Harriet Pattison *Rethinking Learning to Read*, Educational Heretics Press (2016), 212 pp., £11.99

Review by Hazel Clawley

This important book was launched at the recent Alternative Education Futures conference organised by CPE-PEN. It is a 'major study of how children learn to read outside an institutional setting' (Dr Alan Thomas, in the book's Foreword). Most of us have, for the past 150 years, been taught to read in school by whatever method was currently fashionable amongst educational pundits. For me, learning to read in the mid-1940s, it was a 'phonics' approach – though, as I recall, without the rigidity of current practice. My infant school in Cleethorpes presented me with a book full of glossy coloured pictures (pre-war, obviously), with a green, wriggly snake for the sound of the letter 's', and a boy in pyjamas stretching his arms above his head in a yawn for the sound 'y'. The book was arranged alphabetically, and I can recall the later pictures most clearly, because I couldn't wait for the class's slow progress through the early pages, and dashed to the end to crack as much of the code as possible in school time (books could not be taken home) so I could read for myself *Alice in Wonderland*, which my mother and I were sharing as a bedtime story. Being given a 'phonics' toolkit, and then being free to use it in my own way, was a small miracle for me. But it certainly didn't work as well for all my classmates – and therein lies one of the main themes recurring throughout this well-researched study: all children are different, and what works brilliantly for one may not work at all for another, and may even be counterproductive or damaging.

The study is based on a website questionnaire inviting home-educating parents to respond to questions about how their children had learned to read: 311 questionnaires were completed, representing 400 children. The researcher is aware of the danger of small-sample studies being rejected by decision-making government bodies (as with the Badman Review of 2009). While accepting that the sample does not necessarily represent the whole, she offers the work as 'a qualitative and exploratory account through which to challenge assumptions and offer new insights' (p.26).

The book looks firstly at different understandings of learning, comparing in particular two metaphors, that of acquisition and that of participation. Both metaphors were used by home educators in responses: 'He acquired the skills…'; 'Everyone else was doing it, they wanted to do it too…'. Pattison notes that the acquisition metaphor is dominant in our society, but suggests that the participation metaphor 'can be profitably drawn on in rethinking reading' (p.39).

So what is reading anyway? This is the question at the head of chapter three. (I used to think the answer to this was obvious, until faced with the case of the blind John Milton and his daughter. She would 'read' aloud to him from Latin texts that she didn't understand, but he did. So who was doing the reading?) Pattison explores the question through her

respondents' replies: some   treated reading as a phonetic system ('…we must learn the phonetic code…'); some as whole-word recognition ('Reading books the child enjoyed to them, and then first letting the child read the words they could to start and later on reading more and bigger words until they could read the whole story themselves'); and some as a relationship with print ('Living life in a world where words are everywhere'). She touches on methods that don't work ('…many of the methods for teaching kids to read may take the fun out of reading and then kids give up'); on families who eschew any kind of method; on children devising their own method; on memorising; and on silent reading – and the emphasis in school on reading aloud which causes stress to some children.

How do home-educated children learn to read without teachers? Very well, it seems! Of course, some home-educating parents *are* qualified teachers, but even those who are teachers don't always teach their children to read. Of the 311 parents responding, 91 claimed that they had taught their child to read, 133 said that they had not (though most of their children *had* learned to read nevertheless), and 87 took issue with the question itself. Many of the responses to the question about direct teaching led the researcher to speak of 'reading as cultural participation' (p.73): 'The whole family facilitated her to teach herself'; 'She watches us read'; 'I always remember my daughter picking up very quickly on the big bright lights of the supermarket names!'; 'I feel there is no need to teach it, only to perhaps encourage a love of reading'. As Pattison says: 'The challenges to "teaching", both the word itself and the theory behind it, permeate the questionnaire responses and push deeply and widely into a core concept of education' (p.94) – in particular questioning transmission models of learning.

