children who cannot read will not be successful in school or in life. If we lose sight of this simple fact, we will lose a generation of children.<sup>29</sup>

### **A coda: the importance of testing**

The Whole Language doctrine shuns tests and comparative research, as well it might, given its devastating effect upon the opportunities of small children exposed to a state education monopoly. If manifest failure amid the wreckage of children's lives were capable of reining in an essentially ideological movement, the scale and visibility of the Californian debacle would constitute the death-knell of the Whole Language movement.

One moral of this grim story is that hostility to testing arises essentially from reluctance to accept news of reality. Psychological testing, with its long-established empirical approach, seems to carry with it a freedom from dogma and preconception. At its touch many bubbles of educational superstition burst.

There are many implications for Britain in 1996 and beyond. First and foremost, there is the question of the effectiveness of teaching. If teaching has been effective, a test conducted afterwards will show it. Testing is in principle capable of being adapted to the evaluation of most kinds of outcome, not just basic skills. All the more pity, then, that organisations such as the National and the London Associations for the Teaching of English (NATE and LATE), together with the teacher unions, are disposed against outcome evaluation altogether. However *learner verification*,<sup>30</sup> as it is sometimes called, is essential first in the arena of arithmetic, reading and English skills.

Tests also afford singularly adaptable research tools for evaluating standards of groups of children and comparing schools fairly. Group tests of ability and attainment separate under- from over-achievers and isolate the difficulties with learning *processes* that some children have. Special needs, attainment standards, selection criteria for various purposes can all be serviced effectively by judicious and informed use of psychometric tests. A simple but robust research design employing tests would greatly enhance the current cumbersome and inefficient *inspection* model. For instance, a mixed-age sample of 15% of children in a primary school could be assembled in a single classroom, given tests of ability, Maths and English during an hour and a quarter, and the school's effectiveness evaluated by means of the results. Such tests are valid and

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<sup>29</sup> All quotations are from California Reading Task Force, *Every Child A Reader*, California State Department of Education, September 1995, pp. 1, 2 and 14.

<sup>30</sup> S. Engelmann, 'How sensible is your reading program? A closer look at learner verification', *Journal for Supervision and Curriculum Improvement*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 16-22, 1990.



## THE FAILURE OF THE WHOLE LANGUAGE MOVEMENT

reliable. The primary question of real consequence in the inspection process is: Are children being educated in accordance with their abilities?

Finally, there is the use of tests for pupil selection. Once an emotionally fraught issue, selection is now making a comeback; indeed most countries practise some form of selection by attainment, if not by ability, in the secondary years. The meritocratic tradition, smothered by egalitarianism, needs to be reasserted in Britain.<sup>31</sup> However few perhaps would now argue for the full-blown reintroduction of the 11-plus exam, a form of 'high stakes' testing with built-in error. Such sheep-and-goats division now seems far too Bonapartist, social engineering on a scale against which Burke would have protested. Better to establish pupils' capacities gradually and surely by means of regular assessments, accumulating in assessment portfolios, and offer them and their families a wide choice at secondary transfer. Specialist, magnet, CTC, 'Fame' schools – all promote the choice and variety that had so largely been driven out by collective schooling; but no choice should affect the necessity for some children to repeat years which they had failed.

Above all, reading – the technical basis for all subsequent education – is best surveyed and its teaching evaluated, by straightforward group and individual measures of decoding, comprehension and fluency in a psychometric tradition established for the best part of a century.

Learning to read, and to a lesser degree, to write, are of course the major events in one's intellectual development...Everything else is atmosphere, and learning through reading and thinking.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> A. Wooldridge, *Measuring The Mind: Education And Psychology In England c. 1860 - c. 1990*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>32</sup> K. Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography*, Collins Fontana, 1986, p.12.

## CHAPTER 4

### TEACHER TRAINING

OVER THE LAST GENERATION, the Whole Language philosophy has profoundly influenced what educators think about how children learn to read. One of the central tenets of this philosophy is that pupils must be encouraged to think critically about what they read.

Unfortunately, trainee primary school teachers are in no position to think critically about what they are taught about the teaching of reading. They learn nothing of the growing body of research in the cognitive sciences which has established beyond any doubt that all skilled readers can decode print to sound effortlessly and automatically, and that all pupils develop these skills more efficiently when they are explicitly taught how to do so. The overwhelming conclusion of academics in this field is that most reading failure can be prevented by the systematic teaching of phonological (or phonetic) skills at an early stage. If a newly-qualified teacher is even aware of this research, it is unlikely to be a result of his or her training. Despite the insistence of educators at all levels that pupils are taught phonics as a part of an 'eclectic' approach,<sup>33</sup> the evidence suggests that phonological training is almost always regarded as little more than a minor backup for look-and-say of Whole Language programmes.

'Whole Language' is not so much a programme as a philosophy or approach – the term is highly misleading, if not positively Orwellian. Whole Language is a way of encouraging children to read without teaching them anything about letters and sounds.

To anyone accustomed to the intellectual rough-and-tumble that prevails in most academic disciplines, this kind of 'censorship' is almost inconceivable – and not a little alarming. To the 25% to 30% of pupils who leave primary school almost illiterate, it is a personal disaster; the great majority of these pupils will never catch up. Most of those who don't catch up have little to look forward to in life beyond a never-ending succession of TV soaps and state handouts – perhaps relieved by a spell in prison.

