

Rethinking Learning to Read

By

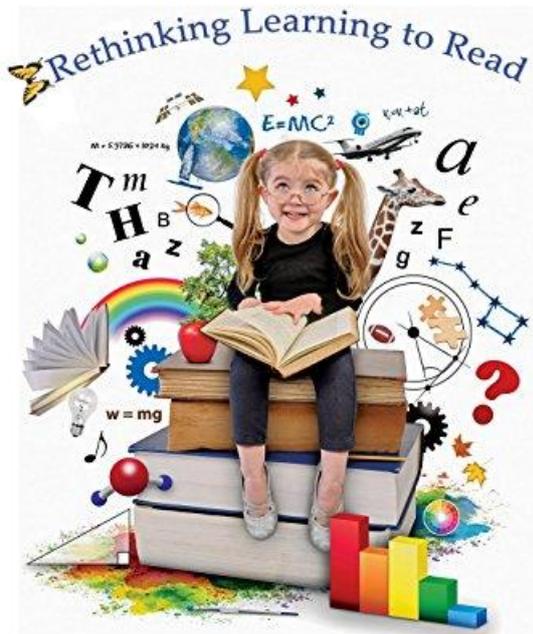
Harriet Pattison

Book Review

By

Emma Marie Forde, July 2016.

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Foreword by Alan Thomas

I have been looking forward to reading Harriet Pattison's book 'Rethinking Learning to Read' since I heard it was being published. As a home educating parent with two daughters Lily ages 9 years and Rosa 5 years, it has been a privilege observing our children learning to read and helping to facilitate and support them in that process, reading to them, answering questions and typing for them as and when needed.

Our older daughter has recently learned to read and although I feel that this has been a gradual process that has taken place over a period of many years it seems to have come together coherently over the last 6 months to a year, largely motivated by her desire to understand what was happening on [Minecraft](#) chat and communicate with other players online. Lily was very excited about this and felt empowered having learned to read of her own volition and in a way that

suit her.

'Rethinking Learning to Read' opens up new conversations about learning to read, inviting us to think about reading in different ways and challenging some of the normative assumptions we may have come to hold about reading and learning more generally. It has been fascinating to read the rich and diverse range of accounts of

home educating children learning to read presented in the book along with the author's philosophical reflections on the implications of these experiences.

The study

The book is based on Pattison's PhD research which explores how children learn to read outside of school. Although there has been a great deal of research carried out related to mainstream school based learning populations, only a small number of studies have researched reading away from school. This is the first major study to date to explore this area and draws on the experiences of 311 families with a total of 400 children who took part in an in-depth online survey which was set up by Harriet Pattison and Alan Thomas in 2009. The research drew families from the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand and Mainland Europe. The participating families adopted a range of approaches to learning and home education: some families were more structured in their approaches, while other families favoured autonomous and radical unschooling approaches and others an eclectic mix. Parents reported that their children were learning to read in a diversity of ways and accounts differed not only between families but also within families; no two children learned in exactly the same way. What was apparent was that each child followed a unique learning trajectory, which could be quite different from that found in normative studies.

Conceptualising and reflecting on metaphors of acquisition and participation: what is reading?

'Rethinking Learning to Read' invites us to take a step back to consider 'what is reading?' and what are the theories and metaphors we are drawing on to make sense of it? This has important implications for how we support our children in learning to read – as it influences whether we believe it is necessary to follow a particular method, to 'teach' our children or whether we believe that they can learn to read naturally with our facilitation and support.

In the book Pattison draws an important distinction between the metaphors of acquisition and participation first identified by Sfard (1998). The metaphor of acquisition involves thinking about learning to read as a cognitive skill that can be acquired sequentially while participation focuses on the child's role as an important member of a social and relational network and an active participant in a wider literate community. To me this latter metaphor is an exciting and useful way of thinking which may be more able to account for the diversity of accounts of learning to read that were found in the sample. It also interests me as a clinical psychologist as it opens up conversations about the emotional, relational and psychological processes involved in learning to read and reflects on aspects of identity involved in becoming a reader and being part of a wider community. In my experience accounts

based on the individual acquisition of cognitive skills do not tend to focus on these issues and the many diverse meanings and implications learning to read has for the child and the social processes involved.

Normative assumptions about reading and the use of phonic based approaches

The book explores the relevant background research which has been undertaken by educationalists and researchers. One of the dominant approaches which forms much of our thinking about reading is phonics. It draws heavily on the metaphor of acquisition and sees learning as the development of an individual cognitive skill which can be broken down into stages and learned in a sequential process. This mainstream view of reading has become so ubiquitous in our thinking and how we talk about reading that we forget it is a metaphor. It is this type of approach that much of mainstream research into reading has been based and which provides many of the normative standards we accept, such as viewing reading as a process of decoding text, assuming children need to be taught to read and at what age they will learn, along with presuming that reading skills can be meaningfully assessed.

What are the alternatives?

