REID & GREEN • AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2004, pp. 12–26

Displacing method(s)? Historical perspective in the teaching of reading

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This paper lends support to the argument that reading pedagogy must be understood and practiced as much more than adherence to a particular reading 'method'. An historical account of debates about particular methods recommended for teaching reading in Australia is presented, through a case study of 'The Jones Method' – an expressly home-grown method. This account, contextualised by a larger curriculum-historical study of English teaching, teacher education and public schooling in the first half of the twentieth century, helps us to rethink current conceptions of primary English and reading pedagogy in schools – when radical socio-cultural change raises new questions about school curriculum, teacher education, and the purposes of schooling.

Introduction

At the present time, the International Reading Association is calling for a scaling down of 'the reading wars' and, like Allan Luke (1998), is reminding both sides of the debate that reading pedagogy is much more than adherence to a particular reading 'method'. Claiming that it's 'time to turn down the heat', and arguing that the reading community needs to 'respect divergent views' about how best to teach reading, the IRA position indicates that it is appropriate for teachers to 'get over method'. What teachers of reading must do, instead, is 'get on' with high-quality reading pedagogy, aimed at improving the reading experience and achievements of children in classrooms (Farstrup, 2003, p. 15). In this paper we argue in support of this position, by presenting an account of some of the history of debates about particular methods for the teaching of reading in Australia. Our account is contextualised by findings from a larger curriculum-historical study of English teaching, teacher education and public schooling in the first half of the twentieth century (Green, Cormack & Reid, 2000; Green & Reid, 2002). Like the so-called 'New Times' (Hall, 1989) in which we now live and work, this early twentieth century period was characterised by large-scale economic and social reformation. It was also a time, in Australia as elsewhere, when English curriculum was constituted as central to the task of shaping future citi-

zens for a changing nation. We use our historical analysis to help us to rethink current conceptions of English and literacy in schools – when radical social and cultural change has raised new questions about the school curriculum, teacher education, and the purposes of schooling.

In dialogue with earlier work in this field of inquiry (Michael, 1987; Patterson, 1997; Rennie, 2000; Reeves, 1996; Soler, 2000), we seek to show how teacher 'casualties' of what is now a 'Hundred Years War' over reading have lurched along behind the experts. They have often sought 'hand outs' from an educational publishing industry that has fed off the anxieties of these teachers (and parents) who understandably do not want to fail their children by having them fail at literacy. The 'newest' successful reading method has always been of great interest to teachers on this account. Our current educational climate of reliance on measurable outcomes for certifying success in literacy, though, has extended the range of interest and influence of the latest 'methods' into both the home and the pre-school setting. As Peter Freebody (2001, p. 1) warns, we are now facing a 'growing diversity of literacy-education practices' within both the public and private realms of education. There is 'increasingly heated debate' about the merits of a range of instructional packages sold to parents and teachers for the teaching of reading at home and in school settings (Freebody, 2001, p.1).

We begin by contextualising the question of Method in an historical and sociological framework, situating the debate over reading methods within the larger framework of English curriculum (Green & Reid, 2001). We then focus on a particular instance of the teaching profession's embrace of an apparently successful method in our research period. This is the 'Jones Method', as it was known in the 1920s, and we use it as a case-study of the kind of methodological fixation that characterises the historical scene of reading pedagogy, now as much as ever. Our aim is to harness the capacity of an historical perspective to enhance understanding and to enable teachers to better see present circumstances as effects of particular discursive traditions that are not (and never have been) fixed, immutable or offering us a 'right answer'. Liberated in the knowledge that there is no one right way to teach all children to read, we are far more likely to look to the needs and circumstances of the particular children we are charged to teach, and work with them, rather than relying on or looking for any single reading method.

