

Speakers' Corner

As the debate on reading standards rumbles on,
Sylvia Edwards makes a plea for a balanced approach in the classroom.

Haven't we had enough yet? The recent claim that standards of reading have fallen has sparked off yet another debate over teaching methods. But why has it become an either or issue?

Both phonic and 'whole word' methods of teaching reading have traditionally relied upon schemes that controlled the language to which developing readers were introduced. Many of the earlier of these schemes *were* repetitive.

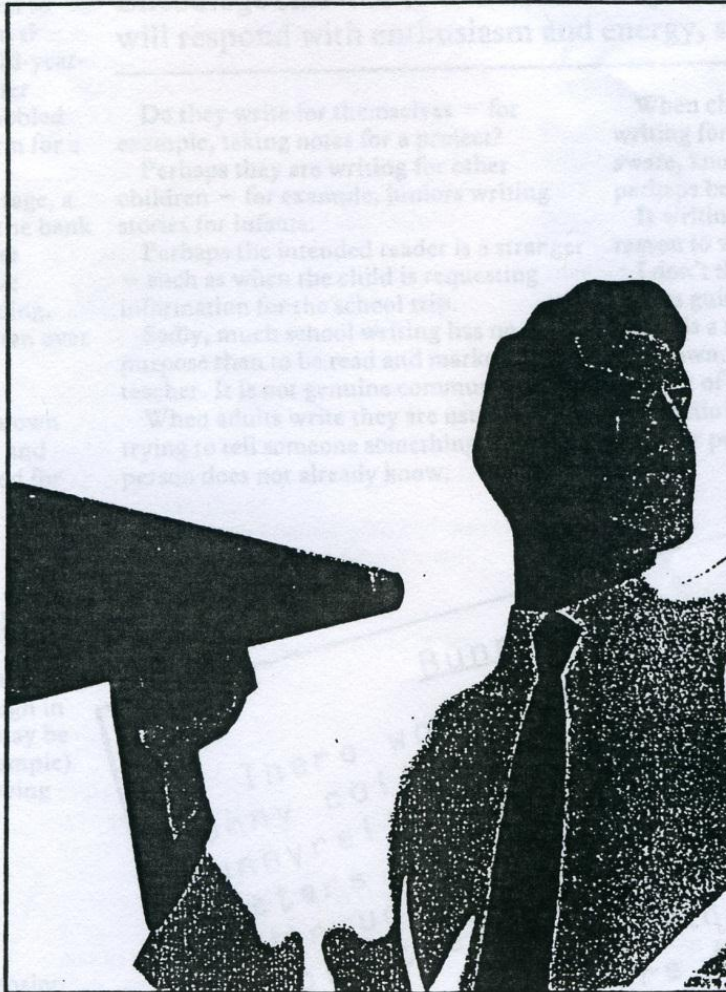
The problem, say the 'real' books enthusiasts, is that learning to read then becomes a chore, lacking in pleasure and interest. If we want to capture the young learner and help him or her to keep the reading habit, then books must be seen as enjoyable. We all agree with that.

The national curriculum, in statements of attainment level 1, states that pupils should be able to recognise that print carries meaning. In the Cox Report we find the statement 'Reading is much more than the decoding of black marks upon a page. It is a quest for meaning.' We all agree with that, too.

The pendulum continues to swing back and forth. But as with any ideas, there will always be those who jump on the bandwagon. The use of real books was never meant to imply a lack of structure. Nor was it the intention that such an approach was right for everyone. Many children who still fail to read are proof that real books are not enough.

The following statement from reading target 2 should have been printed in large capitals. It should emblazon every school reading policy. 'Use as

appropriate a combination of picture cues, sight cues, vocabulary, phonic and context cues.'



We are beginning to realise that effective readers use phonics, sight vocabulary and context cue skills as a simultaneous three dimensional strategy that should be developed from as early as possible.

The national curriculum suggests a broad and balanced reading diet that includes both structure and enjoyment. Contrary to contemporary thinking, the learning of phonics and sight vocabulary can be fun. Well-known games such as snap and dominoes adapt to any level.

Recent reading programmes place interest high on the list of priorities. Real books must continue to play their

part in the reading process. Our task is to lead children into the world of books so they stay there voluntarily.

Learning to read is a long process – through the juniors and beyond. It is also a complex activity that involves strategies that differ according to the material being read. Children need access to a variety of texts. They need to become aware of the differing purposes involved. Only then can learning to read evolve into reading to learn.

If there is a decline in reading attainment, the explanations are far from simple. The 1984-86 teacher strike, a high proportion of supply staff, constant staff turnover, inadequate teacher training, even the influence of television have all been blamed.

Where phonics are taught children can be moved on without having mastered the concepts at each level. A learner struggling with the consonant-vowel-consonant blending can't cope with the magic 'e' at the same time.

Schemes often lack sufficient readers at a parallel level to ensure the vocabulary is thoroughly mastered before the apprentice reader is put on a higher book. Or perhaps reading is not given enough emphasis in the junior years, having traditionally been assumed the responsibility of the infant teacher.

Some children learn to read with a method. The debate centres on the high proportion of children who need precisely carefully controlled, consistent teaching through a combination of methods with pleasure being firmly at the centre.

It's a question of balance. Time is short. Let's not waste it on fruitless dialogue that has little to do with the real problem.