

## A Chapter of Errors: A Response to Martin Turner

Published as: Wray, D. (1991) 'A chapter of errors', in *Support for Learning* Vol. 6, No. 4

### David Wray

The statements and writings of Martin Turner over this past year have stirred up so much emotion that it is quite difficult to stand back and examine what he has to say and evaluate the claims he makes without getting emotionally involved oneself. In what follows I shall try to be as dispassionate as possible, but, lest I fail from time to time to maintain this stance, let me come completely clean and begin by stating clearly at the outset the mixed feelings I have about the Turner position and, most particularly, his "infamous hypothesis". As a specialist whose passion for matters educational, and especially literate, borders on the obsessive, I have welcomed the increased attention given over the past year to the teaching of reading. I have certainly felt very deeply the decline in interest in this area since the heady days immediately following the Bullock report. It is good to see it back high on the agenda. But, and it is a big 'but', I have many times over the past months felt extremely angry at Mr Turner for sparking off such a wave of teacher- (and teacher educator-) bashing in the media. When dedicated, gifted teachers are labelled as 'trendy', 'incompetent', 'assassins of the alphabet' and have the ills of society blamed upon them ("Trendy reading lessons blamed for crime wave" - The Daily Express, 1st October, 1990), I am afraid I find it hard to remain academically detached. Demoralised personnel in an under-funded and over-extended service (of which more later) need nurture and support, not gratuitous attacks.

Having made my personal position clear, I want to try to examine as calmly as possible some of the claims Turner has made, and I shall do this by reference to the actual evidence before us. I shall begin by looking at the evidence underlying the alleged decline in reading standards. This is, of course, ground which has already been thoroughly covered (Harrison, 1991 and elsewhere) and I shall summarise it fairly briefly here. Has there been a decline?

The initial source of evidence on this was that 'leaked' by Turner himself in the summer of 1990. It is a cause of some concern that this has still not been made fully public and, despite Turner's claim that, in the light of subsequent evidence, it "may now be thought to be a matter of diminishing interest", the secretive and 'shady' way in which this evidence was presented is still a very serious weakness in the case which Turner tried to make. However, some local education authority reading test results since made public do tend to give some support to the idea of declining standards. Bald (1990) quotes the results of Derbyshire's reading screening test for the years 1981 to 1989 inclusive and these show a two point drop in mean quotients between 1985 and 1989. Results from Buckinghamshire (Lake, 1991) echo this drop (although with the rider of a totally different explanation for it, as will be discussed later). Other sources of evidence are less clear cut.

The HMI report on reading standards (D.E.S., 1990) found that standards of reading were satisfactory or better in 80% of primary schools (and high in about 30%). While reading in 20% of schools was in need of attention, this proportion had changed little since the 1978 national Primary Survey (D.E.S., 1978). HMI concluded therefore that there was no evidence that there had been a fall in standards of reading in primary

schools. They also found that there was "no evidence of teachers and schools rushing into a single method of teaching reading" (p. 2), and that "phonic skills were taught almost universally and usually to beneficial effect" (p. 2). They go on to state that the highest standards were found in schools with a clearly defined reading policy which involved children experiencing a wide range of texts and of approaches.

The NFER survey (Cato & Whetton, 1991), while it does show declining scores on reading tests in 19 out of the 26 authorities which produced usable information, admits that this evidence is suspect because of its origin in a mixture of tests, none of which assess "how competent readers read in real life; that is silently through (usually) lengthy passages seeking the meaning of the piece as a whole." This survey also found no evidence of the conspiracy which Turner suggests among advisers, teacher educators and language post-holders to promote dogma which ordinary class teachers do not, in their heart of hearts, believe in. On the contrary, by suggesting that children should read a much wider range of texts than a graded reading scheme, these 'conspirators' would seem to be advocating exactly the kind of practices which the HMI report links to higher standards!

