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The 'Reading War' in Early Childhood Education: a Marxist history

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Marx said there was a peculiar difficulty connected with this question. On the one hand a change of social circumstances was required to establish a proper system of education, on the other hand a proper system of education was required to bring about a change of social circumstances; we must therefore commence where we were.

(From the discussion 'On General Education' as quoted in the Minutes of the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association, August 1869).

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Abstract

The greater strength of the reactionary forces in the 'reading war' in the twenty-first century is now forcing early years practitioners systematically to drill young children in synthetic phonics in preparation for a statutory assessment at age five. My inquiry adopts a Marxist perspective in order to investigate the historical circumstances in which different approaches and methods have been used to teach working-class children to read, in the hope of thus being able to illuminate and support the work of today's early years practitioners who are committed to progressive values and beliefs.

My thesis focuses on three main research questions. These are to discover how the different methods and approaches to teach reading have been identified with 'traditional' or 'progressive' ideologies; whether these two approaches are, in practice, equally reactionary; and whether a teacher employed by the state can make a difference. The argument running through the thesis is that state-sponsored schools, including the methods used to teach reading, were devised as a means for the social control of working-class children. However, the thesis will show how parents resisted the state system and maintained instead the tradition of independent, working-class education, including progressive methods to teach children to read. The thesis will also show how, in the face of this opposition, the government resorted to compulsion, forcing children's attendance at state schools in order finally to destroy the independent working-class curriculum. Thereafter the reading war resurfaced as a permanent feature within the state sector of education.

What emerges from the thesis is that early years practitioners should take heart from the knowledge that the expression of their own progressive views can in itself contribute to changes in the wider social conditions in which we work and thereby help to prepare the way for a more democratic and revitalised progressive education in the future.

Introduction

Teaching young children to read in England is a fiercely contested field, which has come to be regarded as a 'war': battle lines are drawn between advocates for the primacy of 'meaning making' and the proponents of 'phonics first'. The purpose of this thesis is to show how this lack of consensus on how to teach young children to read represents an ideological divide with its roots in the history of early years education. The ideological nature of the positions taken up makes the war inevitable and a matter that cannot be resolved simply through empirical research into 'what works'. For, if all that was needed was empirical research, the question would have been answered long ago and a consensus achieved. This thesis is an attempt to glean from the history of early childhood education the hindsight needed to understand the contradictions in and between present theories and practices of teaching reading.

The contradictions appear to arise from a clash of ideologies, loosely described as 'progressive' and 'traditional'. But could the educational approaches associated with these ideologies, notwithstanding their differences, prove to be not so much oppositional as equally reactionary in effect? If so, what are the implications for the practice of a state-employed teacher?

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the conflict over early years education has taken on an additional dimension, namely the age at which formal literacy teaching should be introduced, such that our very youngest children are now encompassed. For the first time in England, a key stage in state-sponsored education was created and made statutory for children younger than the official school starting age (the term after a child's fifth birthday). Between 2000 and 2008, children aged three to five were covered. Of these, some of the younger ones were cared for and educated without charge by family and friends and thus escaped the new 'foundation stage' curriculum; others attended one or more of a range of Ofsted-inspected settings such as state nurseries and provision by the private and voluntary sector, including childminders (although some childminders operated in a black market); most of the older children, aged four to five, attended the

reception class in a state infant or primary school. From 2008, younger babies were included in a revised and extended curriculum for the newly named 'early years foundation stage' which became statutory in all Ofsted-inspected settings for children from birth (DfES, 2007a).

Present practice is characterised by the contradiction between the officially sanctioned play-based curriculum (QCA, 2000; DfES, 2007) and the requirements of summative assessments, especially in the areas of phonics, reading and writing, which must be completed by reception teachers at the end of the key stage (QCA, 1999, 2003, 2008). This has resulted in narrow curriculum provision and a transmission approach to literacy teaching, such that the play-based aspects of the new curriculum may never have fulfilled their promise in reception classes (Adams, 2004); and the view, expressed officially in 2006 (Rose), is gaining firmer hold that an ever earlier start to literacy should be made and in the prescribed form of 'synthetic phonics first'. Children now start school in reception classes at age four (Woodhead, 1989; Rose, 2008), in contrast to the European practice of starting at age six or seven, and informal evidence suggests that it is commonplace to find inappropriate phonics activities in state nurseries as well as the burgeoning private and voluntary sector of early years childcare and education. Thus the very youngest of our children in nursery classes and schools are at risk of becoming subject to the targets and testing which have for so long characterised the schooling of older pupils in England, such that our children are now among the most tested and the most unhappy in the world and whose relatively high standards in reading attainment have been achieved at the expense of the enjoyment of reading (Harlen, 2007; NUT, 2006; UNICEF, 2007; Whetton, Ruddock and Twist, 2007).

Children exposed to too-early an introduction to formal literacy instruction frequently fail to consolidate any apparent success in early learning due to its being short-lived; adults' preoccupation with teaching formal literacy detracts from their essential involvement in the development of children's personal, social and emotional well-being, oral language, thinking skills and conceptual understanding which, developmentally, should have greater priority; children miss out on essential physical play and are at risk of disaffection in later years of schooling due to increased anxiety, poor self

esteem and reduced motivation to learn; children from disadvantaged homes and boys are especially at risk. When children start formal literacy instruction at age six or seven, however, they learn quickly and suffer no long-term disadvantage from a later start (Mabbott, 2006).

Now, as always, the only way for parents to protect their children from an objectionable state-sponsored education is by taking matters into their own hands. This was possible before state schooling was made free and compulsory by the Education Acts of and after 1870; then, working-class parents could have bought private education when they believed their children were ready for it and dictated the educational content. That is no longer an option, even for babies, because private and voluntary provision, including by childminders in their own homes, is now inspected by Ofsted and required to follow the same statutory curriculum as state schools and nurseries.