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<sup>33</sup> The 'eclectic' approach presumes that all children have their own learning styles and that these are best developed through a judicious 'mix' of methods. This view is not supported by research. See Adams, *op. cit.*

## TEACHER TRAINING

Reading failure correlates with aggressive anti-social behaviour more strongly than any social or economic indicator,<sup>34</sup> and as the former Chief Inspector of Prisons, Sir Stephen Tumim, has said recently:

You cannot walk around a Young Offender Institution in this country, talking and listening to the young, without finding an exceedingly high percentage who are virtually illiterate. They cannot write properly, or react properly to ordinary moral issues...<sup>35</sup>

### Obstacles to reform

Any effort to reform teacher training must take into account three quite separate problems. In the first instance, the Whole Language philosophy that dominates courses is a self-contained metaphysical system distinguished by the *a priori* assumption that reading development cannot be empirically tested.<sup>36</sup> One of the leading proponents of the Whole Language philosophy, Liz Waterland, makes the astonishing claims that:

The development of reading behaviour is not testable, but it is observable.

What this statement may mean is that development of *her* pupils' reading may very well be undetectable by conventional tests.

The second problem is that Whole Language theory is inextricably intertwined with child-centred notions of pedagogy. It is unlikely that the wildly implausible tenets of Whole Language philosophers – for example, that word identification is not essential or central to the comprehension of text – would have ever been taken seriously by anyone had they not proven so convenient to those seeking to expunge all traces of didacticism from the classroom.

Yet philosophy and practice can be quite different matters. The impact of Whole Language thinking in today's classrooms has been considerably diluted by its sheer impracticability. Consequently, the trainee teacher, freshly imbued in college with the revolutionary fervour of Frank Smith, Liz Waterland, and Margaret Meek, comes in for quite a shock during teaching practice. For in the work-a-day primary classroom, reading

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<sup>34</sup> See D. Hogenson, 'Reading Failure and Juvenile Delinquency', *Bulletin of the Orton Society*, Issue 24, 1974.

<sup>35</sup> From the Foreword to a report by Alex Carlile QC MP, *Young People and Crime*, Liberal Democrat Party, 1996.

<sup>36</sup> See for example L. Waterland, *Read with Me: an Apprenticeship Approach to Reading*, Thimble Press, 1985; and D. Holdaway, *The Foundations of Literacy*, Ashton Scholastic, 1979.



## TOM BURKARD

schemes still rule.<sup>37</sup> For the beleaguered teacher, nothing is so easy as passing out the graded readers so roundly condemned by Whole Language advocates. Most of these readers are, of course, a relic of a much older revolt against teaching phonics and are based on the Whole Word approach outlined in Chapter 2; they are allied to the look-and-say tradition, based on the long-discredited notion that pupils can recognise words by their overall 'shape' rather than by identifying the individual letters in the words.

While it would be difficult to find a primary school in Britain that still used an uncompromising Whole Language programme, many of the ideas implanted in teacher training colleges retain their appeal – most specifically, the notion that it is more important to stimulate children's interest in books than to teach them the skills which they need to read. Even though there is some evidence that reading scores are creeping back up to the standards that pre-dated the Whole Language experiments of the 1980s, they are still short of what can be achieved when children are only introduced to either reading schemes or real books *after* they have mastered basic decoding skills.

It should not be supposed that the teaching of reading could be reformed solely by exposing trainees to the latest cognitive research, and demonstrating how intensive phonological teaching can all but eliminate reading failure. Such radical change can only be effected when both the head and the reception teacher can lead school policy. The young products of B.Ed. and Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) courses do not have that kind of influence.

The third obstacle to reform is the level of education of the trainee teachers themselves. Very few of them will have attended schools where phonological skills were explicitly taught, and many of them will not have sufficient literacy skills themselves.<sup>38</sup> They tend 'not to have much formal knowledge of language structure'.<sup>39</sup> In an undergraduate linguistics seminar I attended at the University of East Anglia in 1990, only one other student – and a mature one at that – out of 20 had ever learnt how to parse a sentence, and many could not even reliably identify nouns or verbs in a sentence, let alone prepositions or adverbs.

It would be stretching the point only slightly to suggest that the typical PGCE or even B.Ed. tutor is working with a *tabula rasa*. However much these students have been taught critical thinking skills, they have little knowledge to exercise them upon. The

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<sup>37</sup> See footnote 8 above.

<sup>38</sup> See B. Lamb, *A National Survey of UK Undergraduates' Standards of English*, Queen's English Society, 1992.

<sup>39</sup> D. Brooks, T. Gorman, L. Kendall and A. Tate, *What Teachers in Training are Taught about Reading*, NFER Slough, 1992.

## TEACHER TRAINING

notion that 'the job of education is to strengthen the mind rather than fill it'<sup>40</sup> necessarily implies a certain indifference to what the mind is filled with. There is, of course, no such indifference in education, nor should there be. Anyone would be rightly alarmed if a pupil took an interest in nothing but *Mein Kampf* or racist propaganda. Knowledge is the raw material of critical thought: the more knowledge you have, the better equipped you are to make judgements. Conversely, the less knowledge you have, the more easily you are swayed by what you are told. It is interesting to contrast the revolutionary behaviour of students in the 1960s, educated in schools that demanded mastery of a wide range of knowledge, with the many docile and incurious students of the nineties whose mental horizons so seldom extend much beyond their first salaried job.

While these problems are far too deeply-rooted to be resolved by immediate measures, there are a few ways in which they might be ameliorated. Among these would be to end the culture of child-centred education<sup>41</sup> and to introduce linguistics courses (including the fundamentals of basic grammar and phonetics) to the National Curriculum at teacher training colleges.

### Reading Lists in Initial Teacher Training

The teaching of reading has generated more research than any other topic in education. Yet almost all of the post-Bullock information we have on how reading is taught in British primary schools is anecdotal.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the only systematic study we have on how teachers are trained to teach reading is the 1992 survey for the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE).<sup>43</sup> Even this research was strictly limited in scope; as just under half of the approximately 350 initial teacher training (ITT) courses did not co-operate. The authors state that:

...it is known that in a number of cases non-response was due to the course having no compulsory core reading elements.