Finally, the report of the House of Commons Education, Science and Arts Committee (1991), set up in response to public concern over reading standards, states that the evidence available does not prove beyond reasonable doubt that standards of reading have fallen in recent years. The report further states that, if there has been a decline, it is most unlikely that a swing towards 'real books' methods has been the cause.

The evidence, therefore, is inconclusive. It becomes even more so when one begins to question its status. Turner is very scathing about attempts to do this, and in particular to question the validity of the source of the evidence - standardised reading tests. Yet, as he himself admits, "it is important to make serious, substantiated, informed criticisms of psychometric tests", which several commentators have tried to do (Hynds, 1990; Harrison, 1991). A very useful way to look at this is to consider, as Henrietta Dombey (forthcoming) has done, the features of children's reading which standardised tests cannot tell us, yet which are extremely important for teachers to know about. Standardised tests do not, according to Dombey, tell us how children recognise words (simply whether they do), how well children identify words in compelling texts, how children see themselves as readers, the range and depth of children's experiences as readers, and so on. It should be noted specially that this is not the same as claiming that "there are all sorts of ineffable powers which enable readers to siphon meaning straight from the page but which do not show up on tests", to quote Turner. His very metaphor of 'siphoning meaning' suggests that he has a very limited conception of what reading involves, and it is a much richer and complicated act than he seems to allow, and certainly than the psychometric tests currently in use measure.

If one adds to these doubts worries about testing reliability, such as the fact that some authorities seem to have changed their testing instruments during the period under investigation, one is left with some very serious caveats to the evidence as it now stands. However, let us, for the sake of argument, allow that there may have been a decline, and go on to examine Turner's hypothesis about the causes of it.

This hypothesis comes in two parts, namely that: (1) there has been a fundamental change in methods of teaching reading over the last five to seven years, and (2) this change in teaching methods has led to a decline in teaching standards. I shall focus on

each part separately.

(1) is actually very easily dismissed. Evidence from the HMI report (D.E.S., 1990) suggest that very few schools actually espouse a 'real books' approach. Over 95% of classes used graded reading schemes. A survey reported in *Child Education* (January, 1991) reveals that only 6% of the respondents were operating a 'real books' policy and 89% were using a structured programme of phonics teaching. From research which will be described more fully later (Lake, 1991) only two schools out of forty nine, in an area which did seem to be witnessing slightly declining reading standards, were using what could be called a 'real books' approach. These findings completely contradict Turner's claims. Indeed, it is possible to turn this argument on its head. Perhaps it is the fact that the vast majority of schools still teach reading using structured materials which has itself led to the apparent decline in standards. Reading in the real world has changed and a simple ability to recognise words does not go as far as perhaps once it did.

Part (2) of the hypothesis obviously becomes meaningless if part (1) is rejected. However, there are still several interesting points to be made in this area.

The first is a simple statistical point which one would have expected a trained educational psychologist to recognise. This is the impossibility of attributing cause and effect to correlational evidence. The fact that two phenomena coincide would not, in itself, be proof that there was a link between them.

The second is that there are clearly several plausible alternative explanations available which might account for declining standards, most of which in fact will ring a lot more bells with teachers than the essentially conspiracy theory which Turner advances. These include the underfunding of schools, teachers being bombarded with demands upon their time which have eaten into the time available for teaching and developing reading, the difficult years of teacher industrial action in the mid-80s, the emphasis in development initiatives and in-service opportunities over the last few years on other areas of the primary curriculum such as science and technology (Martin, 1990). These factors have undoubtedly had an influence upon teachers. There are, however, two further areas which have probably had even greater influence.