As an early years teacher, I am distressed by the contradictions inherent in my role and aim in this inquiry to find some comfort for myself and colleagues from a better understanding of our situation. A focus of the thesis, therefore, is to meet the expectations of Brian Simon that historical study helps those who are intimately involved in education to view the system objectively and become critically aware of its nature. "There is, perhaps, no more liberating influence than the knowledge that things have not always been as they are and need not remain so." (Simon, 1966, as cited in Simon, 1994, p.17)

Among the questions I hope to answer during the course of the study are:

- What approaches or methods have been used, by whom and at what age, to teach working-class children to read during the modern period from the industrial revolution to the present day?
- Can the different approaches or methods consistently be identified with either 'traditional' or 'progressive' educational ideologies?
- What different forms have traditional and progressive approaches to teaching young children taken over time and have they, in practice, been equally reactionary?

- As a teacher employed by the state, am I a pawn or can I make a difference and, if so, how?

Chapter one discusses the method of historical inquiry adopted in the thesis. There are many different histories which could be told. Mine, I hope, will illuminate the origins of the contemporary debate about how to teach young children to read and be worthwhile in as much as it informs at least my own future practice.

There is an interrelationship between the identification and interpretation of historical evidence and the researcher's political and educational stance. In particular, investigators of the social history of their own society need to question whether or not their most basic assumptions about those societies apply to the period under study:

In order really to understand the past, acts of imagination are required, but more than this, historical research demands responsiveness to the sources and a willingness to see even the most fundamental concepts overturned.

(Andrew, 1985, p164)

My methodological approach, outlined in chapter one, is that of historical materialism, searching, as Palmer (1997) describes, for "the actual experience of historically situated men, women and children". The method used to collect my historical evidence follows Hearn (1978). That is, to undertake extensive reading, mainly of secondary sources but also including relevant government and other official publications, and to note the points of controversy among scholars which might affect the interpretation. Hearn's pleas for the manner in which his research should be judged, regarding the adequacy, heuristic value and contribution of the work, applies to my own inquiry. I aim to interrogate the facts thus obtained, in the light of the advice offered by Thompson (1978), from the theoretical stance of historical materialism.

In chapter two I seek to clarify the Marxist theoretical position that I adopt to interpret the historical and present-day material on the reading education of working-class children. Within this position it is always recognised that, while social structures have been created by individuals, those same structures also constrain individuals. Simon (1994) shows us how the English educational system has always and continues to buttress the

reproduction of our class-stratified society. Inevitably, therefore, education is a site of struggle; and while, for example, a progressive approach may gain ascendancy within education, the seeds are at the same time being sown for an inevitable reactionary backlash.

This has an intuitive appeal. But I also need to explore whether, indeed, progressive education is in effect similarly as reactionary as traditional modes of education. For example, is the twentieth-century progressive educator's stress on educating the whole child analogous to the early nineteenth-century voluntary school's focus on moral and religious instruction? And there are other contradictions to consider. For example, the educator Hannah More, at the beginning of the period, was an ideologue of the emerging, paternalistic, middle class. At the same time, she was a role model of feminine competence and rationality, who may have promoted the cross-class gender interests of women and girls. Working women arguably didn't need her, however, being more than capable of promoting their own class and gender interests (Thompson, 1984).

The 'common people' have always taught their children to read, sometimes making use, when convenient, of available voluntary or private schools. In the nineteenth century, the type of school attended by working-class children, and the curriculum and pedagogy adopted, became subject to intensive class struggle. Only in the last part of the century did attendance at a state-sponsored school become compulsory for children from the age of five. Depending on viewpoint, this can be considered as a victory or a defeat for the working class.

In chapter three I argue that the root causes of the reading war lie in the early days of emergent capitalism, when literacy flourished in the homes and organisations of the common people. This was before the notion of compulsory state schooling had been conceived and when the uses of literacy by the common people contributed to the struggle against an exploiting and oppressive employing class. The emerging working class, steeped in the culture of feudalism, adhered to its traditionally independent methods of teaching children to read in the context of the wider domestic curriculum. This sometimes included occasional attendance at a dame school or private venture school. The methods were progressive, individually

tailored to the needs of the child, probably 'bottom up' in common with all reading instruction at the time, and a small part only of the child's wider education (Gardner, 1984).

This was intolerable to the emerging employing class for two reasons. First, it needed its workers to change their feudal outlook in order to embrace the clockwork discipline required by the burgeoning new industries. Second, it was seriously threatened by the subversive uses of literacy embraced by the working class to support its struggle for democracy. One of a number of tactics adopted in the middle-class strategy to secure its ascendancy was the establishment of voluntary church schools (Thompson, 1968). The curriculum content of these monitorial schools was designed to teach children to know and accept their exploited position in society. Methods of reading instruction were devised with the same aim. To this end, the 3Rs were taught, with largely unsuccessful outcomes, in huge classes according to a military discipline. Parents, however, were unwilling for their children to be subjected to indoctrination in bourgeois morality and religion. The working-class requirement of a school remained, that its primary objective be to teach the 3Rs, quickly and efficiently. Thus the monitorial system failed to fulfil its promise.

Chapter four argues that the state intervened in the church elementary schools in order to introduce greater subtlety into the curriculum and thereby attract parents who were opposed to the monitorial system. At the same time the infant school movement was also seeking to woo parents with a more gentle and appropriate curriculum for babies and younger children. The strategy continued to fail, however, and the high cost of state intervention became unacceptable to the dominant interests represented in parliament. Their demand for cuts led to narrowing the curriculum to instruction in the 3Rs and introducing a system of payment by results, thus tightly controlling both children and teachers. This outcome was enshrined in the Revised Code imposed on state-supported schools in 1862. The government's education policy was no more successful than previous efforts, however, and the passage of the Reform Act of 1867, enfranchising a significant number of working class men in the towns, added urgency to the state's determination to control working-class education. The requirement to attend a state school

was ultimately imposed in 1880, when the education offered in the 1870 Education Act became compulsory. The result was the final demise of the independent working-class schools and the triumph of a controlling curriculum over progressive teaching in early childhood education (Gardner, 1984).

