Sensible approaches to the teaching of reading

In this chapter we aim:

- to draw together research and practice in the teaching of reading;
- to introduce reading as a complex activity;
- to also describe the teaching of reading as complex;
- to claim that the broad and diverse range of children’s early experiences needs to be acknowledged, celebrated and used as a foundation for new learning.

The book

In 2007 we felt very strongly that there was a need to publish research information in relation to the teaching of reading and in support of teachers who were struggling to understand phonics and its place in their pedagogy (Gooch and Lambirth 2007b). This followed a very crowded and enthusiastic conference when teachers, advisors and academics gathered together to challenge the findings of the interim report of the Rose Review (2006). While there had been a plethora of government material instructing teachers about the teaching of reading, there appeared to us then, and now, to be very few voices heard challenging the prevailing phonics discourse and even fewer books available offering a critical perspective. This was particularly the case following the publication of the final version of the Rose Review (2006). We gathered together the work from a number of renowned academics for the purpose of offering a critical and research-informed text about how children learn to read and how we can best help them. Subsequently, in our conversations with teachers and students at all levels, we find there is also a hunger for this research information to be helpfully translated into practice guidance. This book is our attempt to fulfil that requirement. We find, however, that we
are unable to offer simple practice guides without reference to the research to support such work and so readers will not find this book devoid of references to theory, research and scholarship in the field and clear connections between research and practice. In fact, our belief in the teaching community is such that we feel confident that when they read our brief ‘pointers’ towards practice in this text they will creatively and competently set their planning and practice paths in the right direction, that is the direction best serving children, rather than methods or programmes, politics or policy.

For decades now debates have raged around us about the method of teaching reading thought to be most appropriate, often resulting in ‘absolutism and dogmatism’ (Hannon 2000: 71) as can be seen in recent dictats from central government and some of the lobbyists surrounding recent initiatives. In an early work Meek suggested that phonics was popular as a teaching procedure because ‘insecure or inexperienced teachers find it one they can both understand and administer’, persevering with it because ‘in our imperfect world it seems to be the most efficient system we have yet devised for beginners’ (1982: 74–5). But however seductive some of the apparently new simple views seem to be, it is commonly acknowledged that there can be no ‘one size fits all’ approach. This is obviously disappointing for busy and anxious teachers who now find that every aspect of current political dogmatism is available as a downloadable, often free, printable resource. In this book we will try to help by being clear that there are different and alternative approaches to teaching young children to read. While including phonics as one element of reading development, our approach is not dominated by this nor does it view decoding print as an end in itself. Instead, this way of thinking about teaching reading is centred upon the much more important aspect of making meaning, with phonics as one tool that might be useful to some children in the process of learning to read.

Recent history

We will not dwell too much on the history of the debates relating to the teaching of reading, in existence even before the famous Bullock Report (1975) which set out so clearly its recommendations that children should learn to read in context, that ‘language should be learned in the course of using it in, and about, the daily experiences of the classroom and the home’ (p. 520) and not through the use of formal exercises and drilling. This report was exceptional in three other ways. It acknowledged the potential gulf between research and teaching and sought to remedy what it called ‘this uneasy relationship’ by recommending teachers’ involvement with research and researchers’ involvement with teaching. In addition, it made its recommendations on the basis of research findings, broadly gathered and carefully considered. Finally, it sought to seriously unravel the complexities involved in children learning to read and in teachers teaching reading. It is always important to acknowledge the political context within which current central government reports are written and in which initiatives relating to phonics
are situated. In the middle of the 1970s there were raging debates about the overemphasis on creativity and creative approaches in the classroom. The case is similar today and similar groups are powerful lobbyists. The current demand for simple solutions and easily measurable test results does not come from parents, teachers or children. It comes instead from politicians and those involved in commercial enterprises, both groups it could be argued who have limited information about how children develop as readers. Both groups can also be seen to benefit from quick wins, easy targets and the play on parents’ emotions to gain rapid success for their children. In addition it is also important to realise that, while England appears to be quite separate in its approach from other countries in the United Kingdom, it is very close to other English-speaking countries across the world, and in particular approaches being taken in some parts of the United States (see, for example, the work of Shannon 2007).

