of literacy, Colin Harrison and Mary Bailey contribute to the educational debate in their discussions on the development of comprehension and writing respectively. Harrison sheds light on the new emphases that have emerged in the last decade, which not only offer clarity as to the skills encompassed within the term ‘comprehension’ but also raise important issues connected with reader response and the socio-cultural nature of reading. Bailey suggests that in order to develop their pupils’ ability to write fluently, teachers need to have a sound conceptual grasp of the complexity of the process. This is an important issue, close to my own heart, that teachers ignore at their peril.

Part 2, ‘What counts as evidence?’ offers various interpretations of assessment results and different perspectives on what can accurately inform a personal judgement on individual and national standards of attainment in literacy. Part 3, focusing on ways of developing classroom practice, has interesting contributions from the USA and Australia. Addressing the issue of reading reform, Elfrieda Hiebert critiques the instructional (textbook) programmes, which are the most favoured vehicle for literacy teaching in the United States, particularly in the elementary grades. Hiebert questions why these programmes are not a serious focus for research into the effective teaching of literacy.

The emphasis of Raising Standards in Literacy was appropriate for 1999 when, one year into the National Literacy Strategy, concern in England over levels of attainment was at fever pitch. It was a book of its time. In 2003 and with significantly improved national assessment scores in England, consideration is now being directed more towards why high standards in literacy are crucial both to the individual and society. What is all this effective reading and writing for? What kind of reader should an educational system be aiming to develop? And what texts do they want and need to read? It is interesting that the contributors to this book from the USA, Australia and Canada address these challenging questions more thoughtfully. In particular, Luke and Carrington’s chapter, ‘Globalisation, literacy, curriculum practice’, is truly insightful and gets to the heart of these issues. These authors argue for a ‘critical literacy’ that gives pupils access to ‘economies, cultures and places past, present and future’. They suggest that sufficient emphasis has perhaps now been given to the processes and methods of literacy acquisition, and that the teaching profession must move on to teaching children how to use literacy to learn and to developing their capital through involvement with both print and digital media. Pupils need to ‘manage the information flows of images, representation and texts that constitute identity and ideology, and, finally, to engage with other cultures and bodies across time and space’ (p. 247) in order to be prepared for the world they inhabit.

In conclusion, my thinking in 2003 now aligns with the views of Purcell-Gates and Bailey that we cannot promote a ‘simple view’ of either reading or writing, and I offer the quotation from Flower (cited by Bailey, p. 35): ‘Under the pressures of outside evaluation and the exigencies of instruction, many administrators and teachers opt for limited literacies, designating some feature (whether it is correctness, self-expression or a disciplinary practice like literary analysis) as basic and turning it into the signifier and test of literacy. Complexity and dialectic are hard to sell.’

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This book presents a collection of papers from five contributors whose backgrounds are in cognitive psychology, language development, assessment and evaluation and teacher education, and whose focus is on ‘balance’ in curriculum decision-making. According to the editor, the collection will be helpful in clarifying ‘what it is we mean when we speak, or argue, about phonics’, and discusses issues such as ‘what constitutes appropriate research design, how research findings relate to the relevant body of research, the range of learners, language learning, teaching aims and how practitioners should proceed’. All the contributors agree that explicit teaching of phonemic awareness should form only part of...
a general reading programme, which must be meaning-led. However, while offering a range of perspectives (which does not claim to be comprehensive), this collection of papers may not offer the clarity or balance that practitioners are hoping to find.

The first three papers ‘address the issues of why and how phonics should be taught and what a broad and balanced phonics curriculum based in well thought out theory looks like in practice’. It is proposed that this would be of particular interest to literacy coordinators, consultants and senior managers in schools who are concerned with drawing up policies, as well as students in initial training.

In his chapter, Bielby proposes that ‘phonics teaching is most effective when embedded in the context of reading for meaning, for example during shared reading’, and suggests that a balanced phonics teaching strategy will include both ‘synthetic’ and ‘analytic’ approaches, which he suggests are complementary. ‘Synthetic’ phonics emphasises the importance of direct instruction in phoneme segmentation and blending, and knowledge of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs). ‘Analytic’ phonics places more initial emphasis on analysis at the onset-rime level, and argues that phonics teaching should take place incidentally in the context of reading meaningful text. Bielby’s perspective is that phonics is most effective when embedded in the context of reading for meaning and, although he advocates a balanced approach that includes analytic and synthetic phonics, his less than favourable appraisal of synthetic phonics reveals some misapprehensions of the approach, e.g. that it ‘simply teaches that /cuh-a-tuh/ says “cat”’.