One is the progressive demoralisation of teachers which we have witnessed over the last five years or so and which Barton (1991) documents so well. The evidence for this in terms of sheer teacher turnover, with some areas of the country witnessing 25% and more turnover in a year (Smithers, 1990), is powerful enough. Even more disheartening is the constant message which comes from those teachers who remain in post that the profession is under-valued, over-scrutinised and, particularly, under-paid. As a teacher educator, it has become a routine activity to attempt to counteract the very negative messages about teaching which students almost universally receive during periods of school experience. Lack of stability, the continuous drain of experienced staff, and downright cynicism on the part of those who remain does not, with the best will in the world, make for quality teaching. How have schools reached this position? One thing is certain. It has not been caused by the "ever-present and oppressive sense of threat" which Turner in his article disgracefully attributes to the influence of the "whole language movement". It has not, Mr Turner, been advocates of whole language who, over the last ten years, have engaged in a systematic attack on teachers, 'modern' teaching methods, teacher education and indeed any attempt to establish an intellectual

basis for educational practice. On the contrary, whole language advocates have been consistently distinguished by their emphasis on teacher- (and child-) empowerment. The attacks have come from the very people chosen by Turner to publish his booklet *Sponsored Reading Failure*, right-wing "think" tanks who have had and continue to have an extraordinary influence on educational policy.

A second area which has come back into the headlines is social background. A study recently published (Lake, 1991) goes a long way to answering several of the methodological concerns about the evidence so far available on reading standards. It presents the results of the same reading test, carried out at the same time of year on 1500 children of the same age every year since 1979 (although full results are given only for the period 1985-90, the crucial period of decline according to Turner).

Assessments are given of the interactions of these results with factors such as school catchment area, school reading policy, changes in this policy, and children's general knowledge scores. The crucial factor seemed to be catchment area which related much more strongly to declining reading scores than any other. Among children classed as 'late starters' according to the reading test results, general knowledge seemed to have declined. The author argues that it is likely that deterioration in children's background experiences over the period may well have been at the root of the declining reading scores. No relationship was found between school teaching practices and reading achievement. Where schools had changed their policies for the teaching of reading, there did seem to be a link with declining performance, but the data suggest that the changes were a result of schools' concerns over performance rather than a cause of it.

This research study is undoubtedly one of the most important to have emerged from the current 'reading debate' and seems to contradict the Turner hypothesis of changes in teaching methods being responsible for declining standards. Lest it should be thought that this is just another example of passing the blame onto parents, it should be pointed out that the past decade, as well as seeing constant attacks on the teaching profession has also witnessed an increase in poverty, unemployment, homelessness and a decrease in welfare provision of many kinds, all of which have increased the pressure on many families to such a degree it would be surprising if there had not been a deterioration in children's breadth of experience.

There are thus many question marks over Turner's position, both his claim about declining reading standards and his attribution of it to changes in teaching methods. But what about these teaching methods? I want now to move to a more fundamental examination of the theoretical position underlying Turner's article and much of his other writing; namely that the teaching of reading should ideally begin with a thorough treatment of phoneme-grapheme correspondences. Of course, Turner is not alone in taking this position and debate about the merits of a phonics-first approach to beginning reading has been raging for some considerable time. (Books such as that written by Hubert Jagger (1929) contain fierce denunciations of the phonic approach and, in their turn, refer to writing on the same topic dating back to 1887). Turner, and other phonics apologists, continually make the claim that "the weight of research findings" supports their position. It is useful to examine some of this research evidence, and some alternative evidence which is rarely, if ever, cited by phonics advocates.

There are several traditions of research which have attempted to shed light on how people learn to read and become literate, and one of the most important of these has

been grounded in the psychological tradition. A great deal of work has been done, often using measures of eye-movement, on the mechanisms whereby skilled readers recognise words. This tradition was seriously challenged in the 1970s by psycholinguistic research, particularly that of Paul Kolars (1973), which suggested an enhanced role for context in reading. Subsequent work (Zola, 1984; Ehrlich & Rayner, 1981) has suggested that, while context does play an important part in word recognition, and hence reading, it is, for adults, only one cueing system among many. Adults seem to be able to process several sources of information at once (e.g. knowledge about language structures, knowledge about the world, semantic and syntactic context, graphic and phonic cues, discourse knowledge etc.) to make very rapid decisions about words on the page, and also which words to attend to and which to virtually ignore. This extremely complex process takes place almost without conscious thought and is best described as an interaction between reader and text (Rumelhart, 1985).