The research

The Rose Review has already been mentioned but it is important to be clear about this document and its relevance for this book. This Review is actually named the Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading but rather than being independent in any sense, it was commissioned by the government in 2005. It is also interesting to note that, although ‘early reading’ features in the title, the Review focuses its attention almost entirely on phonics from its opening summary page where the second sentence talks about Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) finding phonics teaching to be a neglected or weak feature of teaching (with no accompanying reference) to the clear statement in the Aspects listed as the remit for the Review; here it states that the Review has examined and commented upon ‘what best practice should be expected in the teaching of early reading and synthetic phonics’ (p. 7).

Evidently there was no attempt made at ‘independence’ in this Review nor any pretence at it being less than partial towards a particular aspect of reading and a particular model of phonics instruction. The Review was commissioned and reported at a time when teacher professionalism had already been challenged, if not eroded, by the National Strategies (DfEE 1998) (see, for example, Frater 2000; Messenheimer and Packwood 2002; Bryan 2004) and teachers were therefore much more likely to succumb to persuasion from national governmental sources (Hall 2004). The Bullock Report cited earlier founded its conclusions and recommendations upon wide-ranging research evidence and famously called for teachers to gather greater insight into educational research (1975: 554). The Rose Review offered completely the reverse perspective:

While robust research findings must not be ignored, developers of national strategies, much less schools and settings, cannot always wait for the results of long-term research studies. They must take decisions, based on as much firm evidence as is available from a range of sources at the time, especially from replicable and sustainable best practice. (2006: 15)
The conclusions drawn from the Rose Review have now become embedded within the Early Years Foundation Stage, a statutory document since 2007 in England. It is not the task of this book to trawl once more through and challenge the basis and the findings of the Rose Review; this has been robustly achieved in a number of other texts (see, for example, Hynds 2007; Rosen 2006; UKLA, undated submission to the Rose Review). Instead, it is possible to identify a small number of research reports that indicate that children’s learning, and in particular learning about reading, is complex and often unsystematic. Here in England researchers have identified that children are intentional learners, curious and keen from birth to make sense of their world and to identify patterns around them to help in this sense-making (Hall 2006; David et al. 2003). Learning language, both spoken and written, is culturally framed before and outside of school and ‘best practice’ often involves recognising literacy practices in homes and communities and creating bridges between these experiences and new learning. Although many researchers agree that knowledge of the alphabetic principle is an essential component in learning to read, it is difficult to understand why it could be assumed that this should be learned in isolation, that is, separate from meaning-making or comprehension as it is sometimes referred to. In the US, Strauss and Altwerger analyse and report empirical research carried out there which absolutely refutes any suggestion that ‘intensive, systematic phonics programmes are ... superior to literature-based programmes in developing students’ decontextualised phonics skills or contextualised use of phonics cues’ (2007: 216). In fact, the research found that the higher the phonic scores of children (more than 100) in the study, the lower their ability to retell and, conversely, the best retellers had the lowest phonic scores. In fact, what many research studies seem to be reporting is that good readers pay the least attention to the phonemic level of print.

The politics

In 2006 and 2007, the UK government decided to act upon the Rose Review and ensure that its recommendations were enshrined in statutory documentation to enforce the ‘phonics first and fast’ approach to teaching reading. As we now know, the report and thus the ensuing compliant practice was heavily influenced by lobbyists, with critics such as Wray, Barrs and Meek Spencer worrying about from where the government’s information has emerged:

There’s no question that lobby groups such as the Reading Reform Foundation and the Dyslexia Association have had a disproportionate amount of influence on government educational policies. (Barrs and Meek Spencer 2007: 162)

Government ministers and Rose himself try to dress the report’s recommendations as based on a consensus derived from research. This is actually nonsense. What has actually happened is that pressure groups with axes to grind (and, actually teaching programmes to sell) have caught the ear of politicians and the Rose Review was never going to be a balanced interpretation of the evidence. (Wray 2006: 128)
Also, it seems that the government has been hugely successful in swaying public opinion toward a so-called common-sense approach, reducing reading to phoneme recognition and a functional level. The choices of whose information is to be trusted to inform government policy are interesting here and mirror the ways that similar decisions seem to have been made in the USA (for example, see Shannon 2007). But why would a government enshrine practice in law that is neither informed by high-quality research nor by educationalists, including teachers? From the government’s own statistics we know that in 2008 86 per cent of children achieved Level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 reading test; 83 per cent of boys achieved Level 4 or above and 89 per cent of girls. We also know that these statistics have barely changed between 2000 and 2008 (DCSF Standards). While it is important to note that this would mean that there may be 11 per cent of girls and 17 per cent of boys who did not achieve Level 4 or above, this does not necessarily mean that the same figures are unable to read. It may mean that they were unable to perform at that level on the day, with the particular kind of task, they may be reading at Level 3 or they may not have been present at school to be tested. It remains though that on the basis of such statistics – however they are read and interpreted and understood – all children in England are now being subjected to a ‘uni-dimensional approach to the teaching of a multi-dimensional process’ (Wray 2006: 128) and that the new approach is informed by psychologists and others with perhaps a vested interest beyond that of the success of all children learning to read.