Chapter five argues that, after the destruction of independent working-class education, the reading war transferred to the state sector. At first, during forty years of the repressive Revised Code and the dark age which lingered afterwards, the emergence of progressive ideas and practice in state schools was slow; but they blossomed into the 'new education' in the twentieth century, culminating in the Plowden Report of 1967 (DES). At the same time, in the knowledge of the dreadful conditions in which very young children were being schooled at the turn of the century, it became clear to the state that the next generation of workers and soldiers needed to be safeguarded physically as well as controlled mentally. Children's parents, including their mothers, also needed to be available for work. Nurseries were the answer and the reading war was also fought in this arena, between the followers of Montessori's controlling methods and Froebel's more liberal approach.

A paradigm shift affecting the nature of progressive reading instruction took place in the twentieth century. This paved the way for the work of Susan Isaacs and the subsequent emergence of sociopsycholinguistics. Before this, it would have been anachronistic to have discussed a 'whole language' approach in contradistinction to 'bottom up' methods (Altwerger, Edelsky and Flores, 1987); rather, progressive reading instruction was characterised by its child-centred, individual approach, while traditional methods were strictly standardised for mass delivery in large classes.

For as long as the progressive movement was gaining strength in the state sector during the twentieth century, its opposition was also rallying (Lowe, 2007). The reading war probably first came to be known as such after the publication in 1971 of Smith's book, *Understanding Reading*, extolling the virtues of the psycholinguistic approach. Thereafter, reading crises were manufactured in order to fuel the cries to go 'back to the basics'. This was a successful tactic and thus the ascendancy of the new right, advocating tightly

controlled phonic methods to teach reading, was assured. The strength of the new right has continued to grow such that the government education policy of today closely resembles in its effect the Revised Code of the nineteenth century. However, reactionary methods of instruction are always somewhere contested and they can never completely extinguish the progressive flames which have flickered since the beginning of the present era. Some of this progressive approach, in the twenty-first century, is at the same time both represented and counteracted in the contradictory early years foundation stage: on the one hand, a play-based curriculum is called for; on the other hand, a stringent statutory assessment requires direct instruction in phonics and reading (DfES, 2007a), potentially leading to distress and despair on the part of the practitioner.

In the conclusion to my thesis I reject the view that progressive education is equally as reactionary as the traditional methods to teach reading. And I gain heart from the thought that the Victorian Revised Code was ultimately defeated and that, more than a century later, the pioneers of the 'new education' can act as an inspiration to the generation of teachers today who are called on to restore sanity to early childhood education. In this vein I will seek to answer the questions which have guided my work to interpret the historical development of the reading war. In particular, how might individual teachers be able to make a difference, whether to the lives of their pupils or in a contribution to the new education which surely must grow in the twenty-first century?

Part One: Methodological and Theoretical Approach

Chapter 1 Inquiry methodology: a historical approach

1.1 Introduction

The contested subject of my inquiry concerns the methods we use to teach young children to read and the age at which we start the formal process. The very lack of consensus on this high-profile aspect of contemporary educational practice suggests that a definitive answer cannot be gained from an empirical study. If it could, the killer piece of research would have been designed, implemented, published and gained consensual approval long ago. Rather, the matter remains controversial due to its ideological nature. The character of the battles fought today arises out of the struggles of the past, which took place in the context of particular social, cultural, political and economic circumstances.

Historical inquiry can help us to understand the practice of the past, in the context of its time and place, as well as how and why it changed and developed into the forms we see today. Illuminating the present dilemma in this way can inform and give confidence to practitioners by exposing to question the historically-bequeathed, taken-for-granted assumptions – held by themselves and others – about the nature of what they do.

The outcome of such research might also affect the balance of political forces controlling a young child's education and a teacher's work by counteracting the arguments made by reactionary political forces. These are coloured in an often intangible manner, according to Webster (1976), by references to tradition. Alarms raised, regarding literacy or educational standards, for example, are "fuelled by implicit assumption about standards earlier achieved":

Unfortunately, the historical perspective implied has almost invariably been formed in the absence of any serious regard for the historical evidence. Our impressions of short-term trends are often illusory, and longer-term studies invalidate most of our ideas about continuity and growth.

(Webster, 1976, p211)

Or, in the satirical words of Jeff Hynds (2009), regarding reading, "standards are always going down". Historical study thus becomes the more important in order to counter political propaganda; although Webster offers no special reason why the results of an inquiry of this nature would have

more practical political success than the findings that he rightly suggests can be overlooked of “current psychological, sociological or economic research” (Webster, 1976, p210).

It must be a hope of the optimistic researcher, however, that a piece of work may contribute to a change in the political climate. In the words of Weiss:

... research provides a background of data, empirical generalizations and ideas that affect the way that policy makers think about problems. It influences their conceptualisation of the issues with which they deal; it affects the facets of the issue that they consider inevitable and unchangeable or amenable to policy action; it widens the range of options that they consider ... by altering the terms of policy discussion. (Weiss, 1982, p289)

The researcher’s work might also mesh with deeper changes in the contemporary social structure; or it can become a tool for the activist in the struggle to improve the lot of the children whom the current system of state schooling purports to serve. This latter point is discussed further in chapter two.

