

---

# Eight Years of *Reading*: an editorial retrospective

---

The final issue in this 33rd volume of *Reading* is also the last for which I shall be responsible as editor. This seems like a good time to look back over the issues which have caused debate in literacy over the eight years during which I have edited this journal, eight years which have witnessed more controversy than any other similar period I can remember, but also which have seen major changes in our thinking about the teaching and development of reading and writing. These controversial issues have been well aired in the pages of the journal and a thorough reading of the 24 issues produced during these eight years would give anyone new to the field an excellent way into the topics which have been bothering teachers of literacy over the period.

*Reading* is a very broadly based journal. I have deliberately tried to include articles on a wide range of topics in literacy, yet it is possible to discern several themes in what has been published. In some ways, of course, these themes have been determined by the issues of prominence of the times – teaching methods in reading, family literacy, the role of new technologies are perhaps the best examples of issues which had to figure in *Reading* because they were being widely debated outside its pages. In other ways, we have raised issues for debate which subsequently became important – I would like to think that some of the material Maureen Lewis and myself have published in *Reading* on non-fiction literacy falls into that category. I would like to pick out seven themes which have figured prominently in the journal over the eight years.

## 1. Standards and methods

My period as editor began at a time of high controversy as findings emerged which seemed to suggest that children were not achieving as highly in reading as they had a decade earlier. The debate surrounding this reached headline proportions in the national media before professional views on it had time to be published and most commentators would now agree that we plumbed some pretty low depths during the year in which this was headline news. A more sober assessment later cast doubt on the premises of the argument – were standards falling? what did this actually mean?

This controversy reached the pages of *Reading* in a different way as concerns were debated that standards might be falling because of teaching methods. A number of articles in the journal have tried to explore in some depth the nature of the reading process and the messages arising from this for teaching, and I am pleased to say we never entered the debate in the crude ‘real books versus phonics’ way that it was being handled outside. I tried to give a framework for thinking about the teaching of reading in my article in Volume 26 (2), but we also published two later articles which I feel are almost seminal in advancing understanding in this area. Henrietta Dombey’s article in Volume 27 (3) has become required reading for student teachers in a great many colleges and universities and Usha Goswami’s piece in Volume 28 (2) expresses with the typical clarity of this author just how phonics teaching might most effectively be approached.

## 2. Range and genre

The debate over the issue of text genre that became so ill-tempered in Australia has had a much more subdued but nonetheless significant effect in this country. In my very first issue of *Reading* (Volume 26 (1)) I included a piece on genre by Trevor Cairney, a prominent Australian educationalist and the points he raises have been well discussed elsewhere since that article. The issue of range in children’s writing and reading became very significant following the Dearing review of the National Curriculum for English and it has been discussed in several articles. Alison Littlefair and David Lewis both looked at this in Volume 26 (3) and Maureen Lewis and I discussed some ways forward in helping children read and write more effectively in a range of non-fiction genres in Volume 29 (1) and 30 (2). The points made in the ‘genre debate’ have been notably taken up since in the National Literacy Strategy Framework of Teaching Objectives and these issues are now extremely current and important.

## 3. Family literacy

The role of parents in children’s development as readers had been widely explored during the

1980s. In the mid-1990s this focus on parents helping their children became widened to a look at the literacy of families and children together and the Basic Skills Agency (or ALBSU as it was then) initiated several major large and small scale projects to examine the effects of family literacy programmes. Volume 29 (3) of Reading was devoted entirely to this issue, with articles from such major contributors to the area as David Barton, Keith Topping and Sheila Wolfendale. This is an issue which almost certainly has further to run.

#### 4. Literature and stories

We have not neglected aspects of reading and writing which may seem to have been rather sidelined by the shift in thinking to a focus on functional literacy. Many articles in the journal have concentrated on the role of literature, stories and storying and the special issue published in 1993 (Volume 27 (1)) is, I think, a mini-classic of its kind. In the foreword to that issue, Colin Mills, as guest editor, commended the authors of the articles for "keeping at bay the potentially reductive approach to reading implicit in much of the current 'orders' and approaches to assessment" and I feel it is one of the strengths of the journal generally over the past eight years that it has helped do just that.