It is interesting that now, a few years along the road since ‘phonics first and fast’ became the mantra from policy-makers and politicians and commercial publishers in England, a spokesman for the DCSF is reported as saying that ‘phonics was never intended as a quick fix’ (Scott 2010). Importantly, Clackmannanshire, which is the authority in Scotland upon which Professor Rose based much of his review recommendations, is reported as having the view that ‘synthetic phonics in itself was not a magic bullet’. ‘We would see it as an important component of learning to read, but it is not the only component. That’s the difference between Scotland and England’ (Scott 2010). In the same report, the Head of West Dunbartonshire Council (another heavily-cited local authority used by those supporting a synthetic phonics ‘one size fits all’ approach and informants to the Rose Review) claim that synthetic phonics was only ‘one strand in a 10-step programme which included extra time in the curriculum for reading, home support for parents and the fostering of a “literacy environment” for reading’. It is interesting also to note that in Scotland 18.5 per cent of children are reported to leave primary school ‘functionally illiterate’. To summarise, in the government’s review headed by Professor Rose, those areas of Scotland which were claimed as beacons shining light on the importance of synthetic phonics first, fast and only are not doing so and may never have done so. In addition, while Scotland was hailed as having ‘a tradition of teaching phonics which almost certainly continued over a period when it had fallen out of favour in England’ (Rose 2006: n223) it is also struggling with some persistent statistics which seem to reflect that there
remains a small group of children who are not succeeding in learning to read at even a basic level. Even the term ‘functional literacy’ is contentious. One definition of being functionally literate is ‘if [they] are able to engage effectively in all of those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in their culture or group’ (Barton 1994: 193). The assumption made in government statistics and discussions is that there is a homogenous literacy culture to which we all belong. We are now clear of course that this is not the case and that it is not possible to assume a single, common literacy standard but rather acknowledge the range of literacies in which children/people engage.

Most education scholars would acknowledge that phonics has a part to play in the support of children’s development as readers but the part it plays in learning to read and in reading is the focus of the debate. If the act of reading is defined very narrowly in simple measurable terms (see, for example, Stainthorpe 2006: 117) then the act of cracking the alphabetic code is often seen to be central to this. If, however, reading is acknowledged as being a complex process ‘based on several different kinds of knowledge, and their learning to read was a matter of learning to draw on all these sources of information in the act of reading’ (Barrs and Meek Spencer 2007: 151) then simply providing children with phoneme recognition skills is in danger of disadvantaging children, misleading them as to the complexity of the English language and disaffecting children at the earliest stages who will not see the advantage of learning sounds. Far from Stainthorpe’s claim that ‘if they are taught the letter–sound correspondence and how to blend sounds into words, they are armed with a strategy for reading words independently … if children have this knowledge they have a necessary tool for developing fluent word reading’ (2006: 117), we would claim that such narrow teaching disarms children, misleads them about how the English language is represented symbolically and importantly misdirects them about the very nature of reading. This book is founded on the belief that by ‘putting children’s meaning-making at the heart of their learning’ (Meek Spencer 2007: 164) and acknowledging the volitional nature of learning – and particularly literacy learning – and the efficacy of social constructivist approaches (Hall 2006), children will be more closely engaged with their learning, motivated to learn and supported by teachers who not only understand them as learners but also understand the nature of reading and how children learn to read.

The practice

Children are different and may learn differently. Further, children in any one class will arguably have had a diverse range of early experiences in literacy, phonological support and letter/sound introductions. While most teachers are aware of this, many still engage in practices that they themselves were familiar with as children, particularly now that the government, via Professor Rose, the National Strategies and the Early Years Foundation Stage, has imposed a one-size-fits-all programme for teachers to follow (Primary National
Strategy 2007). Some of us, however, have real teachers’ anecdotes to help our understanding and in support of empirical research. One colleague whooped for joy as she came into the staffroom at lunchtime, full of joy at the fact that one child had ‘cracked it’ – not with phonic programmes, nor with phonic games, nor with phonically regular texts (the ‘decodable books’ referred to in the Rose Review which promotes so-called ‘quick wins’ (n82)) – but with Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain (Aardema 1986). This is a story based on an African legend with strong rhyme and a strong pattern to help developing readers. Listen to just one part of this engaging text:

These are the cows, all hungry and dry,
Who mooed for the rain to fall from the sky;
To green-up the grass, all brown and dead,
That needed the rain from the cloud overhead –
The big black cloud, all heavy with rain,
That shadowed the ground on Kapiti Plain.