Dombey makes the case for the necessity of phonics knowledge, pointing out that competence in systematic word recognition frees children’s attention to focus on what the words say. She draws on wide-ranging knowledge of children’s literacy acquisition to discuss why children need to be taught rather than infer the phonic system for themselves. The most persuasive argument for ‘teaching’ phonics, she concludes, is that we cannot afford to invest the vast amount of time required to put children in a position to learn all the complexities of our spelling system inferentially. Having said that, Dombey is short on specifics, arguing that children should not be taught phonics as if English was like other languages that use ‘our’ alphabet, like Italian. She proposes that, given the many irregularities and inconsistencies in the pronunciation of written English and the problem of regional pronunciations, rime units provide a more reliable guide to pronunciation than grapheme-phoneme correspondences. She concludes that children ‘need to be taught in ways that recognise, capitalise on, stimulate and guide, their evolving capacity to analyse and synthesise both the spoken and written word initially at the level of onset and rime and later on at the level of the phoneme’. Implicit in Dombey’s proposed structured order for the introduction of phonics is a fear that giving children an early introduction to GPCs and the synthetic phonics techniques of blending and segmenting words out of context would mislead them into anticipating more regularity than exists in English. However, as Share (1995) pointed out, once children acquire knowledge of letter/sound correspondences together with phoneme blending and segmenting techniques, a self-teaching mechanism is triggered, scaffolding the learning process as irregular words are encountered and remembered simply because they are ‘tricky’. In my view, a truly balanced approach would be to build a foundation with synthetic phonics and word games disassociated from meaningful text, alongside introducing children to storybooks and analysis of the text as appropriate.

Medwell presents results from a study of 300 effective teachers, selected on the basis that their classes had made more than expected progress and their colleagues also recognised them as ‘effective’. Although these teachers claimed that they thought phonics was important, it was not a priority and was often taught in the context of reading ‘big books’. In a multiple-choice questionnaire, the effective teachers placed more value on the meaning of the text although they included letter-sound correspondences in discussions about the stories. Observations of what 26 of the teachers actually did in their classrooms frequently failed to support the questionnaire data. Neither the effective teachers nor a comparison group of teachers scored well on a word segmentation task, with less than half of each group able to segment words correctly into onset and rimes and very few able to segment words correctly into phonemes. The effective teachers could communicate and understand the needs of their pupils, although they could not identify a strategy or an order of teaching children to read.

The final two papers focus on the lively debate concerning the key elements that are salient to children as they begin to encounter
written language. Goswami regrets the polarisation that has developed between ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’ phonics, and in particular the way in which naturally developing phonological awareness of onsets and rimes is included under the ‘analytic’ label and contrasted with phoneme awareness-based GPC phonics teaching under the ‘synthetic’ label. Goswami feels this totally misrepresents what onset-rime research offers the teacher of beginning readers. Whilst emphasising the need for a balanced approach, Goswami passionately defends and supports with evidence the value of her own research claiming that phonological awareness and onset-rime build on developmental processes and have been fundamentally misunderstood. Yet, to this reader, she herself seems to misunderstand the instructional approach of synthetic phonics, which makes no claim to capitalise on developmental processes, but rather posits that phoneme awareness is not a developmental skill but is nevertheless necessary to reading a phonemically based script and therefore needs to be taught as a procedural skill.

Goswami calls for more rigorous research that asks the right questions, for example, a straight comparison between one phonics method and another, rather than comparing any single method to the NLS, which can suffer from ‘Hawthorne effects’.

Lastly, Brooks makes no claim to be impartial and openly declares that he is supporting a very particular perspective with a particular synthetic phonics programme in mind. He then presents a reasonably balanced analysis of synthetic and analytic phonics approaches with a slight misrepresentation of analytic phonics, in that he suggests it relies exclusively on implicit learning. He concludes that traditional synthetic phonics is simply a finer-grained version of analytic phonics requiring phonemic rather than phonological analysis. After listing some recent synthetic phonics programmes, he highlights POPAT as a possible way forward. In this programme, children first identify which of three pictures represents a spoken sound. They then associate the sound-pictures with initial and final consonants in a paired-associate learning phase. Subsequently, graphemes are paired with learnt phonemes and words can be translated between spoken and written language. He suggests that once children are comfortable with regular letter-sound correspondences they can be introduced to high frequency irregular words that they will need in their sight vocabulary. Again, I would suggest that a truly balanced perspective would recognise that children will be looking at storybooks throughout this phoneme-learning phase and that, where appropriate, salient aspects of the words in the text can be analytically appraised both spontaneously and with support from a parent/teacher.

How successful is this collection of papers in presenting a balanced view of the role of phonics in the acquisition of reading? Only Brooks admits to being biased towards a particular perspective on literacy acquisition and presents a reasoned exposition of his support for a particular synthetic phonics approach. Goswami regrets the polarisation of the synthetic and analytic approaches and advocates balance, whilst fiercely supporting her own perspective based on many years of research into phonological awareness and onset-rime and their crucial role in reading development. Bielby proposes balance but implicitly supports an analytic approach and Dombey suggests an explicit, analytic approach starting with the introduction of onset-rime and moving on to GPCs. Medwell surveys ‘effective teachers’ looking for insights into best practice and finds that ‘effective teachers’ are not very knowledgeable about either onset-rime or phonemes but work largely with ‘Big Books’ and meaningful text, and have an understanding of children’s needs. Synthetic phonics was misrepresented and misunderstood by advocates of the analytic approach and the analytic approach was misrepresented by the only advocate of the synthetic approach as relying wholly on children’s implicit awareness. For classroom practitioners and trainees, is this the reality of current research?

Reference


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