Although this approach is popular, it has been criticised and has elicited some controversy. There are alternatives such as whole word learning based approaches (I learned this way myself as a child reading 'Peter and Jane' books with my mum before I started school). However, in mainstream discourse these approaches have become marginalised and it is interesting to think about the alternatives as presented in *Rethinking Learning to Read*. As an adult I had been influenced by [John Holt's](#) (1991; 1995) observations of children learning to read without needing to be 'taught'. Holt explained how children could be in fact be damaged by being coerced and pressured to read in a school system which was unable to accommodate and respond to the child's individual preferences and needs. These ideas along with unschooling philosophy that I had accessed mainly via online forums and sites such as [sandraddodd.com](#) and [Always Learning](#) led me to trust that our children would learn to read in their own time with our support in ways that suited them. Peter Gray has also written some interesting accounts of [unschoolers learning to read](#).

What approaches did home educating parents draw on?

Parents in the sample drew on a diversity of approaches and practices when supporting their children in learning to read. Perhaps unsurprisingly parents' views in the sample were heavily influenced by phonics. However, what was significant was that not all families used phonics based methods, some were openly critical of it

and some of the children did not respond well and resisted a phonics based approach. Families shared: *“No phonics, no flash cards, no traditional teaching methods were used in our home – for reading or anything else”* and *“Phonics doesn’t suit every child – as a very strong visual learner my daughter finds the individual sounds in words meaningless ... she hears words as a single sound.”*

Some families drew on whole word learning approaches, some an eclectic mix, while others acknowledged the limitations of using methods and a number preferred to use no methods at all because this is what they felt was the best approach for their particular child and that they would learn to read naturally by engaging in everyday life. *“Living a life style of literacy”*; *“Living life in a world where words are everywhere”* and *“Given time and exposure children will learn to read and will enjoy it.”*

Some children also developed their own methods which drew on word recognition, memorisation and guessing, or together with a parent they co-created a unique approach which suited them. It was apparent that what suited one child may not suit another and this included children within the same family, one parent said: *“There is not a “one-size-fits-all” magic formula”* and another family: *“often requiring different resources to be available at different times rather than following a single ‘method’ throughout.”*

Away from phonics families were actively and pragmatically choosing methods and approaches with the best fit for the child and they were using those methods in ways that were facilitative of their relationships, the child’s learning and their emotional well-being. In taking this open and flexible approach families were placing the child at the centre of the learning experience. For example, a parent said *“Go with what works for that particular child”* and another *“The method is not important; the important [thing] is that the child likes it.”*

The sample was characterised by a diversity of accounts, there was no one singular approach that could be used to describe the theoretical positions adopted by this group of parents. In fact, as a home educating parent and also as a researcher Pattison explains that it is not necessary for a parent to hold an understanding of what reading is or how reading happens for it is precisely this “not knowing”, questioning and flexible state of mind that enables a parent to be reflexive and responsive to their child, putting the relationship first and re-thinking what reading actually is.

“There was no consensus on what reading might be. Home educators hold a variety of opinions- what is helpful is to acknowledge that there are more than one way of seeing and more than one way of approaching the meaning of the written word, but however we choose to do so, there will be important consequences for how we expect children to learn to read (Pattison, 2016).”

Parental attitude

What was particularly interesting was that what united parents across the sample, even those parents who had adopted phonics based approaches was their ability to be flexible and questioning of whatever type of approach or method they were using and to be open and guided by their child's motivations and preferences. Parents' critique of theory and method usually arose as a direct result of their child's responses and reactions to it rather than as a result of philosophical inquiry. Pattison points out that these are important qualities for a parent to have when supporting a child who is learning to read and also when reflecting critically and philosophically about the nature of reading itself:

" [A] flexible attitude toward phonics represents an important shift in thinking about learning to read. Rather than thinking about the nature of reading, parents are thinking about the nature of their children as learners approaching reading. It is a change with important implications for the question, "what is reading" On a practical level it puts the individual child at the centre of what it means to learn to read and that individuality becomes the focus for understanding learning. On a theoretical level that children may learn to read in different ways means that a universal definition of reading can no longer be predicated on a theory of reading pedagogy." (Pattison, 2016)

How did parents support their child learning to read?

Whatever the methodological and theoretical approaches taken by parents in the sample, they supported their child learning to read in three main dynamic and evolving ways

- 1) Reading aloud;
- 2) conversation and
- 3) Games, toys, computers.

What was fascinating here was that each category represented a multiplicity of practices and activities which held different meanings for each parent-child dyad and were impacted upon by the types of relationships they developed over time. So on the surface an activity might appear to be alike but the narrative accounts reflected quite different meanings and motivations. Reading aloud meant different things for different families and for each unique parent/child and sibling relationship. How children responded was also very different: some children wanting to be read to frequently, whilst other children not wanting to be read to at all. What seemed to be important was that the child was able to influence and control how they engaged with the options and activities available to them. It was wonderful to read about the varied, rich and meaningful relationships, play and conversations between parents and children that had developed over time.

No one set of practices or activities together constituted a “core essence” of what was necessary to learn to read. What was apparent was the dynamic interactions between parent and child and the wider community. The child quite clearly influencing the course of learning and reacting differently to the environment that is offered to them and shaping it in ways that suit them. Likewise, each parent will develop a unique relationship with each child and will respond to them differently. Gabor Mate explains in the video why no two children have the same parents due to the parent’s different emotional reaction to each child. Pattison draws our attention to open systems, chaos and complexity theories (often drawn on family therapy) as a useful way of thinking about how these dynamic influences and interactions might help shape our understanding of how our children are learning to read.