Historicising reading methods

In 1926, advice to teachers on 'Educational Efficiency' provided a clear statement as to the importance and centrality of reading to the project of schooling:

> It would be difficult to over emphasise the importance of securing efficiency in Reading and Literature in our Primary Schools, for they are the basis of a sound knowledge of English. 'The importance of English in the Elementary

> Schools' states the report on '"The Teaching of English in England" is absolute and unchallengeable. It is not so much a subject as the body and vital principle of all school activity.' (Hayes, 1926, p. 41)

From the turn of the twentieth century, reading instruction in primary schools has been understood as part of the work of English teaching. Prior to this time, 'Reading' was an 'R' unto itself, so to speak. Michael's (1987) survey of 300 years of the teaching of English from the late 1500s drew on textbooks devoted to the teaching of 'reading, spelling, rhetoric, logic, composition, grammar, elocution, poetry, fiction, drama' (Michael, 1987, p. 2). During the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, teachers naturally 'had their methods' but, as Michael notes:

> … they did not follow, or discuss, a Method. Their central concern was the relation between the teaching of reading and the teaching of spelling. At no time was there complete agreement as to how the two skills should be related, and during much of the period there was little conception of them as separate skills. Until well into the nineteenth century the dominant view was that reading was learnt through spelling, which should therefore precede it; but in fact the early stages of both processes were taught in such close relationship that they cannot be distinguished. (Michael, 1987, p. 14)

It is predominantly throughout the last century that instruction in reading has become increasingly understood in terms of 'Methods', as more or less manageable solutions to the problems faced by Modernist industrial national governments trying to introduce mass (and increasingly compulsory) education among the populace. We have written elsewhere (Reid, 1999) of early accounts of the teaching of reading, where attention to method was a nicety often overlooked in the interests of what was, often, quite 'ruthless efficiency'. In the early nineteenth century, for instance:

> Mrs Wesley's methods of teaching her children to read are perhaps most widely known. … When one of the Wesley children reached the age of five, a day was set aside to teach it to read. All in turn began their lesson at nine in the morning; by five o'clock they knew their letters, 'except Molly and Nancy, who were a day and a half before they knew them perfectly', for which their mother thought them very dull. On the following day the child was ready to tackle the first chapter of Genesis. (Musgrove, 1966, p. 6)

As the responsibility for teaching young children to read shifted from the family to the schoolroom, and from the mother to the teacher (Steedman, 1992), conscious attempts were needed to emulate *en masse* the successful practices of the immediate past. This particular and fairly common sort of teaching practice became known as the 'alphabetic' method of teaching reading. It has since become the base-line Method, against which all others have been measured and counted.

Getting over Method?

Allan Luke (1998, p. 305) notes that '[i]n Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the US and England the "great debate" over literacy education has taken the form of a near-continuous debate over which instructional approach is best able to "solve" student reading and writing problems.' In most of these places, the adjudication of literacy debates takes the form of state-mandated literacy curriculum and assessment. However, where researchers and experts on reading cannot agree, and see a moral and intellectual obligation to debate and continue to research their often-competing claims, educational systems, by contrast, must act. Increasingly, their actions tend to support a uni-dimensional approach across the system. Luke sees the search for a single successful method of teaching reading and writing as misguided, however, and doomed inevitably to fail at least some children in our schools:

> Many of us working from sociological and cultural perspectives on literacy education have tried to change the subject of the great debate, to shift it sideways. We have argued that there is no "right" way of teaching reading and writing, but that different curricular approaches – and their attendant textbooks, classroom events, assessment instruments, and adjunct materials – shape literacy as social practices differently. The ways that literacies are shaped have uneven benefits for particular communities and, unfortunately, the outcomes of literacy teaching continue to favour already advantaged groups in these communities. (Luke, 1998, p. 306)

In Australia, and in particular our present home state of New South Wales, the *English K-6 Syllabus* specifies that all teachers should heed Luke's words. No individual state system has legislated a particular method by which teachers must work to achieve the outcomes the state has mandated for children in particular years of schooling. That is not the case in some other English-speaking countries. NSW requires that teachers ensure a 'systematic' and 'explicit' approach to the teaching of reading, and requires them to have a sophisticated and broad knowledge about reading. It is only when teachers feel insecure in their knowledge of a range of instructional methods, and the principles informing them, that such requirements encourage them to seek out and institute 'a method' that seems to have brought successful results for others. Rather than teaching reading in a set and prescribed fashion, NSW teachers have a larger task. They must ensure that they provide students with time to learn to use, and to learn about, what Luke and Freebody (1999, 2003; see also Freebody & Luke, 1990) characterise as a complex interconnection of four reading processes or practices (decoding, comprehension, knowledge of textual function and critique). All readers need employ these processes in any reading activity that goes beyond 'barking at print'.