1.2 Historical methodology

Historical inquiry, in common with all other investigative approaches, is a controversial methodology, inevitably value-laden and ideologically positioned. Within the field are two principle approaches: first, an ostensibly atheoretical, traditional academic history in which the facts are seen to speak for themselves; second, study of the past which is consciously guided by theory. Few, nowadays, would take up extremes of either position but they can be seen to be represented by, say, Elton for the first and Althusser for the second (McCulloch & Richardson, 2000; Tosh, 2002). The two approaches to history are referred to, respectively, as “lower case” and “upper case” by Jenkins (1997), who expounds the poststructural opposition to both. Thompson (1978) represents historical materialism, the Marxist approach which stresses the need for a balanced interaction between theory and practice in a historian’s work.

The bulk of this chapter concerns how methodological debates in historical research treat of fact and theory. The argument is that, although accounts of the past have an intrinsic fascination, facts do not speak for themselves; evidence has to be selected and interpreted, in accordance with

rigorous scholarly procedures, in the context of theory. Care needs to be taken, however, not to stray from theory into *a priori* reasoning, in which the generalisations made cannot be sustained by the facts.

1.2.1 Theory

E.H. Carr (1986) led the field in the 1960s in establishing in academia that theory was essential to the understanding of history, for the historian needed a philosophy within which to interpret the facts. Empirical historians, who opposed the notion of theory, nevertheless produced value-laden work, informed by unrecognised or unstated theories of their own, at all stages in the process of selection and interpretation of evidence. Jenkins (1997) develops this further to show how the unstated theories of “lower case” historians are, ultimately, endorsements of bourgeois ideology. Carr warns that any historian can become preoccupied with promoting a particular point of view and urges his readers to “study the historian” for the bee in their bonnet and “listen out for the buzzing” (Carr, 1986, p17).

Jones (1972) summarises the shortcomings of the work of empiricist academic historians who, lacking a conception of how social structure might have affected the past, traditionally treated events as unique and the actions of people as resulting from the free will and moral responsibility enjoyed by individuals. By assuming that theory – “interpretations” – would emerge after the collection of facts, they failed ever to formulate theory or, if they did so, achieved it by “deceits and sleight of hand”:

Those who tried to create theory out of facts, never understood that it was only theory that could constitute them as facts in the first place. Similarly those who focused history upon the event, failed to realize that events are only meaningful in terms of a structure which will establish them as such.

(Jones, 1972, p113)

Meanwhile, outside the narrow confines of British academic history, theories had flourished regarding the nature of society, historical continuity and change, especially in the hands of the founders of sociology. They, we are reminded by Abrams (1971), “from the outset addressed themselves to the problem of explaining specific configurations of change in particular historical settings”. Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in Abrams’s view, is a fine representative example. And Marx, of course, remains monumentally influential.

However, the many weaknesses of much of sociological theory in accounting for social causation are the same whether applied to social structures in the present or in the past. “The distinction is not that between theory and non-theory,” according to Jones, “but between the adequacy or inadequacy of the theory brought to bear.” (Jones, 1976, p296) Or, as Abrams suggests, “the structure of a good explanation in sociology is essentially the same as that of a good explanation in history”. For this a researcher needs “a plausible point of view”, or hypothesis, about the relationships they are studying and must beware of becoming overwhelmed by the intricacies of technique; the hypothesis, or theory, is necessary to direct observations and suggest how to evaluate the relevance of the evidence. Nevertheless, he suggests that sociologists generally are likely to put greater time and effort into conceptualising their problems than historians usually do (Abrams, 1971, p120).

Thompson (1978) insists that theory cannot be considered in isolation: it has a legitimate place only in its dialectical relationship with the facts and must be directed towards recovering, explaining and understanding; the synthesis of the dialectic between theory and facts being historical knowledge itself. He describes the explanatory framework which he espouses, historical materialism, as “developing knowledge”. Historical materialism elaborates its categories within a conceptual totality, which is neither a finished theoretical “truth” nor a make-believe “model”. The development of knowledge takes place both within theory and within practice, arising from a dialogue between them.

Tosh believes that good theory acts as a quality control on the selection and interpretation of evidence: “Wishful thinking is more likely to be controlled by historians who approach their enquiries with explicit hypotheses than by those who try to follow where the sources lead.” (Tosh, 2002, p209) Furthermore, all work is tempered by the knowledge that other researchers are quick to spot deficiencies. Tosh adopts the metaphor of bees in bonnets:

Historians are seldom happier than when citing contrary evidence and alternative interpretations to cast doubt on the work of their colleagues – especially those who seem to have a bee in their bonnet. ... The speculative tendencies in theoretical history do not go unchecked for long.

(Tosh, 2002, p209)

I return to theory in chapter two. The following section discusses issues associated with the need for rigorous scholarly procedures to select from sources of evidence and interpret the silences or absences of evidence, summarised by Thompson (1978) as “historical logic”.

1.2.2. The ‘facts’

Regarding historical evidence, Thompson is adamant that, “historical procedures must be followed” to avoid generalising from particular evidence to inappropriate contexts (Thompson, 1976, p390). The example he gives is of methodism, which has taken different forms in different times and places; the error would be to discuss human experience in one particular circumstance as though the methodism being practised had the same characteristics as the methodism of a different time and place:

One might go on for a long time listing the differences of context between pre- and post-1832 Methodism. But what is important to stress is that these differences are not just those of ‘circumstances’ or ‘contingency’ – the historian wriggling out of a necessary definition with some trivial local excuse – but those of sociological context and typological characteristics.

(Thompson, 1976, p388)

In my own work, I need to apply this insight to what “learning to read” has meant for different generations of young, working-class children and their families at different times and in different contexts. For example, the reading war in early childhood education is fought between those who adopt opposing views regarding the primary purpose of teaching children to read. On the one hand, the progressive approach advocates that children should learn to derive meaning from a text; on the other hand the traditional approach advocates that children should learn accurately to decode the text. The form taken by the progressive approach was different, however, before and after the middle of the twentieth century, when a paradigm shift permitted the discussion of ‘whole language’ approaches which would have been anachronistic in earlier times (Altwerger *et al*, 1987).