For beginning readers, however, because they lack the automatic control of these cue systems, the process seems to have different emphases. Ehrlich (1981) found that beginning readers were much more dependent upon context to read words than were older readers, a finding which goes some way to explaining the evidence from Weber (1970) and Clay (1969), to name but two, that young readers are more likely to substitute synonyms and similar grammatical words in oral reading, and are facilitated in their reading by being given meaningful (i.e. context embedded) text to read (Goodman, 1965). An approach to teaching which built upon what children do well would emphasise context and meaning.

Another line of psychological research has been that concerned with developments in children's awareness of sounds, superbly summarised in Goswami & Bryant (1990). It has certainly been well demonstrated that the more able young readers tend to be those who have greater phonological awareness, but there is no support here for the idea, advanced by some phonics theorists, that beginning with direct teaching about phoneme-grapheme relationships will thus accelerate reading progress. Goswami & Bryant in fact argue that it is through learning to read that children become aware of phonemes rather than vice versa. An awareness of phonemes is a product of learning to read rather than a precursor, and, indeed, children's nascent awareness is more likely to show itself in their writing than in their reading for quite some time.

Another important area of research, coming from a completely different tradition, has examined the impact upon children's literacy development of experiences external to the school. It is quite clear than becoming literate is a cultural phenomenon and takes on different meanings in different cultures (Heath, 1983). Children are alert to these differences from a very early age (Teale, 1986). It has also been established by a myriad of studies that young children are engaged in making sense of the literate environment which surrounds them from the moment they are born (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1983; Sulzby, 1986). The vast majority of children arrive at school with an emergent understanding of how print functions as a carrier of meaning in the world around them. This understanding, as with all linguistic developments, is founded upon the interactions which take place between adult and child, and child and child, and one of the most important settings for these interactions is the sharing of stories (Snow & Ninio, 1986). The emphasis, therefore, in good infant classrooms upon story as a way into reading is thoroughly justified.

It should be fairly clear that approaches to the teaching of reading based upon this breadth of research demonstrate anything but "a narrow, impoverished view of reading", in Turner's words. Indeed, in the face of this, it would be a phonics-first approach which would be in greater danger of being narrow and impoverished. This point is made very strongly by Adams (1990) in perhaps the widest ranging review yet of research into phonics approaches to teaching reading. Because this report itself has been used by phonics advocates to support their position, it is worth quoting from its concluding chapter. "Finally, none of these programs embodies the misguided hypothesis that reading skills are best developed from the bottom up. In the reading situation, as in any effective communication situation, the message or text provides but one of the critical sources of information. The rest must come from the reader's own prior knowledge. Further, in the reading situation as in any other learning situation, the learnability of a pattern depends critically on the prior knowledge and higher-order relationships that it evokes. In both fluent reading and its acquisition, the reader's knowledge must be aroused interactively and in parallel. Neither understanding nor learning can proceed hierarchically from the bottom up. Phonological awareness, letter recognition facility, familiarity with spelling patterns, spelling-sound relationships, and individual words must be developed in concert with real reading and real writing and with deliberate reflection on the forms, functions, and meanings of texts" (p. 422). If we examine carefully the teaching programmes suggested by writers often classed as advocates of whole language, it is usually apparent that the concern in this final sentence is very much at the heart of these programmes. That suggested by Holdaway (1979), for example, is full of activities which concentrate attention upon letters and sounds, but which, crucially, begin from real experiences with real texts. Those described by Butler & Turbill (1984) likewise make constant reference to words, letters and sounds, but again set these into a meaningful context. Whole language programmes are clearly not built upon a "narrow, impoverished view of reading". They are, in fact, far more in tune with the findings of a whole range of research than are the methods seemingly proposed by Turner.