It would therefore be wrong to assume that any but the smallest percentage of

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<sup>40</sup> Alec Clegg, quoted in N. Norris, *Understanding Educational Evaluation*, Kogan Page, 1990.

<sup>41</sup> See for example, the pamphlet in this series by I. Tyk, *Culture in the Classroom*, Centre for Policy Studies, 1996.

<sup>42</sup> The 1975 Bullock Report was the last major inquiry into the teaching of reading. Its findings were published in *The Bullock Report, A Language for Life*, Department of Education and Science HMSO, 1975.

<sup>43</sup> D. Brooks, T. Gorman, L. Kendall and A. Tate, op. cit.



## TOM BURKARD

newly-trained teachers have any prior knowledge of the rather specialised field of cognitive language studies. What little they might learn in their training is highly selective, and none of it incorporates recent academic findings.

The most objective way to assess the content of any course (without actually attending it) is to examine the course reading lists. While these lists do not necessarily reflect in detail what happens during training, it is unlikely that courses will contain even minor elements which are not reflected in the reading lists. The CATE survey lists the 30 most frequently recommended books in order of popularity. I have classified 27 of these books into one of three categories according to their overall philosophy of teaching early reading (the remaining three books were not readily obtainable).

The first or *Holistic* category includes works that are totally committed to the Whole Language philosophy. The criteria for inclusion are:

1. The author(s) must unequivocally state that the learning of language is a unitary skill which cannot usefully be taught as sub-skills.
2. They will not advocate the use of reading schemes with controlled vocabulary.
3. They will not advocate the formal teaching of word-recognition skills, either through phonological analysis or look-and-say.

The second category is *Holistic-Eclectic* (which emphasises the Whole Word approach discussed in Chapter 2). The criteria for inclusion are:

1. Initial reading instruction should focus upon encouraging the child to react to the meaning of the text.
2. Word-recognition skills must be developed.
3. Pupils should be encouraged to use a combination of pictorial, semantic, graphic and syntactic skills to identify unknown words in a text (this belief is also present in most 'holistic' theories.)

The third or 'Phonological' category hardly needs defining. It consists of one book, (the 29<sup>th</sup> most popular of the 30 books listed). It is the only one to recommend an emphasis on phonological training. And even this book does not give the trainee much



## TEACHER TRAINING

in the way of practical advice on how to teach phonics. As the CATE survey says:

No books dealing in any detail with the complex relationships between the writing system (the orthography) and the sound system (the phonology)... are to be found among the 30 most common reference books.

Four of the books do not concern early reading. Two were about oral language development, and two were about extended reading. However, in all cases, the author's attitudes about reading were sufficiently clear to allow the following classification.<sup>44</sup>

<b>Holistic</b>	<b>Holistic-Eclectic</b>	<b>Phonological</b>
1. Waterland (1985) 68%	2. Beard (1987) 57%	29. Bryant (1985) 18%
3. Meek (1982) 54%	6. Bullock (1975) 42%	
4. Smith (1978) 52%	8. Southgate (1981) 39%	
5. Hall (1987) 45%	9. Arnold (1982) 38%	
7. Meek (1988) 41%	11. DES (1990) 34%	
10. Holdaway (1979) 37%	14. Hutchcroft (1981) 27%	
12. Noon (1985) 34%	16. Cox (1989) 24%	
13. Wells (1986) 32%	17. Lunzer (1979) 22%	
18. Tizard (1984) 21%	20. Kingman (1988) 20%	
19. Wade (1990) 21%	26. Clark (1985) 19%	
22. Meek (1988) 20%	27. Clark (1978) 19%	
23. Waterland (1989) 20%	28. Clay (1979) 19%	
25. Wray (1989) 19%	30. Perera (1984) 18%	

This breakdown gives a clear picture of what most teacher training institutions consider a 'balanced' approach. As the books which are most likely to have an impact are the ones that are short and easy to read, the real balance is decidedly skewed in favour of the evangelical works of holistic enthusiasts such as Waterland and Meek (respectively, the most popular and third most popular books on the list). In contrast with those by Beard and Bullock, their books are uncomplicated (and unreferenced).

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<sup>44</sup> In this list, books are listed in the order of their popularity on reading lists; the percentages given refers to the percentage of reading lists on which each book appeared. Full details can be found in Appendix B.

## TOM BURKARD

### An analysis of Whole Language texts

In *Read With Me* by Liz Waterland, trainee teachers will learn that pupils became poor readers:

...because they had had *too much* teaching;

and that:

The reader reads a text by making informed guesses as to the likelihood of what that text will mean.

If Liz Waterland really reads like this, perhaps she can be forgiven for some of the odd ideas that she suggests. Her 'apprenticeship' approach entails selecting a book that the teacher thinks the child will enjoy and reading it with the pupil until he more or less knows it by heart. The pupil is gradually encouraged to take over the process of reading, telling the story in his own words if needs be. How quickly the child gets fed up with going over the same story is not mentioned. From the teacher's standpoint, this method is very labour-intensive, and even Waterland is not so impractical as to deny that it cannot succeed without the active participation of the parent(s) helping the child to 'read' at home.

Meek, who also advocates 'apprenticeship', admits that:

A teacher who hears a child read every day does it for such a short time that practice at home is always necessary.

This is where the whole idea begins to fall apart. It is precisely the pupils most at risk whose parents are either unwilling or unable to help them at home. For all the egalitarian rhetoric of modern education it would be difficult to devise a system more likely to deny all hope to children from the more deprived backgrounds. A black American educator, Lisa Delpitt, has explained how child-centred approaches to literacy and language utterly marginalise pupils from minority cultures by failing to teach them the language skills taken for granted by the white middle-class – the language, both written and oral, of power.<sup>45</sup> In Britain, this minority status is defined less by race than by social class.