1.2.3. Controls

Regarding historical procedures, Thompson raises two notions, in particular, regarding “controls” and “humour”. He uses the concept of control in the context of sampling and suggests that the researcher is at risk of giving a high profile to examples from which she or he can generalise, at the expense

of other sources of evidence. These, especially exceptions and differences, “the paradoxes and equivocations of actual men in an actual society”, can act as controls on inappropriate interpretation and should be searched for and explored (Thompson, 1976, p394).

The lack of control is also evident when researchers have failed to examine in sufficient detail, from a range of points of view, a particular culture but, rather, have accepted the criticisms of those who were seeking to supercede the culture. The example he gives is of the “old plebeian culture which was being confronted and partially transformed” by the processes of industrialisation:

... in the absence of such an examination we are all guilty of presenting it only in its negatives: simply in terms of those features which Methodists or political reformers *rejected*: indeed very often in the form of caricature – drunkards, gamblers, fornicators, layabouts; thriftless, unfamiliar, disreputable. ... The old culture or cultures were neither stupid nor animalistic nor to be defined only by their negatives. They demand delicate retrieval ...

(Thompson, 1976, p399)

In my own work, I believe this lack of control is evident in the widespread, uncritical adoption by historians of negative views on private working-class education, in such as the dame schools and private venture schools. Derogatory accounts of these schools were compiled by official, government-sponsored bodies, such as the Newcastle Commission in the mid-nineteenth century. I have been impressed in this context by the work of authors such as Gardner (1984) and Laqueur (1976a, 1976b, 1976c) whom, I believe, go some considerable way towards undertaking the examinations called for by Thompson.

A further example of a form of control regards the several types of personality who would have inhabited any particular historical environment and which should not be studied in isolation. To examine any one of these, “we must keep the others always in view as necessary controls” (Thompson, 1976, p401).

Regarding my own work, I want to gain insights into the present-day debates surrounding how we teach children to read. But I take Thompson’s discussion of “controls” as a serious warning against the temptation to

generalise my findings and insights into a form which might lead to simplistic and anachronistic recommendations for current practice.

1.2.4. Humour

Thompson discusses the role of humour, often turning around issues such as nonconformist hypocrisy, in communities with nonconformist traditions. Such laughter is also a control for the researcher: “laughter *matters*, as a social phenomenon: it is a kind of criticism, a kind of self-defence”:

But how is one to recapture this essential dimension through published sources or in a formal interview situation, which is by definition a humourless one? The essence of this shared humour is a moment of accord, outside of any formal structure.

(Thompson, 1976, p396)

Alas, in this article at least, Thompson gives no further pointers towards how a researcher might answer this question although in my own reading I have enjoyed Thompson’s account of the *Bad Alphabet* published in the early nineteenth century by members of the Female Reform Society in Blackburn who pledged themselves “to use our utmost endeavour to instil into the mind of our children a deep and rooted hatred of our corrupt and tyrannical rulers” (Thompson, 1968, p788).

1.2.5. Anachronism

The meaning of the terms we use, in different periods and contexts, is discussed by Trevor-Roper, who cautions against adopting the anachronism of judging the past as if it were subject to the present. Trevor-Roper refers to historical periods as if they were homogenous, for example “every age has its own social context, its own intellectual climate” (Trevor-Roper, 1969, p15). I find it more helpful to think in terms of there being a range of social contexts and intellectual climates in any period but, nevertheless, he makes the important point that a taken-for-granted milieu would not have been explicitly expressed in the contemporary documents. Attempts to reconstruct and deduce it must use language which would have made sense at the time and avoid the use of terms which bear the meaning of present society:

To discern the intellectual climate of the past is one of the most difficult tasks of the historian, but it is also one of the most necessary. To neglect it – to use terms like “rational”, “superstitious”, “progressive”, “reactionary”, as if only that was rational which obeyed

our rules of reason, only that progressive which pointed to us – is worse than wrong: it is vulgar.

(Trevor-Roper, 1969, p16)

Andrew takes up this point in the context of interpreting the absence of evidence, asking how the silences can be read without any clues as to their meaning. “Can we take these clues from our own knowledge and insights alone or does this impose the present on the past in a way which simply negates the historical enterprise?” (Andrew, 1985, p158)

She suggests that even historians who are sympathetic to the complexities of working-class lives in the nineteenth-century have interpreted working-class educational activity from a middle-class perspective. To avoid this danger of imposing present definitions on another historical period, she suggests using documentary evidence to piece together the answers to a series of empathetic questions about working-class lives at the time, designed to clarify the point of view of representative historical characters.

She summarises the questions as follows:

- What kinds of activities were members of the working class involved in during this period as part of their daily lives?
- What kinds of knowledge and skills did they feel that they required in order both to participate in these activities and to become involved in others?
- Where would they go or what means would they adopt in order to acquire such knowledge and skills?

(Andrew, 1985, p165)

Nevertheless, the evidence of middle-class observers and participants in historical events becomes important due to the shortage of documentary records of a largely oral tradition in working-class communities. Andrew welcomes any conflicting evidence which this approach renders for two reasons: first, it provides insight into the differences between classes; second, it reinforces the need for a theoretical framework to support the interpretation of evidence from historical documentary material.

Andrew’s work relates to an important aspect of my own, namely the widespread working-class refusal to accept state-sponsored forms of schooling in the nineteenth century. I need to pay careful attention to her comments about the limitations of a middle-class perspective and the possibilities of moving closer to an empathetic understanding from working-class points of view.

1.2.6 Selection of evidence

As well as interpreting absences of evidence, choices have to be made from a potentially huge range of material which might be relevant to an inquiry.