In many ways this can be seen as an 'anti-Method' model. It requires

teachers to provide instruction that will assist children to 'decode' a range of cultural texts, 'participate' in the meanings generated by them, 'use' the range of texts and textual forms in purposeful and appropriate ways, and 'analyse' the social and cultural norms taken for granted as 'natural' in the texts they encounter. One of the strengths of this model is that '[i]t shifts the focus from trying to find the right method to whether the range of practices emphasised in one's reading program are indeed covering and integrating a broad repertoire of textual practices that are required in new economies and cultures' (Luke & Freebody, 1999, p. 6).

This model of reading instruction arguably represents the 'best we can get' in the early twenty-first century. Informed and careful teacher use of this framework in planning for reading instruction all through the primary school (and indeed beyond) is likely to provide the sort of reading curriculum that best ensures success for most readers and for the system. Yet it is also clear that it demands high-quality knowledge, preparation and organisational skills from teachers. This is not a new state of affairs, certainly in NSW. All throughout the twentieth century it has been acknowledged that there is little to be gained from a narrower and more technical legislation of method. In 1926, for instance, the NSW Syllabus did not prescribe any particular method for the teaching of reading; rather, as one commentator of the time wrote, 'it leaves the teacher free to use those methods which appeal to him most. In many ways this freedom is desirable, but it throws the responsibility upon the teacher of having some definite means of attack' (Hayes, 1926, p. 43).

Further, as Dewey (1916/66, p. 170) wrote, 'nothing has brought pedagogical theory into greater disrepute than the belief that it is identified with handing out to teachers recipes and models to be followed in teaching'. Yet in spite of this official acknowledgment of the inadequacies of adherence to 'methods', the search for successful teaching programs and methods has been more intense in the field of literacy education than in any other area. This is true in all English-speaking countries, and teachers in Australia are well aware from their own personal-professional histories of methods of teaching reading that have gone by such popular names as 'phonics', 'look and say', 'language experience', and the associated products and reading series that have accompanied them. Moreover, they are even today able to choose from such general and specific packages for literacy instruction as 'The Spalding Method' (Spalding & Spalding, 1957), 'Cued Articulation' (Passey, 2003), 'Reading Recovery' (Clay, 1991), and 'Letterland' (Wendon/Pollard, 2003).

Looking back: A history lesson

In this section, we take a look behind the official syllabus requirement for teachers to choose wisely in 'attacking' the teaching of reading, in examining the record of more popular and vernacular educational thinking during the first half of the twentieth century in NSW. While we

know what the Department was saying officially to teachers and to the public, through its printed materials, the text-books it authorised for trainee teachers, and its annual reports to the Minister for Education, we focus here also on what teachers were saying to each other. Our sources include the professional journals *Education* (Organ of the NSW Teachers' Federation) and the *Education Gazette*, published by the NSW Department of Education. These monthly circulars record much of interest to us in our search to understand the practice of teaching reading during this period.

According to one early Australian commentator (Archibald, 1922), the situation described by Michael (1987) and Patterson (2000) regarding the teaching of reading in England was very similar for NSW, as indeed it was for other British colonies (Soler, 2000). The alphabetic method was in general use in New South Wales up until the New Syllabus of 1904:

> After that date, phonic methods gradually superseded the alphabetic method, though much spelling was still done by the letter names. The primers and readers supplied by the Department of Education were based on phonics. The 1st Primer, for example, contained lists of words, e.g., **hit**, **bit**, **pit**, **sit** &c., to be read by the children. Other lessons consisted of disconnected sentences containing similar words, while a few lessons were composed of continuous narrative. Needless to say, these last named were the favourite lessons in the book. (Archibald, 1922, p. 179)

As Archibald explained, once a system of teacher education became established in NSW in the 1900s, 'word and sentence' methods of reading were introduced to student teachers, and in this way gradually spread to schools. At this time, professional development for teachers was provided in the form of 'Evening Extension Courses' at the new Teachers' College, and these too focussed on this 'freer' method of reading. As Archibald writes:

> By 1915, word and sentence methods, with a more or less definite system of phonic teaching, were used in most infant schools. From experience of the results obtained by word and sentence methods at North Newtown I can affirm that the change was justified. The reading in the upper classes was fluent and expressive, and new reading matter was attacked with confidence. In all classes the reading period was a favourite one. … but in many schools a definite phonic plan appeared to be lacking (Archibald, 1922, p. 180).