In this, there are few phonically regular worlds (e.g. ‘big’) but having heard the story, enjoyed it, shared it with others, drawn pictures about it, enjoyed role play from it, played with it – on this day, this five-year-old boy read it with accuracy, fluency, understanding, enjoyment and pride. What must he be learning from his persistence with this text in relation to the content, the richness of the vocabulary, the tune on the page, as well as the absolute sense of achievement in orchestrating the decoding of print and clear comprehension of the content? This text, like all good books, opened another world to him and motivated him towards new reading experiences and other worlds. Compare this with:

The sheep is shut in the pen. The grass is green. The sun shines. We will
Let the sheep out now. We will grow if the sun shines. The sun is hot today.
I have lost my shoe in the steep street. It had a crown on it. I will get it.

(SND, c. 1920)

It is this on this kind of antiquated meaningless text that new ‘decodable’ books are now being based (see, for example, the new Floppy’s Phonics from the Oxford Reading Tree and Bob Bug from the new Songbirds phonics titles from ORT). Such texts are a far cry from the meaning-packed Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain, with all its subdued references and the possibility of connections to be made and considered. The tune of its text of course will be familiar to young children from timeless nursery rhymes and the memorable, ‘This is the House that Jack Built’. I can hear critics lining up to decry this as anecdotal and therefore irrelevant in a research argument. My point is that the teaching world is packed full of such anecdotes – just ask teachers. Meek of course
constructed the seminal work *How Texts Teach What Readers Learn* (1988) decades ago in the knowledge that it is not teachers alone or programmes that make a difference but the human connection between reader and text and teacher that consistently provides the reading lesson.

What seems to be important to remember is that phonics is not an end in itself, whether it be synthetic or any other kind of phonics. Further, reading is also not always an end in itself but often a beginning, a pathway to other worlds, other learning and affirmation or challenge to our own worlds. Neither can phonics be allowed to be the beginning of learning to read. Many children receive reading lessons long before starting school in the form of shared texts that are written, told or read, and it has been estimated that some children may have received 6,000 stories before starting school (Barton 1994). Thankfully, legislation cannot impinge on these reading lessons. These children will have a head start when they begin school with their knowledge of how stories work, patterns and tunes in stories, the relationship between illustration and print as well as some clear information about print drawn from reading and re-reading favourite tales. The children with this kind of rich early literacy experience (Gououch 2007) will mostly be able to withstand reductionist reading tuition when they start school, though some may become disaffected. Those children, however, who have not had the benefit of mediated early experiences in a range of literacy and reading practices before they start school in this current era of prescriptive practice will find their first reading lessons to be the recounting of sounds rather than the joy of tuning into meaning in encounters with high-quality books and stories.

It is easy to make young children recount sounds, to chant together, to take part in phonics games, to copy letters on ‘sound’ worksheets. Young children are mostly compliant and eager to please. We are though, as their reading teachers, completely unable to make children form connections, to make them understand, to make them learn to read. As Hall makes clear, ‘accomplished reading teachers … see their learners as intentional beings and … see learning itself as a volitional process’ (2006: 20). We cannot make children learn to read. We can, however, entice them, make reading a pleasurable experience, invite them into story worlds, create affective opportunities for children to participate in reading, provide space and resources for children to play with stories, join in with them in playing with the sounds of the stories, help them to find tunes and patterns in print, immerse them in the pleasurable sounds of our language – delicious onomatopoeic and alliterative examples are frequently found in good picture fiction (see, for example, *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt* and *Mr Gumpy’s Motor Car*). And within these writing, talking, listening and reading experiences we can also help children to make sense of the alphabetic code.