E.H. Carr advocates an assumption of “ignorance” in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the evidence. He quotes Strachey: “Ignorance is the first requisite of the historian, ignorance which simplifies and clarifies, which selects and omits.” (Strachey, 1918, as cited in Carr, 1986, p8).

Such “ignorance” might also usefully be deployed against taken-for-granted explanations of previous generations of researchers. Andrew calls for a critical approach to such previous interpretations: “We should beware of absorbing a kind of received wisdom about which avenues of investigation are likely to prove worthwhile.” (Andrew, 1985, p159)

Andrew points out that some form of sampling, “deliberate or otherwise”, is inevitable. This selection of the evidence, however, must be a representative selection as far as possible, which will reveal both contrary and supporting indicators (Tosh, 2002, p209).

McCulloch and Richardson summarise issues surrounding the use of published primary sources, although often the questions raised can also be addressed to secondary work. The issues concern the nature of the text, including its authenticity, credibility, representativeness, meaning, author, context, audience and influence. (McCulloch and Richardson, 2000, p91). Hearn, however, suggests that different criteria need to be applied to work derived from previously collected data. Secondary sources inevitably have to be extensively relied upon, and the scholarship respected of the accepted authorities, in a sociological study of wide scope undertaken by a single worker. However researchers can reduce the severity of associated difficulties, such as the problem of selectivity, by wide reading of the relevant historical work and becoming familiar with the points of controversy which continue to engage the field. Such a study should be judged, first, by the adequacy of the information gathered, including not only whether contradictory evidence has been overlooked but also whether the best evidence has been used; second, by the heuristic value of the categories, including whether the analysis raises new or important questions; third, by

the contribution the analysis makes to the improvement of social theory and the understanding of the human condition (Hearn, 1978).

Kaestle (1992) relates the relative importance of evidence to the degree of certainty with which it can be known. A matter which is widely accepted as “factual”, for example, is likely to be relatively unimportant; the matter which has become the subject of historical generalisation will be contested:

It's not hard to get consensus on many low-level matters we call “factual”, such as “Horace Mann was born in 1796 in Franklin, Massachusetts.” The more certainty we have (collectively) about something historical, the more trivial it is likely to be. On the other hand, the more significant and interpretive the generalization, the less certain we will be about it.

(Kaestle, 1992, p363)

Kaestle uses the history of literacy to illustrate how he believes consensus has been achieved, by marshalling a range of approaches in a number of different studies, in a process he describes as having attained “internal and implicit standards of historical dialogue”. The relevant research permitted a degree of generalisation arising from three distinct areas: interaction between local and national research; analysis at both micro and macro levels; and a confirmation of results from studies undertaken in different countries. “Thus, the history of rudimentary literacy rates has matured and has produced some generalizations that seem to garner considerable consensus.” (Kaestle, 1992, p365)

Kaestle calls for greater attention to be paid to an area of more recent interest, regarding the historical uses of literacy, which attempts to bring actors alive and connect them, as readers, with their texts. I hope I might be able to draw together some of the evidence regarding young, beginner readers, and thereby contribute to Kaestle's call for the contribution of “many little studies, innovations in methods, and much speculation about the relation of theory and historical research.” (Kaestle, 1992, p366)

Even then, he says, the answers will be impermanent, “but by these standards, some answers are still better than others”. This approach also seems to sit well with Thompson's call for concepts to be developed more sensitively to understand the nuances of historical working-class cultures (Thompson, 1976). In the light of this advice, in my reading of the literature, I

will be looking for opportunities to unite young, beginner readers, with the text available at the time.

Kaestle has also summarised the pitfalls, some of which are discussed in more detail above, which await the sociologist or educational researcher without any formal training in history. He says they must guard against the following tendencies:

- to confuse correlations and associations with causes;
- to be inaccurate in defining key terms, especially through vagueness or 'presentism' (the danger of assuming that terms had their present-day connotations in the past, a form of anachronism);
- to fail to keep clear a distinction between evidence of ideas about how people should behave and evidence of how ordinary people in fact behaved;
- to fail to distinguish between intent and consequences and fall into the trap of inferring the former from the latter.

(Kaestle, 1988, as cited in McCulloch and Richardson, 2000, p124)

McCulloch and Richardson comment that, while these strictures apply to all historical work, educational researchers are especially vulnerable due, first, to the political nature of education in the present and, second, to the inherent danger that those new to these methods will underestimate the complexity of the problems. McCulloch and Richardson also stress the importance, in historical research, of studying both the turning points and "the points that failed to turn" (McCulloch and Richardson, 2000, p125).

It will be important for me, a sociology graduate and teacher, to keep my research questions uppermost in my mind as I assess the written material and to keep in mind the importance of noting continuity as well as change in teaching practices in different contexts.

1.2.7 Postmodernism

Postmodern approaches have challenged the credentials of historical inquiry such that Tosh suggests that "historians are in a state of confusion about what exactly they are up to" (Tosh, 2002, p165). Jenkins believes postmodern approaches are more constructive than those of traditional historians in that they foster greater reflexivity and clearer, more honest, positionality "within or against traditional discourse" (Jenkins, 1997, p2). Jenkins labels two distinctive schools of thought within history as "lower case" and "upper case" and denounces them both for their "common-sense empiricism and realist notions of representation and truth". Furthermore, they

are both ideologically positioned but don't always acknowledge this. The first, "lower case" approach, in general can be characterised as endorsing the belief that 'the-facts-speak-for-themselves' and is concerned with the past for its own sake, without any reference to the present or future. Ultimately, however, this is an endorsement of bourgeois ideology because the bourgeoisie "doesn't want a different future ... it has now arrived at its preferred historical destination – liberal, bourgeois, market capitalism" (Jenkins, 1997, p15).