What do families do to enable their children to become readers? This is one of the most fascinating sections of the book. Some answers in brief: sharing books through reading aloud (or not!); talking; answering children's questions; conversation; games, toys, computers; children's play and other interests; television (or, indeed, the absence of television!). What comes over above all is that there is no one magic formula to produce children who enjoy reading, no 'essential core that that all children must have'; rather, 'there are multiple possibilities and combinations as opposed to narrow necessities' (p.116).

Learning to read doesn't always follow a linear, upward curve. Sometimes it progresses by fits and starts, according to home-educators' evidence. And sometimes it traces a *downward* curve. Readers can move from 'hard' words and phrases to 'easy' ones, if 'easy' means short words that follow the rules of phonics (like 'red') and 'hard' means longer words that buck those rules (like 'conscious'). Everything depends on the child's interests, and which words are meaningful to them. (I'm reminded of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's 1963 classic *Teacher*, in which her Maori beginner-readers chose their own special words (of love or fear) to write large on cards and carry with them. Many chose 'skellington' [sic], their own 'bogey-man' word, and soon learned to read and write such powerful symbols.)

Parents within the sample reported that their children learned to read anywhere between the ages of 18 months and 16 years. Many parents were unsure exactly when their child had started reading. Most claimed that once their child had decided to read, at whatever age, they learned very quickly: 'As he was 6 years old, one Sunday morning, he called "Mama, I am at page 61!"'; 'At 10 I saw her holding a book and I asked what it was. She said it was the book she'd read over the weekend. And that was that. She could read.' 'Late reading', considered such a problem within the formal education system, is not a problem for these children. 'At home a child who is not reading at 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 or older may become a proficient reader on a par with age expected norms within months' (p.138).

All children are different. As I have already mentioned, this is one of the main themes of this book. Yet 'children in school do not have a choice about reading instruction. Nor for that matter do schools or teachers' (p.145). At home things are different: 'Learning to read is a very personal adventure and each person comes to it differently at different times and for different reasons and in different ways'; 'Back off and let the child lead'; 'Emotional readiness to read is more important than his or her intellectual readiness'. This personalised approach to learning was all the more important to those parents whose children had been removed from an unhappy school situation, especially those who had been unjustifiably labelled as having special educational needs, or who felt their special needs were not being catered for by the school system: 'I have found that the creative/spatial/technical child (often a boy) learns to read at a later age. In school he/she may be labelled "dyslexic"' (Mother of three children who learned to read aged between 10 and 12). Children's own motivation was key to learning to read, whether it was a 'desire to join in the cultural world of those round them' (p.175), or the need to read a specific text for a particular purpose: 'We started playing World of Warcraft and he found his reason' (p.178).

The overriding impression left by this book is of how many ways there are to learn to read, how quickly it can happen once a child needs and wants to learn and how the age at which a child learns is of little or no consequence. Contrast the school approach, where only one highly prescriptive method is on offer, where the process is deemed to take a number of years, and where precise reading 'targets' are specified for each age.

Unlike most academic research studies, this book does not end with neat conclusions. Instead, Pattison suggests a possible new way to understand how children learn to read, through applying the insights of complexity theory. (This is an offshoot of chaos theory, which I first came across in the late 1980s when as a home-educating parent I was introduced by my son to the Mandelbrot Set which he was investigating via our primitive home computer.) This contrasts with the cause-and-effect logic which has dominated the sciences and social sciences since their inception, and which lies behind much of the 'cognitive skills' approach to reading, where each prescribed sub-skill must be acquired in a set order for the 'result' of reading to follow. The application of complexity theory to reading research is a new idea (for details of the argument, see pp. 187-92); yet, as Pattison

says: 'some similar strands of thinking are discernible in some of the things which parents said'. For example: 'It was only after the younger child was reading fluently that I realized that I'd neglected to first teach her the alphabet song ... she did eventually learn the alphabet song (although not very well) ... "knowing the alphabet" is clearly not an essential "pre-reading skill"!'

There is much in this book to encourage and support home-educating families. More importantly, the findings need to be taken seriously by government and by their curriculum advisers. Will this happen? At the same conference that saw the launch of this book, I attended a session by Dr Ian Cunningham, in which, as a scientist, he bemoaned the lack of evidence-based practice in our education system as a whole. So it may take some time.

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