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<sup>45</sup> L. Delpitt, *Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Black Educator*, 1986; *The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children*, in *Effective School Practices*, Spring 1993

## TEACHER TRAINING

With the apprenticeship approach, even parents who try to help their children are doomed to frustration and failure unless their child is one of the lucky ones who has the ability to work out the phonic code largely on their own. For five years I have made my living by teaching the code to children whose parents have tried and failed to help their children by listening to them read at home. The story is depressingly monotonous: parent and child are both driven to desperation by hapless teachers who themselves have been systematically denied scientific knowledge of how children should be taught to read.

While the apprenticeship method is by no means the only Whole Language approach,<sup>46</sup> they all operate on the principle that reading is a natural behaviour which is learnt in the same way that a child learns how to speak, and that attempts to teach word-recognition skills only serve to distract the pupil from his essential task of getting meaning from print.

### The Holistic-Eclectic texts

In 1975, the Bullock report stated that:

...there is no one method, medium, approach, device or philosophy that holds the key to the process of learning how to read.

Virtually every official pronouncement since has reflected this supposedly neutral stance in the debate on teaching reading.

It is well to bear in mind that Bullock's task was to reconcile the political pressure for formal, phonic-based teaching with the zeal for holistic, meaning-based approaches shown by progressive educators. Unfortunately, the eclectic 'compromise' is really nothing of the sort; the texts I have classified as holistic-eclectic generally concede that there is a place for reading schemes and phonics, but the emphasis is still on the development of reading as a holistic art. The author of the most popular Holistic-Eclectic text Roger Beard states that:

I am going to take the [top-down] approach because I feel that some interpretations of the [bottom-up] approach leave themselves open to misuse, conveying an impression that learning to read is basically sequential.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For a summary of these methods, see C. Moon (Ed), *Practical Ways to Teach Reading*, Ward Lock Educational, 1985; and D. Wray and J. Medwell, *Teaching Primary English*, Routledge, 1994.

<sup>47</sup> R. Beard, *Developing Reading 3-13*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1989.



## TOM BURKARD

Interestingly, Beard has subsequently become one of the most influential critics of the apprenticeship approach popular with the Whole Language movement. In a later work, *Reading by Apprenticeship?*, Beard and Oakhill use the findings of contemporary cognitive research to demolish the assumptions of Whole Language philosophy.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, recent advances in research are so compelling that even holistic philosophers are beginning to concede that phonological knowledge is essential to skilled reading, even though they still insist, against all evidence, that this knowledge is more effectively learnt when it is not actually taught.<sup>49</sup>

Of all the works on the Holistic-Eclectic list, the only one to give a serious consideration to the teaching of phonics is Bullock. This worthy report concedes that:

...the accurate perception of individual letters and groups of letters is clearly an important factor in learning to read...

but argues against 'a rigorous and systematic programme of exercises' to teach letter-recognition skills. The authors regard the explicit teaching of phonics in the early stages as 'profitless', and they conclude that '...it is better for children to learn grapheme-phoneme relations in the context of whole-word recognition' – which itself occurs in the context of 'reading for meaning'.

Bullock, like other leading exponents of Holistic-Eclectic methods such as Frank Smith,<sup>50</sup> makes an issue of the complexity of English orthography, citing some 166 rules of sound-spelling correspondence. Smith gives various figures in different sources ranging from 200 to 400. What is clear from both these works is that their authors regard even one rule as too many. They all ignore the fact that all skilled readers understand these rules, and that children with poor innate phonological ability can only learn them efficiently when they are explicitly taught. The longer this teaching is delayed, the more difficult and problematic it becomes.

### **The effectiveness of the Holistic-Eclectic approach in practice**

There is no reliable evidence of how the 'eclectic' orthodoxy is translated into practice. Other than OFSTED reports, which are largely subjective, the only contemporary evidence is an NFER report published in 1992.<sup>51</sup> This survey reported:

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<sup>48</sup> R. Beard and J. Oakhill, *Reading by Apprenticeship?*, NFER, 1994.

<sup>49</sup> See the Afterword by B. Cullinan and D. Strickland in Adams, op. cit., 1990.

<sup>50</sup> F. Smith, *Reading*, Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 1985.

<sup>51</sup> See V. Cato, C. Fernandes, T. Gorman, A. Kispal, with G. White, *The Teaching of Initial Literacy: How do Teachers Do It?*, NFER, 1992.

## TEACHER TRAINING

...a marked consensus of opinion about the need to use different methods of teaching in the initial stages.

The authors state that:

All (schools) made use of methods that involved children learning to 'sound out' letters, syllables, and component parts of words.

My own initial research in this area has revealed nothing contrary to the findings of the above survey and the following patterns have begun to emerge clearly:

1. All schools make extensive use of reading schemes.
2. All respondents report that in reception, encouraging children to regard reading as an enjoyable activity takes precedence over teaching letter or word recognition skills.
3. When a child encounters an unknown word, all respondents agree that it is better to either encourage 'guessing' or to simply supply the word than to encourage him or her to sound it out.

No school in my survey lacked an element of phonics in their programme. The most interesting feature of this survey to date is that most primary schools appear to teach only the most basic phonological skills, and they seem to have no clear idea as to how these skills should be deployed.

### A New Eclectic Model

Cognitive research studies all agree that explicit teaching of phonological skills must be at the heart of any successful framework of an eclectic perspective.<sup>52</sup> There is, however, no overall consensus as to how and when phonological skills should be taught.