In the first NSW example of a smart teacher finding a niche and filling it, the 'Ellis Method' was developed and demonstrated at Arncliffe Public School by Miss Ellis during 1916 and 1917. Archibald explains:

> ... much enthusiasm was aroused at the definite phonetic teaching given, and the ingenious method of dealing with hitherto unphonetic words. After the comparative indecision of past reading methods, it was felt that her method supplied everything definite and thorough. It was accordingly introduced into many schools. (Archibald, 1922, p. 180)

Just a year or two later, though, a report warning teachers about problems with the 'Ellis Method' was published in the *Education Gazette*. A Miss Venables, Assistant in Charge of the kindergarten and lower First Classes at Bowral District School, wrote the following critique of the system:

> It seems to me that there is a great danger in teaching to read in this way. It is a danger that is common to every system of teaching to read that gives young children power to read a set of symbols as sound combinations … People are being accused just now of reading unthinkingly, of following the blind leadership of third-rate politicians, of walking through life chained to the popular philosophy of the moment – and we are asked to train children to think. (Venables, 1918, p. 299)

Around this particular point in time, the end of World War 1 had brought increasing awareness of the effects of both German and British militaristic propaganda that had successfully mobilised *and* destroyed a generation of young men. Many liberal educators were professing the desire that citizens should be able to think beyond what they were told, and to consider both the meanings and the implications of the public texts that were made available.

> A method of teaching to read that introduces a printed word as a set of sound symbols and not as the written expression of an idea, is going to increase the existing tendency towards the use of empty verbiage …
>
> The disadvantages I have referred to are common to all methods of teaching to read. The child whose experiences have been limited, and lacking in vividness, will suffer through being taught to read too soon, no matter what method is used. The child who has lived a full and varied life will have a wider range of ideas, and the written word will instantly call up its associative ideas. I believe one day we shall not teach children to read until they have first lived. (Venables, 1918, p. 299)

After three years of using the Ellis Method, Miss Archibald, too, had her criticisms of it, which she summarised as follows:

> 1. The method does not follow the natural development of perception, as it begins with elements in themselves meaningless to the children, and proceeds to combine them into words.
> 2. The method is so logical that it is practically an adult method … with children of 6 years of age it entails an amount of reasoning that is foreign to the child's stage of development.
> 3. The early reading is so restricted that it is very hard to awaken interest in the child … A skilful teacher, of course, will introduce interest into any lesson, but the interest in this case is extraneous and is not inherent in the subject itself.
> 4. It has the disadvantage of other phonetic methods based on a differentiation of type. The child has to examine the word so closely that it is likely to affect his eyesight. (Archibald, 1922, p. 181)

She goes on to say that, after experiencing the 'intensive drill' required by the Ellis method, the arrival of another phonetic method '[i]n which the elements of words were introduced in a play way, was received with relief' (Archibald, 1922, p. 181).

This new method was one devised by a teacher called Mr George Jones, who had been teaching at Bundarra Public School, in the north west of NSW for the past twenty-five years. During that time, he clearly had ample opportunity to reflect on the need for, and design, a method of teaching reading that, as it happened, had considerable success among his pupils. As the Inspector for the region was able to compare the success enjoyed by the children at Bundarra with that of children taught by other teachers, the method Mr Jones had devised came to the wider attention of the Department of Education. In December 1919, Jones was invited to address the NSW Teachers' Federation Annual Conference, where he demonstrated his system of teaching reading. The report of the session allows us some insight into the reasoning behind his method:

> The principle was one that they had in operation in the Bundarra district for over 12 months. He saw the difficulties long since when handling young classes himself, and also when his assistants took charge of the young ones. He had come to the conclusion that the fault lay with the mother tongue, which was full of phonic difficulties. In order to make it thoroughly phonetic he sat down night after night and formulated a new alphabet. That alphabet consisted of letters and signs. There were 19 vowels, 16 consonants and one silent letter in the alphabet. … Anyone could take it up with the use of the chart and the necessary notes for their guidance. The child must feel that it was interested. The fault in the past lay not with the child, but with the system. (*Education*, 15 January 1920, p. 66)