Using phonics as a core method to teach reading is seductive as it appears simple and efficient, with letters and sounds to be ticked off by teachers when they have been memorised. In reality, reading is not simple and neither is learning sounds in our language (Goswami 2007; Goswami and Bryant 1990),
and our preoccupation with efficiency and quick wins in reading is in contrast with the efficacy of the teaching in other nations and cultures where children at the age of four and five are not at school receiving reading instruction but are playing at home or in kindergartens. The results of this sound beginning to learning are clearly evident in international statistics (see Mullis et al. 2006).

Quick wins and efficiency, systematic approaches and incremental learning belong to the language of politics where short-term goals are important and easily measurable outcomes are the basis of popular headlines and soundbites. In classrooms, children make life slightly more complex as their learning progress is often messy rather than systematically secure and learning happens over time rather than as a single event as children make connections with prior learning, often outside of school, and across contexts and subject barriers.

Although it has been claimed that when children learn to read the ‘language of written texts is accessed via the eyes rather than the ears’ (Rose 2006: appendix, n62), those of us working with children as teachers and parents, rather than laboratory scientists, know that this simple explanation is not the case. Children become attuned to texts; they learn the tunes and language of texts which is why multi-sensory approaches are often successful as discussed above. In addition, we also know from the work of neuroscience and now neuroimaging that brain activity during reading occurs in different brain regions with connections being made across those regions as we both decode and experience words (Price 2000). This makes the idea of children using only their eyes rather than their ears to access print somewhat oversimplistic.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have introduced the context for this new book in a number of ways. We have stated our aim – which is to provide a research-informed text for teachers which will also include ideas to connect theory with their practice. We have stated our view that the politics and policy context for the move towards synthetic phonics only practice is in danger of leading towards a damaging reductionist approach to the teaching of reading, described by Meek as ‘a thinner gruel of educational nourishment’ (1987: viii) in its attempts to construct reading as simply being able ‘to come to terms with the alphabetic principles if they are to learn to read and write’ (Rose 2006: 16). We have begun to construct reading in this chapter as a complex, social and cultural activity, with lessons often learned in the first instance in multi-dimensional family and outside-school contexts and from a range of texts, including print texts. We have begun in this chapter to also construct learning as being a broader and more sophisticated activity than simply listening to instruction, and learners as volitional and sophisticated themselves in their abilities to draw information from a range of sources in a relatively short space of time and from a range of places in order to become readers at varying developmental stages by the time they make their first school encounters with literacy.
Finally...

In this book we are writing for teachers who are not satisfied with, as Stannard describes it, ‘the Stainthorpe and Stuart’ model (Stannard 2006: 121) but are looking instead for alternatives. Teachers generally are rather conservative and very compliant but above all teachers work hard as they seek to help children to learn, and hopefully this book will help them to achieve this objective. In Chapter 2, ‘Critical contexts’, the theoretical background to this book is fully and critically reviewed and includes examination of the Rose Review as well as the Early Years Foundation Stage. Chapter 3 is a discussion of ‘The role of the teacher’. In this chapter, knowledge for teaching and the theoretical arguments relating to how teachers teach is illustrated by practical suggestions on how connections can be forged between theory and practice in principled classroom activities. In Chapter 4, ‘Knowledge for reading’, the knowledge required by children to ensure their development as readers is outlined and discussed. In this chapter, what children need to know, experience and understand is carefully presented with ways to embed important alphabetic information into real and meaningful activities and texts. An effective environment for reading is proposed in Chapter 5, ‘Environments for reading’, with ideas about what a print-rich environment could actually look like presented in practical terms. To follow this, in Chapter 6, ‘Resources for reading’, the kinds of resources that children need in order to experience a rich literacy curriculum and the kinds of high-quality texts required is described with the emphasis clearly on children’s literature. ‘Reading routines’ is the focus of Chapter 7, in which we argue that there are a range of regular activities that are absolutely essential to support children’s reading development. ‘Talk, reading and writing’, in Chapter 8 makes links between classroom activities involving talk, reading and writing and we suggest that the three modes of language are closely interconnected in effective literacy classrooms. In Chapter 9, ‘Assessment of reading’, we draw together ideas for creative and critical pedagogy and also address the important issue of assessment and how children’s reading can most usefully be described and recorded. A summary is offered in Chapter 10, ‘Conclusions: principles and practice’, and here we present what we believe to be ‘the non-negotiable principles and elements of effective practice in literacy in primary education’. We claim in this final chapter that the approaches recommended and illustrated in this book will lift children’s experience of learning to read and to be literate beyond contemporary politically and commercially motivated emphases which threaten to limit professional creativity and integrity.

Further reading