It should be obvious that one of the best ways to answer this question is to observe real, existing primary schools that teach reading successfully – but there is little fresh empirical evidence in this area.<sup>53</sup> My own current research is focused on a Suffolk

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<sup>52</sup> Summaries of the relevant cognitive studies can be found in M.J. Adams, op. cit. (1990) and L. Ehri, 'The emergence of word reading in beginning reading' in Owen and Pumphrey (eds), *Emergent and Developing Reading: Messages for Teachers, Vol 1*, Falmer, 1994.

<sup>53</sup> See D. Wray and J. Medwell, *Teaching Primary English*, Routledge, 1994.



## TOM BURKARD

primary school (Woods Loke Primary School in Lowestoft) with an unexceptional working-class catchment; this school has reduced rates of reading failure by around 80% as compared to county averages.<sup>54</sup> The results obtained at this school are as clear an example of practitioners confounding the experts as anyone could wish to see.

Teaching practices at Woods Loke controvert everything taught in teacher training courses. They also confound the assumptions of cognitive researchers by successfully teaching phonological skills from the very first day in reception classes. Because four- and five-year olds are not naturally proficient at these tasks, it is widely assumed that phonological skills should not be explicitly taught in these classes. An initial 'logographic stage' has been postulated<sup>55</sup> during which children are presumed to recognise words holistically; this stage, if it exists, may only be a product of how pupils are taught.

Other cognitive scientists,<sup>56</sup> because of the *supposed* inability of young children to break words down into individual phonemes, have proposed that initial phonological training should be made simpler by teaching them to discriminate 'onset' (initial letter sound) and 'rime' (rhyme). There is as yet no evidence that this approach has proven successful in a primary school.

The Woods Loke approach is only just beginning to emerge from the shadowy *samizdat* existence it has suffered for the last two decades. Ironically, the school's teaching is avowedly eclectic. They do use reading schemes – but only to reinforce basic phonological skills that have already been taught. They do use real books, and they do encourage pupils to reflect upon the meaning of texts – but only *after* pupils can identify the words in them. Pupils are encouraged to use context and syntax to identify unknown words – but only *after* they have analysed the graphic structure of the words. Their sole heresy is that children are not given books until they can read the words in them independently with reasonable accuracy. Pupils are never encouraged to use the 'guessing' strategies identified by Stanovich<sup>57</sup> as characteristic of poor readers.

The crux of the difference between the authors of this pamphlet and many contemporary cognitive scientists is one of emphasis. We believe that phonological analysis and decoding should be the *primary* means by which word identification skills

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<sup>54</sup> See, by the current author, 'Phonological Training in Reception Year', *British Journal of Curriculum and Assessment*, 6/3, 1996.

<sup>55</sup> See R. Beard and J. Oakhill, op. cit., 1994.

<sup>56</sup> See L. Bradley, 'Rhymer, Rimes, and Learning to Read and Spell', *Phonological Development*, June 1992; also U. Goswami and P. Bryant, *Phonological Skills and Learning to Read*, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1990.

<sup>57</sup> See for example, K. Stanovich, *The Language Code: Issues in word Recognition*, in S.R. Yussen and M. C. Smith (eds) *Reading Across the Life Span*, Springer Verlag, 1988.

## TEACHER TRAINING

should be taught. We consciously reject the notion that 'real books' must be used first to stimulate pupils' interest in reading. Learning is stimulated more by mastery than by enthusiastic presentation of reading as an exciting activity. We reject the idea that pupils should be encouraged to use 'word guessing' strategies to predict words on the basis of context, syntax, or pictures. If encouraged, this strategy may entirely displace phonological decoding. Poor readers almost always find phonological tasks difficult, and if they are given an alternative means of word identification, they will use it to the exclusion of any but the most primitive and inaccurate phonological analysis. 'Guessing' is the lazy way out, and lazy pupils don't learn.

The problem with all pedagogic systems which stress the primacy of 'reading for meaning' is that there is little evidence that many, if any, beginning readers read text for any purpose other than either showing off or satisfying adult requirements. While young children do sometimes read comics and well-illustrated books of their own volition, it is the pictures rather than the text that creates the interest. My own son went through his Tintin comics just as avidly before he could read them as he did after learning to read.

The independent reading of text does not become a meaningful or interesting activity until the text can be read with relative ease. As a means of engaging young pupils' interest, text cannot even begin to compete with other forms of juvenile entertainment. The juxtaposition of text with stimulating features or activities does not draw the child's attention to the print – it only serves to *distract* him from the text, and lead him to believe that reading words is not essential to understanding a story.

Stimulating pupils' interest in a text is important. But it should only come *after* they have mastered the code. And it is more a function of a teacher's ability to teach both literature and other subject matter successfully than anything that could be defined as 'teaching reading'.

Woods Loke is not the only primary school in Britain to use a phonics-first approach, but such is the influence of Local Education Authority Reading Advisers that I have only been able to identify four other state primaries that will admit to using a similar approach, and none of them have been using it for long enough to generate useful data. In theory, all primary schools should be able to reduce reading failure by comparable margins. In practice, it is quite another matter. Few heads or teachers are willing to employ any new approach, no matter how promising, unless it enjoys a measure of official approval.

### **Teach what works – not what is fashionable**

The heated debate about teaching phonics has been going on for the better part of this century. Now that the cognitive sciences have established the central position of phonics,



## TOM BURKARD

there is a widespread feeling that it is time for conciliation and compromise. Marilyn Jaeger Adams, who has done more than anyone else to present the evidence for phonics in a wholly convincing manner, believes that the debate has been needlessly divisive and ultimately destructive of children's needs.<sup>58</sup> She has interpreted her evidence in such a way as to put the need for phonics within a broadly eclectic teaching philosophy. Perhaps she is right to do so. Given the dominance of Whole Language philosophy in teacher training colleges, her approach may be the only way that these citadels of unreason can be breached.