The 'Jones Method' differed from the 'Ellis Method' in one key aspect: it involved the children in hand movements and special diacritical marking of the words they were learning to read. To explain this, we turn once again to Archibald:

> The children first make a 'sound' in their hands. For example, the long sound of i is represented by the hands being placed together at the tips of the fingers, and then coming down in a tent shape, the letter m is shown by the hands being placed horizontally together. The combination of these two hand movements gives the word 'my'. The various vowel sounds are arranged in progressions, which have a certain similarity of movement. In this way the children associate sounds and hand movements.
>
> The next step is to associate these sounds with diacritical marks, which bear a close resemblance to the hand play, e.g. **i** is shown by the diacritical mark ^. Which resembles the tent shape previously made by the hands. The next step in association is connecting the diacritical mark with its letter equivalent, e.g. ^ may be written as **i**, **igh**, or **y**. A favourite exercise with the chil-

dren is that of 'dressing' the signs, e.g., the following would be written on the blackboard:

d$^+$n h$^+$s $^+$ b$^+$t

and the children would write the corresponding words underneath –

d$\overset{+}{\text{a}}$n h$\overset{+}{\text{a}}$s $\overset{+}{\text{a}}$ b$\overset{+}{\text{a}}$t

In this way the children obtain a familiarity with words in [an] easy and pleasant way. (Archibald, 1922, p.181)

What is of interest to us here is the familiar echoes of both Venables' and Archibald's criticisms, and the connections that many primary teachers today can make with these methods. Further, although we may never before have heard of either the Ellis Method or the Jones Method, we in Australia have certainly heard of the Spalding Method, devised in similar circumstances just ten years later, in the 1930s, in the US, and rediscovered here in the early 1990s. Jones' method attracted attention from within the Education Department, and was sponsored by several Inspectors who recommended his work. In 1920 he was removed to Mortdale in Sydney, 'to afford fuller opportunity for him to explain his reading methods to the many more teachers of the metropolitan district. Mr Jones has many busy days and nights before him in this year' (*Education*, 15 May 1920, p.168).

From this point followed a series of regular advertisements for Jones' seminars, in the Teachers' Union paper *Education*, and in the official Education Department paper, the *Education Gazette*. Jones produced a series of publications, including the *Jones Phonetic Chart* (at a cost of 5/- 'mounted on linen with wooden rollers' or 3/6 for the manilla card version), and a series of textbooks (the First Primer with coloured illustrations cost 9d), from which the following illustration is taken.

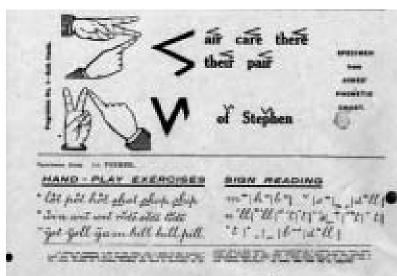

Figure 1. Illustration of hand positions for the Jones Method.

The accompanying *Teachers' Handbooks* cost 2/6 each. The Education Department's strong sponsorship and recommendation for professional development in this method lasted well over five years, thus ensuring a full coverage of the approach throughout the state, and also, interestingly, interstate. Jones' *Teachers' Handbook* was named as a recommended

text in the nationally used *The Principles and Technique of Teaching in Elementary Schools* (Elijah, 1924).