Jenkins's vigorous criticism of this type of traditional academic history would be shared by those whom he defines as in the "upper case" school but whom he criticises as being deluded by the "fantasies" of metanarratives:

... that is, a way of looking at the past in terms which assigned to contingent events and situations an objective schema of historical development usually construed as appropriately progressive.
(Jenkins, 1997, p5)

This, he says, is the "modernist project" which holds that the past is "going somewhere" but which, similarly to history in the "lower case", has collapsed in the face of the postmodern assault. Jenkins holds that facts and reality cannot exist independently of the historian because they can exist only if there is a theory to name them. Furthermore, historians can interpret the past in any way that they choose for they can tell "many equally legitimate stories from various view points, with umpteen voices, emplotments and types of synthesis" (Jenkins, 1997, p20). Any certainty is thus impossible to achieve and, for Jenkins, this provides the opportunity for people who have been "negatively represented and/or ignored ... to construct histories of their own; histories of emancipation and empowerment" (Jenkins, 1997, p22).

Jenkins, in his reader, generously includes convincing critiques of postmodernism including, for example, by Palmer (1997). A proponent of historical materialism, Palmer feels that Marxists are on the defensive in the face of a postmodernist grip on intellectual trends:

... a rather uncritical adoption of what has come to be known as critical theory has resulted in the wholesale jettisoning of historical materialist assumptions and understandings, to the detriment of historical sensitivities and the denigration of the actual experience of historically situated men, women and children.

(Palmer, 1997, p104)

Nevertheless, historical materialism can assimilate and be enriched by that which is of value in critical theory. Contemporary Marxist historical analysis, he says, can “ground the often important insights of critical theory in materially embedded social relations and experiences of struggle and subordination, power and resistance, accumulation and accommodation.” (Palmer, 1997, p105) Postmodernity, he says, describes the condition of contemporary cultural life; postmodernism is the ideology associated with it. But the fundamental social relations of the capitalist economy remain unchanged and, therefore, the working class remains the driving force of social change. In contrast, the new social movements (such as feminism and postcolonialism and for such as peace, environment and aboriginal rights) are, none of them, “in anything approximating an elementary relationship to *actually existing capitalism*”. Palmer refers to these subjects, often espoused by postmodernists, as “silences” in Marx’s writing; they are, nevertheless, subject to explanation by historical materialism.

Tosh, similarly, calls on historians to put postmodernism in its historical context, located in a particular cultural moment. “This is not the first time that the credentials of history as a serious discipline have been called into question,” he says:

The emphasis placed by postmodernists on the indeterminacy of language and the pervading tone of cultural pessimism are very contemporary, but their denial of historical truth has a very familiar ring about it.

(Tosh, 2002, p191)

Tosh describes ways in which historians, including Marxists, have indeed responded positively to many of the postmodern criticisms, not least in the fields of postcolonialism and feminism, at the same time maintaining the ontological validity of their discipline. Nevertheless, he accuses some Marxists of reductionism, failing to realise the strength and importance of associations which people enter into for reasons unrelated to production. “It is not difficult to argue that identification by religion, race or nationality has been at least as important over the long term as identification by class.” (Tosh, 2002, p232)

Regarding language, historians have also become more aware of the structural constraints which language may impose on its users, of the

different meanings language can have at different times, in different places, and of historical writing as a literary form. Nevertheless, we know from everyday life that language is not only a successful means to communicate and infer meaning but also that without it human interaction would be impossible:

If language demonstrably serves these practical functions in the present, there is no reason why it should not be understood in a similar spirit when preserved in documents dating from the past.
(Tosh, 2002, p194)

Another Marxist who has been provoked by postmodernism is Geras, who feels that if “anything goes” in historical interpretation then, in the same way, “anything goes” morally and politically, which is wrong. For if truth is wholly relative to particular discourses or social practices, there can be no injustice:

The victims and protesters of any putative injustice are deprived of their last and often best weapon, that of telling what really happened. They can only tell their story, which is something else.
(Geras, 1995, p110)

Thompson (1978) develops a passionate defence of the materialist conception of history, “the first-born intellectual child of Marx and Engels”, in opposition to the idealism of Althusser, who elevates the role of theory to the detriment of practical, empirical work. Thompson’s polemic might just as easily be addressed to postmodernists as to the structural school of Marxism represented by Althusser.

1.2.8 Historical materialism

According to Thompson, the “given-ness” of facts is one half of the dialogue which makes up the discipline of the historian. Facts have determinate properties which are independent of their existence within forms of human thought and are witness to a real historical process. But facts need questioning; they don’t speak for themselves. Evidence in its primary form needs interrogating by minds trained in a discipline of “attentive disbelief”. Facts may be interrogated in at least six different ways.

These are, first, to establish their credentials as historical facts; for example how they were recorded, for what purpose and whether they can be confirmed with adjacent evidence. Second, at their face-value; here, the values of the time come into play, for example attitudes towards marriage.

Third, as recorded statistics, for example indices of mortality or wage-series; these might be considered as more or less value-free. Fourth, as links in a linear series of occurrences, or contingent events, to form a narrative. This, he says, is “history as it actually happened (but as it can never be fully known)” and the form of interrogation is crucial:

... *an essential constituent of the historical discipline*, a pre-requisite and premise of all historical knowledge, the ground of any objective (as distinct from theoretic) notion of causation, and the indispensable preliminary to the construction of an analytic or structured account (which identifies structural and causative relations)

(Thompson, 1978, p29)

Fifth, as links in a lateral series of social/ideological/economic/political relations, for example a contract as a special case of the general form of contracts at the time. Sixth, for structure-bearing evidence.