I shall conclude by giving a simple answer to the question at the very end of Turner's article. Of course, people want to find out more about reading, reading standards and teaching methods. We have ourselves at Exeter several research projects underway and planned and I do not doubt that the same is true elsewhere in the country. What I hope, however, is that research and investigation into these matters does take into account the complexity of what is being investigated. The teaching of reading is far too important and far too complex for simplistic analyses such as that of Martin Turner to be of any use whatsoever in its development.

## References

- Adams, M. J. (1990) Beginning to Read Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press  
Bald, J. (1990) 'Problems with reading?', Language and Literacy News , No. 3  
Barton, L. (1991) 'Teachers under siege: a case of unmet needs', Support for Learning , Vol. 6, No. 1  
Butler, A. & Turbill, J. (1984) Towards a Reading-Writing Classroom Rozelle, NSW: PETA

- Cato, V. & Whetton, C. (1991) An Enquiry into LEA Evidence on Standards of Reading of Seven Year Old Children London: HMSO
- Child Education (1991) 'Reading survey confirms structured teaching approach', Child Education , Vol. 68, No. 1 (January)
- Clay, M. (1969) 'Reading errors and self-correction behaviour' in British Journal of Educational Psychology , Vol. 39, Part 1
- Department of Education and Science (1978) Primary Education in England , London: HMSO
- Department of Education and Science (1990) The Teaching and Learning of Reading in Primary Schools London: HMSO
- Dombey, H. (forthcoming) 'Reading standards: what teachers need to know' in Wray, D. Standards in Reading Exeter: University of Exeter
- Ehrlich, S. & Rayner, K. (1981) 'Contextual effects on word perception and eye movements during reading', Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour , Vol. 20
- Ehrlich, S. (1981) 'Children's word recognition in prose contexts', Visible Language , Vol. 15
- Ferreiro, E. & Teberosky, A. (1983) Literacy before Schooling London: Heinemann
- Goodman, K. (1965) 'A linguistic study of cues and miscues in reading', Elementary English Vol. 42, No. 6
- Goswami, U. & Bryant, P. (1990) Phonological Skills and Learning to Read Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Harrison, C. (1991) 'The state of reading: a personal view', Language and Literacy News , No. 4
- Harste, J., Woodward, V. & Burke, C. (1984) Language Stories and Literacy Lessons Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann
- Heath, S. B. (1983) Ways with Words Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Holdaway, D. (1979) The Foundations of Literacy , Sydney: Ashton Scholastic
- House of Commons (1991) Standards of Reading in Primary Schools London: HMSO
- Hynds, J. (1990) 'Are the educational psychologists right?', Language and Literacy News , No. 4
- Jagger, H. (1929) The Sentence Method of Teaching Reading London: Grant Educational
- Kolers, P. (1973) 'Three stages of reading' in Smith, F. (ed) Psycholinguistics and Reading , New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston
- Lake, M. (1991) 'Surveying all the factors', Language and Learning No. 6
- Martin, T. (1990) 'Struggling readers', Language and Literacy News , No. 4
- Rumelhart, D. (1985) 'Toward an interactive model of reading' in Singer, H. & Ruddell, R. (eds) Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association
- Smithers, A. (1990) Teacher Loss Interim report, School of Education, University of

Manchester

- Snow, C. & Ninio, A. (1986) 'The contracts of literacy: what children learn from learning to read', in Teale, W. & Sulzby, E. (eds) *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading* Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex
- Sulzby, E. (1986) 'Writing and reading: signs of oral and written language organisation in the young child', in Teale, W. & Sulzby, E. (eds) *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading* Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex
- Teale, W. (1986) 'Home background and young children's literacy development', in Teale, W. & Sulzby, E. (eds) *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading* Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex
- Weber, R.M. (1970) 'First graders' use of grammatical context in reading' in Levin, H. & Williams, J. (eds) *Basic Studies on Reading* New York: Basic Books
- Zola, D. (1984) 'Redundancy and word perception during reading', *Perception and Psychophysics* , Vol. 36