We are able to see more clearly how the Jones method worked in practice from an account by Hayes in 1926. By this time he is able to assume teachers' familiarity with the principles of the method when giving advice about how the youngest readers should be taught. As he writes:

> One successful teacher begins as follows:
> 'What do we use when we want to say something?'
> 'Our tongue.'
> 'Yes. Sometimes we use our hands also.'
> The teacher makes a beckoning gesture to one child.
> 'How did you know I wanted you?'
> The teacher makes a gesture indicating 'go away.'
> 'You see we can talk with our hands. Dumb children always talk this way. They make words with their fingers and we can also.'
> The teacher makes MAN using Jones' hand signs, at the same time saying the word. Gradually the word is said more slowly, the hand signs keeping pace. The children are encouraged to imitate, and attention is drawn to the position of the hands. When commencing the word – 'the three fingers pressed together just as our lips are when we say the word; then we open the mouth with the tongue level; then the tongue goes up to touch the roof of the mouth. Now we will write the word. First three fingers III; now make them round at the top, just like two lips pressed together **m**; now the open-mouth **a** – this ? is the tongue; the letter looks something like an apple. Now two fingers touching the roof **n**.'
> Next a man is drawn and the word is written underneath. Again the word is broken into letters and the children are told that we call them sounds. They are asked to give words with the sounds **m**. 'Mat,' 'Milk,' 'mum,' are given. The same method is followed with **a** and **n**. To complete the lesson, the children attempted the drawing of a man and the writing of the word beside it. (Hayes, 1926, p. 44)

Part of the reason for the success of the Jones Method seemed to lie in the help it provided to both the child and the teacher. In what was one of several 'advertorial' pieces for 'The Jones System of Teaching Reading (Copyrighted)' that appeared in various issues of *Education* each year through the early to mid 1920s, Jones[1] claims that: 'The child becomes self-active, self-reliant, and finds out how to sound words for itself. Thus the teacher finds that the irksome stage of elementary teaching of Reading has lost its boredom' (*Education*, February 1920, p. 92). He goes on to speak directly to his clientele thus:

1 This article in fact bears no mark of authorship. However an Editorial Note that accompanies it, explaining that Education was unable to secure patents for the designs, which 'prevented Mr Jones from being able to place the matter at our disposal', suggests that Jones is indeed the author.

> Besides being of great value in the kindergarten and infant classes, there is a special value to be placed upon it in schools of one teacher. In such the attention of the teacher is diverted owing to so many classes needing aid. As a preparatory aid to a new Reading lesson, the diacritics are marked where necessary, and as these enable the pupils to pronounce the words for themselves, the lesson is learned by silent reading, and the thought content arrived at while the teacher is engaged elsewhere. This is a claim of precious value to such teachers as well as to the children. (*Education*, February 1920, p. 93)

By May, *Education* reported that 'intense enthusiasm' had gripped 'Bundarra on the Gwydir', 'when teachers for thirty miles around assembled to hear Mr Jones explain his method of teaching to read.' (15 May 1920, p.168). What was clear, too, was that it seemed to work. Eighteen months later, Jones and his publisher were advertising a Summer School at Fort Street in January (*Education*, 15 December, 1921, p. 21). We may well ask, however, what happened to the 'Jones Method' over the rest of the century. Did it simply disappear? Or did something like it emerge at other times? Where are you now, Mr Jones?

Certainly, in the following years, we could find no more advertisements for the method, although by this time it was significantly well known among teacher educators (Elijah, 1924), and student teachers were informed about this method in their teacher education. In the immediately ensuing period, articles and materials in *Education* focussed on the teaching of writing replaced discussion about reading for a year or so, with the introduction by the Department of a new simplified cursive handwriting style, and increasing discussion about spelling.

By 1928, in a piece discussing 'Spelling in the Primary School', a practising teacher ('No. 139') underlined the continuation of the earlier link assumed between the teaching of reading and spelling. Asking 'How far are we, as teachers, responsible for the condition of present day spelling?', this teacher offered the following:

> I would like to state that I have heard sound teachers of nearly thirty years experience express the opinion that they cannot achieve the results that they formerly obtained. I know that it is not due to any falling off in enthusiasm on their part, nor yet lack of effective methods. But I believe that, unconsciously, many of them have suffered from the effects of pinning their faith too closely to a particular method of teaching reading, forgetting that none is perfect. (*Education*, 15 September 1928, p. 358)

This teacher went on to outline what s/he saw as the 'method which approaches nearest to perfection'. Such a method would be 'one that makes greatest use of the faculties of touch, sight, hearing and speech – in other words, uses hand, eye, ear and lip – one that will give the child those best weapons for attacking the spelling "demons" which are to confront him' (*Education*, 15 September 1928, p. 358). The vernacular understanding of Reading, at this time, was still very much reading

aloud. Archibald, speaking as an acknowledged expert Infants Mistress in the *Education Gazette*, expressed a wider view of reading. She considered the following criteria should be considered, in terms of judging a 'packaged' reading method before teachers chose to implement it in their classrooms:

