

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

Review by Fe Mukwamba-Sendall

Launched at the CPE-PEN Alternative Futures Conference in June, this book gives a unique insight into how children learn to read outside the didactic teaching methods applied within the traditional setting of the school. The book drew on Pattison's doctoral study of 311 home educating families who completed questionnaires how their children acquired reading skills. Throughout the book is illuminated by the voices, thoughts and experiences of home educating families. These families described radically different approaches and experiences from those experienced within mainstream educational settings and yet these children were able to become able and proficient readers. It is acknowledged that the study is 'small scale', qualitative and exploratory, that the responses may not necessarily reflect the experiences of all home educating families. Nonetheless this study provides not only to new insights into the achievement of reading but challenges assumptions about learning (p.26).

Pattison questions the fundamental nature of 'teaching' reading, providing a clear and accessible overview of the concept, acquisition and participation in learning. It is noted that within the system the acquisition of reading has become a 'method', a formulaic approach 'one size fits all approach' that sees a child failure to read as: the failure being with the child and not the method. While within school's children's participation and relationship to reading is limited by the didactic form to teaching and this in itself can kill the joy of learning. The study's responses highlight diverse nature of approaches to acquisition of reading adopted by home educators. They may start formally by adopting a school at home approach or at the other extreme be totally child led; no matter the style originally adopted, over time approaches to reading evolve to respond to the child's needs. Parents see the child as an active participant, acknowledging a relationship exists between the reader and the reading, methods need to change to suit the child's interests and needs.

This recognition that children needs vary with the individual child, that all children are different and learn differently forms a central theme within the book. Pattison suggests that the application of an offshoot of chaos theory 'complexity theory' (discussion pp. 187-92) might be usefully applied to understand the diverse ways children acquire reading. Parents in the study highlighted that learning to read is not linear, that children can successfully read without knowing the alphabet or following the rules of phonics, that they can learn in what seems a haphazard manner, reading following what interests them so mastering words deemed 'hard' before perceived easy words.

Other important points are identified within this study. Parents were revealed to have a particular issue with the very notion of 'teaching', and were seem in their responses to reject the didactic of formal teaching relationships and guided learning approaches (as adopted within schools). Instead parents responses exhibited an innate flexibility to learning and adopted co-creating approached to reading with their children. Parents also identified as viewing themselves as learners, learning how to assist their child's learning, thus parents were flexible, able to change their mind and approach towards reading. Reading is seen by the parents to be a life event rather than a classroom like 'teaching' event – reading is absorbed into everyday life of the child and thus acquisition is far less formalised than within a classroom. Therefore, parents saw themselves as facilitating their child to acquire reading through day to day life via play, television, shopping trips, computers; reading was seen to be present in multiple possibilities rather than in the limited structure of formal 'let's read a book'.

Pattison usefully applies Lave and Wenger (1980) and situates the acquisition of reading within home education in terms of 'community of literacy practice'. This allows the acquisition of reading to be recast not as a cognitive skill but as a social practice that is meaningful in the family setting. Parents encourage their children to become participants in the literate world that already exists around them; therefore, the parent's role is not to teach but to facilitate their children's peripheral participation in a broader culture of literacy life (pp. 73-77).

The study allows a new lens to be focused on how children learn to read outside the traditional structures of a classroom. The fact that children do successfully learn outside the school system challenges notions of teaching, theories that underpin models teaching and tests our fundamental notion of what is education and how we learn.

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