Yet there is a danger in this approach. Consensus becomes orthodoxy and orthodoxy suppresses dissent. Academic disciplines become sterile when they do not allow dissent. The great names in any field of intellectual endeavour frequently belong to those who have boldly rejected conventional wisdom.

Children are not being harmed by prolonging the debate on teaching reading; they are being harmed by the spurious methods of the Whole Language movement. As long as 25% to 30% of our children leave primary school nearly illiterate, the debate must be maintained. However Marilyn Jaeger Adams interprets the cognitive research, one simple fact remains: the only way the reading debate can be resolved is to see what works. Since Jean Chall's monumental surveys<sup>59</sup> established that phonics produces better results than 'meaning' oriented instruction, this line of empirical enquiry has totally dried up.

Were education a private enterprise, industrial spies would be lurking outside the Portakabins at Woods Loke trying to discover the secret of their success. Unfortunately, education has become the preserve of ideologues who consider that their own wisdom should prevail over empirical evidence. Until educational researchers show themselves willing to examine what works, they can argue forever about what *ought* to work.

Unfortunately, trainee teachers don't even have the benefit of the wisdom of Marilyn Jaeger Adams. Of the trainee teachers questioned in the NFER survey, 60% said they had been taught little or nothing about phonics. The response from tutors and pupils alike confirm the overwhelming bias in teacher training courses against teaching phonics. For all that progressive educational theorists talk about their 'democratic' ideals, the record demonstrates their strange reluctance to allow dissenting voices inside their own domain.

If they continue to do so, their very existence is at risk. The State of Oregon has already disbanded publicly-financed teacher education programmes<sup>60</sup> and similar proposals are increasingly heard here.

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<sup>58</sup> See M.J. Adams, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*, MIT Press, 1990.

<sup>59</sup> See J. Chall, *op. cit.*

<sup>60</sup> J. Stone, *An Open Letter to the Oregon State Legislature in Effective School Practices*, Spring 1993.

## TEACHER TRAINING

**Know that tomorrow the last of many battles we mean to fight...**

A new National Curriculum for teacher training courses is now under consideration. This will include detailed specifications on the teaching of reading.

Melanie Phillips has shown<sup>61</sup> how the praiseworthy intentions of the National Curriculum for schools were corrupted by the 'education establishment' and how, as a result, teachers have been lumbered with an administrative nightmare – together with some of the worst aspects of child-centred ideology, which are now enshrined in law. This must not be allowed to happen to the National Curriculum for teacher trainers.

The Government has a choice: it can either listen to those same administrators who introduced the Whole Language methods which have proved to be so disastrous, or it can listen to teachers who have proved that they can teach effectively.

Executives in the Teacher Training Agency also face a choice: they can either accept the findings of objective academic research and the practice of those who have demonstrated the efficacy of a phonics-first approach. Or they can fight a rearguard action for an intellectually bankrupt ideology that has blighted the lives of an entire generation and which has created an illiterate underclass. When making their choice, however, they should be aware that the forthcoming publication of primary school league tables will leave nowhere to hide for those who continue to advocate such an ideology.

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<sup>61</sup> M. Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes*, Little Brown, 1996.



## APPENDIX A

### THE FEVER OF EDUCATIONAL DEBATE: A CASE STUDY

#### The events of 1990-91

ON 22 JUNE 1990, a group of educational psychologists convened in Croydon. Inspection of reading test data from the authorities represented confirmed that a widespread decline had occurred in the preceding years. The report of that meeting ignited a wave of public anxiety. The concern with educational standards of all kinds – and especially reading standards – continued at a very high level in Britain and, still with reading as the focus, six months later in Australia, Canada and the United States.

On 6 September I published a booklet, *Sponsored Reading Failure*, with the Education Unit of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA). Behind me, at the televised press conference marking its launch, reigned the photographed head of Maynard Keynes; in front of me hung a framed chart of inflation through the course of world history, rising steeply after the publication of the *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. Around the polished mahogany table congregated journalists anxious for an explanation of statistics. During the proceedings, the Secretary of State telephoned to convey in person the gist of his press release of the same day:

The issue is about teaching methods, not resources...My prime concern is to raise standards... Any additional evidence about reading standards among seven-year olds is important. Mr Turner's report is to be welcomed for that reason, and as an important contribution to the debate about these matters.

In retrospect it is easy to see that a scandal over reading was waiting to happen and had long been brewing. My pamphlet had merely been the catalyst.

In an Afterword written in May 1993 when an abridged version was reprinted in an Open University course book,<sup>62</sup> I wrote:

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<sup>62</sup> M. Turner, 'Sponsored reading failure', in B. Stierer, and J. Maybin, (eds) *Language, Literacy And Learning In Educational Practice*, Multilingual Matters with the Open University, 1994.

## APPENDIX A

*Sponsored Reading Failure* was written in four days in an empty flat in Taunton. I had corresponded with, but not met, its subsequent publisher. The analysis was my own, an edifice reared in isolation. At the time child-centred orthodoxy seemed unshakeable, the [National Curriculum] English Order immutable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

In June 1990 a group of educational psychologists, convened by myself, met privately to address disturbing trends in local authority reading test data; we rashly communicated to a reputable journalist working on a background feature for the *Times Educational Supplement* who had already published data similar to ours. The news story that developed contended for months on equal terms with Saddam Hussein for front page space.

The number of LEAs with a confirmed downward trend in measured reading attainment at seven years old has since risen inexorably to 37; one, Cheshire, has been able to report full data showing no such trend; only 51 LEAs ever performed such systematic testing. The loss of progress represents about seven months for the average child in five years. My thesis that the concurrence of reading failure with the Whole Language movement was unlikely to be a coincidence has since been widely, if hypocritically, accepted.