> The following tests may suitably be applied in summarising the merits or demerits of any reading method:–
> 1. Does it create from the beginning a definite connection between the child's spoken language, with which he is already familiar, and the new written language he is now attempting to learn for the first time?
> 2. Is it sufficiently elastic to allow of the introduction of a certain amount of motor activity in the early stages?
> 3. Is it so planned that very soon the emphasis may be placed on the real aim of reading, viz. thought getting, and so a love of reading be fostered in the children?
> 4. Does it provide a means for the mastery of the mechanical difficulties of reading? (Archibald, 1922, p. 179)

It is interesting to compare Archibald's criteria with those listed in Freebody's recent warning against the problems inherent in packaged reading methods. As he notes, there are 'four sets of considerations that need to be dealt with in the use of commercial early-literacy packages' (2001, p. 2). In summary, these are as follows:

- What view of reading and writing is the package based on?
- Are there additional learnings or skills needed for children to master the material?
- How consistent is the package with classroom practice?
- How does the package respond to the needs of individual children?

Certainly, in 1928, a teacher operating under the somewhat curious pseudonym 'No 139' reflected on the state of teachers' knowledge about the teaching of reading in a way that rings true to our situation today:

> During the past fifteen years or so, we have had a rich crop of methods for teaching reading, none of which I wholly condemn, but I cannot help thinking that teachers have not always understood the principle underlying the methods adopted, and floundering as one learning to swim, they have not achieved the results which the author or an enthusiastic exponent of that method can and does achieve. (*Education*, 15 September 1928, p. 358)

Conclusion

Seventy-five years later, the situation remains very much the same. The current rhetoric for 'quality teaching' (DEST, 2001; NSWDET, 2003) recognises the importance of the teacher's knowledge and skills in teaching reading, and it is imperative that all teachers remain critical readers of reading materials and methods. It is only in this way that the need to 'deal the "effective teacher" back into the game' (Freebody, 2001, p. 3)

can be met with regard to literacy curriculum. We suspect that few teachers are as willing as Miss Venables was, in 1917, to openly criticise the methods that a colleague, school or system might endorse as the answer to students' problems with literacy. However we do believe that all teachers would agree with her that the most important aspect of our work as literacy teachers is to teach our students 'to think'.

Exploring the history of reading in Australia is very much an exercise in relating to our present. We can see from this account that debates over reading methods are, in fact, both limited and limiting. The *Jones Method* did work, for Mr Jones, in Bundarra, just as the *Ellis Method* worked for Miss Ellis, in her classroom. Both these people were, clearly, outstanding teachers, but it was their knowledge, skill, understanding, tact and timing that was what was important in their success – not 'the method' itself. Critics of programs such as Reading Recovery query the nature of the intense and rigorous training that teachers need to be accredited as Reading Recovery tutors, for instance (Barnes, 1997). We think they miss the point that this process of knowledge building, practice and skill development may be what *all* teachers need, if they are ever to be able to move beyond reliance on a single approach or a package of strategies and equipment. It may well be the case, indeed, that good reading pedagogy involves teaching from across a range of sometimes *contradictory* 'Methods' – that the needs of a particular child, or a group of children in a particular classroom may require teachers to draw on a variety of research and perspectives, and never a single 'method'.

This, of course, highlights the need for openness to differing points of view with regard to the teaching of reading. It highlights the need for teacher education to ensure that teachers have access to the sort of professional knowledge that will enable them to weigh up the competing claims made by advocates of different reading methods – *including* historical knowledge and awareness. The intellectual work of teaching reading, as evident in the thinking of the teachers whose words we have excavated from the past, is considerable. It requires high-level professional judgement and application of specialist, and situated, knowledge. The need for well-informed teachers, able to evaluate the approaches and materials packaged in support of the range of methods currently available, and adapt them to the changing conditions of language, literacy and communication, remains as acute today as is has been throughout the history of education in Australia.

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