#### 5. New technologies

Neither could we neglect the impact of new technologies on reading and writing. These technologies, of course, are not only affecting the ways literacy is taught but also the very nature of what counts as literacy. Several articles have explored aspects of this issue. Jane Medwell has made a notable contribution with her work on electronic books and reading (Volume 30 (1) and 32 (1)) and Keith Topping reviewed the development of electronic literacy in Volume 31 (2). Other articles by Keith Topping (Volume 31 (2)) and Gilly Byrom (32 (2)) also made the point that more traditional technologies such as audio-tape have an important role to play in enhancing literacy.

#### 6. Oracy

In the current climate, literacy is at the foreground of our concerns in terms of national policy and, hence, the efforts of schools to develop their teaching. The particular roles of speaking and listening have been somewhat neglected and I am quite proud that in the pages of this journal, nominally about literacy, articles about oracy have regularly featured. From Christine Craig's and

Debbie Ostler's (Volume 28 (2)) accounts of classroom work to Jim Ewing's (Volume 30 (1)) research into the effects of co-operative learning, the contribution of oracy to the development and language and literacy has been well explored.

#### 7. Assessment

The final issue addressed regularly, some would say comprehensively, in this journal has been the thorny one of assessing literacy and language development. Given the context of increasing importance being put upon objective measurement of children's achievements, this is not, of course, surprising, yet what has been useful has been the focus not just on 'how to' in terms of assessment but also on 'why'. A critical edge has always been present in articles in this journal about assessment approaches. Robin Campbell began this with his review of the 1991 reading SATs in Volume 26 (1) and assessment has figured as a sub-theme in most of the issues of this journal since then. Rhona Stainthorpe returned admirably to a critique of SATs in Volume 31 (1) and no doubt this will also be an issue which runs and runs.

#### And so, to conclude ...

Of course, trying to condense 24 issues worth of articles to a limited number of themes does little justice to the richness of the material we have published. Each of the 176 articles has contributed in its own way to an enriched understanding of this most vital of topics, children's literacy development. They have each had at least one very enthusiastic reader (me!) and, I'm sure, a large number of other fans. Editing such a journal has been a labour of love for me and there is no doubt I will miss it.

It has not, of course, been an individual effort. I must pay tribute to the work of a number of people who have served this journal admirably. Thank you to:

- all those who have served as members of the editorial board during my period as editor and read and commented on submitted papers, to Peter Brinton, Robin Campbell, Mike Dilena, Jim Ellis, Nigel Hall, Jerry Harste, Alison Littlefair, Andy Manning, Jane Medwell, Colin Mills, Bobbie Neate, Linda Pagett, Frank Potter, Bridie Raban, Helena Rigby, Pat Smith,
- Robin Campbell and Jane Medwell for their work as Reviews editors,
- Colin Mills, Sue Beverton, Jerry Harste and Andy Manning for their guest editing of issues of the journal,

- staff at Blackwell for being so supportive and so understanding when I just couldn't get material to them at the right times,
- Margaret Rogers for helping me set up and manage the journal procedures during the first few years,
- and finally Jane Medwell for supplying assorted photographs, mopping fevered editorial brows and generally being there.

For those who do not yet know, I'd also like to mention one of the major reasons for my relinquishing the stewardship of this journal I have

loved so much. Alexander, whose initial steps into literacy you will find recorded on the cover of this issue, has changed my life in so many ways, all of them good, and it is to him that I'd like to dedicate this final issue.

Finally, I'd like to wish my successor, Teresa Grainger, success with her editorship of the journal and to assure her of my continuing support. Teresa can be contacted at Christ Church College, Canterbury, Kent.

David Wray