The political construction of different approaches to the initial teaching of reading is eye-opening. It appears that there is, at bottom, a religious dispute about values, with two opposing sides still fighting the English Civil War, and those sceptical about religion likely to be credulous about all else.

Early in the new year (8 January 1991) the Department of Education and Science released two reports commissioned by John MacGregor, though by then Kenneth Clarke had taken his place as Secretary of State. Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) reported on the teaching of reading in unwontedly forthright fashion. The heart of the matter however was the evidence on declining test scores. From the DES the Secretary of State had written to Philip Halsey, Chairman and Chief Executive of School Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC), requesting an enquiry specifically into the data on seven-year olds held by LEAs. SEAC passed the request down to the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), which employed some members of the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) who had worked on language



## MARTIN TURNER

monitoring in the early and mid-80s; the APU was by now incorporated into SEAC and re-designated the Evaluation and Monitoring Unit (EMU).

From this mirage of dancing initials, what was to be expected? Could dirty linen be washed in public? I was initially greatly shocked, as no doubt were my original psychologist colleagues, to learn that out of 26 LEAs reporting data in analysable form, fully 19 (73%) were found to have a decline that matched the one we had described. However this terrible vindication was accompanied by much wriggling: tests were described as dated or incommensurable, the 'sample' unrepresentative and definitions of reading 'modern'.

### The Parliamentary quadrille

Meanwhile, the parliamentary select committee on Education, Science and Arts had interested itself in the question of Primary Reading Standards; it took evidence from the Secretary of State and others, including myself, on 27 February and 6 March, 1991. Its report was published on 8 May.<sup>63</sup> Although not widely covered in the press the findings were regarded with some of the reverence which the working of parliamentary democracy inspires in many, not least in the MPs themselves.

The members of this committee concerned themselves, briskly, with two questions. Have reading standards declined? And: what is the state of reading teaching? These were the two concerns that had already been addressed by the official reports. The MPs however were content to deliver themselves of 37 paragraphs, in the fourth of which they state that 'the scope of the enquiry has been restricted to the two reports'. As an exercise in disclosure, therefore, the committee's report covered no new ground and, heaping prudence upon discretion, rather reduced the range of what had already been said. As an exercise in the democratic control of education, however, it affords some worthwhile observations. The members visited a good school (Darell Primary) in an LEA (Kingston) whose reading test scores had risen somewhat. The head of this school, Brian Thompson, as one author of *Breakthrough To Literacy*, advocated nothing beyond the safe 'eclectic' approach but nevertheless offered an example of good practice, through careful attention to the detail of reading technique.<sup>64</sup>

The Secretary of State, having expressed scepticism of fashionable teaching methods, expected Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs) to provide:

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<sup>63</sup> Education, Science and Arts Committee, Session 1990-91, *Third Report: Standards of Reading in Primary Schools*, Volumes 1 (Report together with Proceedings of the Committee) and 2 (Minutes of Evidence and Appendices), HMSO, 1991.

<sup>64</sup> A fuller account by Donald McLeod of reading teaching at Darell School is to be found in the *Independent*, 17 May 1991.

## APPENDIX A

...a more solid core of data upon which we can make judgements about... standards of reading...the first solid basis...

for such a judgement. The committee demurred. SATs were:

...unlikely to provide the information needed [yet] we do not recommend the introduction of any further test...Primary schools have undergone quite enough upheaval in recent years.<sup>65</sup>

The committee took a positive approach with regard to teacher training ('more time should be given' and opportunity to specialise) and good practice (encouraging 'teachers to use these centres of excellence to observe work of high quality'). Parental involvement, book variety and nursery provision were similarly commended.

What had happened to our *point d'appui*? The members of the parliamentary committee said that:

It is important to keep a sense of proportion... The various methods of teaching phonics should be evaluated... [W]e wholeheartedly agree... that we have not got a crisis...

They quoted in their Conclusion a professor of education who had been obliged to renew his own sense of balance during an eventful year.

We have not found evidence to support this view, [the one which] attributed the apparent decline in standards ... to the growth of 'real books' methods of teaching reading... We therefore conclude that the claim that reading standards have fallen in recent years has not been proved beyond reasonable doubt.

Grounds for reasonable doubt, of course, were in plentiful supply. HMI's errant '5%' of real book teachers again did sterling service. And the statisticians, the NFER experts themselves, led the committee to believe that standardised scores and percentiles were:

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<sup>65</sup> The Secretary of State's most pertinent comment was not digested. After moving from the Department of Health, he said, he found to his surprise that he didn't employ a single teacher, he did not own a single school.



## MARTIN TURNER

...different statistical reporting methods [such that] there will necessarily be difficulty in combining the data.<sup>66</sup>

The behaviour of the committee confirms much experience of argument within the education establishment: the amateur, however masterly, is no match for the professional, however servile. The experts at NFER were delegated – from the Secretary of State to the DES to SEAC to NFER – the unpleasant task of analysing at second or third hand incomplete data reluctantly supplied by a minority of local education authorities. The data was, in an important sense, objective. However the supplementary verbal accounts, including interpretations, given by education authorities were open to special pleading, bias and motivated reticence. The NFER authors conceded quite plainly that:

...the survey could not establish reasons for any changes in reading standards since no relevant measures were sought.<sup>67</sup>

Yet suspect as the views of LEAs might be, few as were the number offering reasons for decline, far though such explanation fell beyond the scope of the NFER enquiry, the authors reached for the forbidden apple:

In no case was a decline in reading standards associated with methods of teaching reading.<sup>68</sup>

This sentence was no mere slip: it followed pages about modern methods, redefinitions of reading, the beauties of the National Curriculum and the general dubiousness and undesirability of testing. The sentence was elevated into a 'conclusion'. It was noticed gratefully by the *Times Educational Supplement* on 14 December 1990. It acquired enhanced importance as one of the report's 'three main points' in a summary drafted at the time by SEAC. It guided the thinking of the committee who were content, even so, with the Scottish verdict of Not Proven. The short, damaging sentence was picked up even by prominent educational psychologists to offset any useful contribution

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<sup>66</sup> Percentiles and standard scores are directly equivalent.

<sup>67</sup> V. Cato, C. Whetton and others, *An Enquiry into LEA Evidence on Standards of Reading of Seven Year Old Children: A report by the National Foundation for Educational Research*, HMSO, 1991.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, p. 69.

## APPENDIX A

made by the British Psychological Society,<sup>69</sup> extracted carefully and quoted in the first editorial comment directly on the events of the year by competent psychologists.<sup>70</sup>

For the NFER analysts there would have been an 'association with methods of teaching reading' only if sizeable numbers of LEAs had come forward, announced significant downward trends in measured reading attainment, implicated widespread dereliction in the teaching of reading and accepted full responsibility. Such a development would undoubtedly have inspired interest.

In the only useful scientific test of the decline in measured reading attainment, a subsequent NFER report<sup>71</sup> found just such a decline: between 2 and 3 points of standard score, equivalent to about four to six months of progress for an average child. This finding, which fell within a decimal point or two of that originally claimed, emerged from the best kind of enquiry: the re-administration, under carefully controlled conditions, of tests from the new Reading Ability series,<sup>72</sup> to a second sample in 1991 closely matched with the standardisation sample of 1987. The conclusion merited two sentences in a recent review of the post-war period.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> To the effect that the SAT has the 'attribute of the elastic ruler' (BPS, 1991).

<sup>70</sup> P. Gray and G. Lindsay, 'What price success? Appraising research in field settings' in *Educational and Child Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 1, British Psychological Society, May 1991.

<sup>71</sup> T. Gorman, and C. Fernandes, *Reading In Recession*, NFER, 1992.

<sup>72</sup> A. Kispal, T. Gorman and C. Whetton, *Reading Ability Series*, NFER-Nelson, 1989.

<sup>73</sup> G. Brooks, D. Foxman, and T. Gorman, *Standards In Literacy And Numeracy: 1948-1994*, National Commission on Education (Paul Hamlyn Foundation), 1995.



## APPENDIX B

### BOOKS ON READING LISTS IN TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

The following teacher training text books represent the thirty most used books on teacher training courses and are listed in order of popularity. Figures in brackets indicate the proportion of teacher training reading lists on which that title has appeared.

1. L. Waterland, *Read with Me: an Apprenticeship Approach to Reading*, Thimble Press, 1985 (68%).
2. R. Beard, *Developing Reading 3-13*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1987 (57%).
3. M. Meek, *Learning to Read*, Bodley Head, 1982 (54%).
4. F. Smith, *Reading*, Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 1985 (52%).
5. N. Hall, *The Emergence of Literacy*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1987 (45%).
6. The Bullock Report, *A Language for Life*, HMSO, 1975 (42%).
7. M. Meek, *How Tests Teach what Readers Learn*, Thimble Press, 1988 (41%).
8. V. Southgate *et al*, *Extending Beginning Reading*, Heinemann Educational for the Schools Council, 1981 (39%).
9. H. Arnold, *Listening to Children Read*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1982 (38%).
10. D. Holdaway, *The Foundations of Literacy*, Ashton Scholastic, 1979 (37%).
11. Department of Education and Science, *English in the National Curriculum* (No.2), HMSO (34%).
12. C. Moon (Ed), *Practical Ways to Teach Reading*, Ward Lock Educational, 1982 (34%).
13. G. Well, *The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Languages and Using Language to Learn*, Hodder and Stoughton 1986 (32%).

## APPENDIX B

14. D. Hutchcroft, *Making Language Work: a Practical Approach to Literacy for Teachers of 5- to 13-year old children*, McGraw-Hill, 1981 (27%).
15. J. Bennett, *Learning to Read with Picture Books*, Thimble Press, 1982 (15%).
16. Department of Education and Science and Welsh Office, *National Curriculum: English for Ages 5 to 16, Proposals of the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the Secretary of State for Wales* (The Cox Report), DES, 1989 (24%).
17. E. Lunzer and K. Gardner, *The Effective Use of Reading*, Heinemann for the Schools Council, 1979 (22%).
18. B. Tizard and M. Hughes, *Young Children Learning Talking and Thinking at Home and at School*, Fontana (21%).
19. B. Wade, *Reading for Real*, Open University Press, 1979 (21%).
20. Department of Education and Science, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language* (The Kingman Report), HMSO, 1988 (20%).
21. D. Houlton, *All Our Languages: A Handbook for the Multi-Cultural Classroom*, Edward Arnold, 1988 (20%).
22. M. Meek and C. Mills (Ed), *Language and Literacy in the Primary School*, Falmer Press, 1988 (20%).
23. L. Waterland (Ed), *Apprenticeship in Action: Teachers write about 'Read with Me'*, Thimble Press, 1989 (20%).
24. M. Barrs et al., *Patterns of Learning: The Primary Language Record and the Language Curriculum*, Centre for Languages in Primary Education, 1988 (19%).
25. D. Wray et al, *Literacy in Action*, Falmer Press, 1989 (19%).
26. M. Clark (Ed), *New Directions in the Study of Reading*, Falmer Press, 1985 (19%).
27. M. Clark, *Reading Difficulties in Schools*, Heinemann, 1979 (19%).
28. M. Clay, *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behaviour*, Heinemann, 1979 (19%).
29. P. Bryant and L. Bradley *Children's Reading Problems: Psychology and Education*, Basil Blackwell, 1985 (18%).
30. K. Perera, *Children's Writing and Reading: Analysing Classroom Language*, Basil Blackwell, 1984 (18%).



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