The first five points, according to Thompson, belong to the widely accepted “discourse of the proof” within the discipline of history. The sixth point is more controversial but, for historical materialists, the structural organisation of a given society can sometimes be inferred from discrete facts. For example, a tenure is a discrete fact which can be understood only as a part of an entire structure of tenurial occupancy governed by law. Similarly, a bill-of-exchange is not only a discrete fact but also an indicator of a particular system of credit (Thompson, 1978, p30). In other words (my words), the whole is greater than the sum of its parts but each part has something to say about the whole:

the facts will disclose nothing of their own accord, the historian must work hard to enable them to find “their own voices”. Not the historian’s voice, please observe: *their own voices*, even if what they are able to “say” and some part of their vocabulary is determined by the questions which the historian proposes. They cannot “speak” until they have been “asked”.

(Thompson, 1978, p30)

In my own research, for example, Vincent’s work provides an example of this. Primers published in the nineteenth century suggested that children were taught to read in a progression from learning the alphabet to sounding out lists of syllables. Additional evidence to this discrete fact suggests that in the state-sponsored schools this was indeed the form taken by lessons in reading. The primers could also be used in the private working-class schools of the day but there is little directly relevant additional evidence to confirm the

manner in which they were used. Vincent believes, however, as a result of asking questions of the wider evidence regarding the structural roles of the two types of school, that in this different context children were never asked to speak in disconnected syllables or memorise columns of words. Vincent thus makes a discrete fact speak differently in two different contexts (Vincent, 1989).

Thompson describes “historical logic” as the manner in which the historian engages in a discourse of the proof, in dialogue between concept and evidence. This is done by generating a series of hypotheses, on the one hand, and by undertaking principled empirical research, on the other. In this way, historical logic discloses itself, not involuntarily or automatically, but through the hard work of the historian. The historian is the interrogator; the question is a hypothesis, for example regarding structure or causation; the respondent is the evidence, including its determinate properties (Thompson, 1978, p39).

Thompson proceeds by offering a number of propositions in defence of historical materialism. First, facts have a real existence; but they can be known only by applying the historical procedures outlined above to the questioning of the evidence. Second, historical knowledge is, in its nature, provisional, incomplete and selective; it is also limited and defined by the questions asked and the concepts informing the questions. But this doesn’t mean that the knowledge gained is untrue. Third, historical evidence has determinate properties: any number of questions may be asked but only some will be appropriate; any theory of historical process may be proposed but will be successful only if it conforms to the fixed and definite limits of the evidence. Thus historical knowledge can never be positively proved but, after Popper, “false historical knowledge is generally subject to *disproof*” (Thompson, 1978, p40).

Fourth, the relationship between historical knowledge and evidence is one of dialogue because the two are mutually determining; neither can be a function of the other, for example in terms of inference from, disclosure, abstraction, attribution or illustration. Fifth, the evidence of real history, the object of historical knowledge, is necessarily incomplete and imperfect.

Nevertheless, the ontological status of the past is the same as that of the present:

To suppose that a “present”, by moving into the “past”, thereby changes its ontological status is to misunderstand both the past and the present. The palpable reality of our own (already-passing) present can in no way be changed because it is, *already*, becoming the past for posterity.

(Thompson, 1978, p40)

Neither is the ontological status of the past affected by the nature of the questions asked or the character of the questioner, regardless of gender, ethnicity or social class. The objective of the historical discipline, namely knowledge of “history’s truth”, doesn’t change. What does change is the outcome of historical enquiry because each age, or each practitioner, may propose new questions to the historical evidence, or may bring new levels of evidence to light:

In this sense “history” (when considered as the products of historical enquiry) will change, and ought to change, with the pre-occupations of each generation ... But this by no means implies that the past events themselves change with each questioner, or that the evidence is indeterminate.

(Thompson, 1978, p40)

The questioners, of course, inevitably and rightly, have their own values, which will influence their choices of question to put to the evidence and their judgments and evaluations of the answers; but unethical practices will be found out. “Historical logic”, according to Thompson, provides the procedural safeguards against dishonest undertakings. “It is, exactly, within historical logic that such attributions of meaning, if covert and improper, are exposed: it is in this way that historians find each other out.” He uses the example of a feminist critique which would take a history book to task, not because it had been written by a man, “but because the historian neglected contiguous evidence or proposed conceptually inadequate questions: hence a masculine ‘meaning’ or bias was imposed upon the answers.” (Thompson, 1978, p41)

Sixth, theoretical concepts or hypotheses arise out of empirical engagements and there is a dialectical relationship between them, the synthesis being historical knowledge. Thompson explains what he means by concepts and hypotheses in a footnote:

By “concepts” (or notions) I mean general categories – of class, ideology, the nation-state, feudalism, etc., or specific historical forms and sequences, as crisis of subsistence, familial development cycle etc . – and by “hypotheses” I mean the conceptual organisation of the evidence to explain particular episodes of causation and relationship.
(Thompson, 1978, note 42, p195)

Seventh, historical materialism differs from other historical explanations in its categories, its characteristic hypotheses and attendant procedures; and in its conceptual relationship with Marxist concepts in other disciplines. Marxist theory itself, however, is as much subject to the discipline of historical logic as any other. There is no home for theory independent of the facts,

Thompson tells Althusser:

It follows that if Marxist concepts (that is, concepts developed by Marx and within the Marxist tradition) differ from other interpretive concepts in historical practice, and if they are found to be more “true”, or adequate to explanation, than others, this will be because they stand up better to the test of historical logic, and not because they are “derived from” a true Theory outside this discipline.

(Thompson, 1978, p44)

Thompson deploys his eighth proposition not only against Althusserian epistemology but also against other structural or functional systems, such as Parsonian sociology, “which periodically attempt to over-run the historical discipline” but which cannot explain social change. The proposition is that certain critical categories and concepts employed by historical materialism can only be understood as historical categories. This is because history is dynamic, not a series of ‘stills’. “Any historical moment is both a result of prior process and an index towards the direction of its future flow. ... We inhabit the same element ourselves (a present becoming a past)” (Thompson, 1978, p47).

The nature of the evidence is therefore not static but dynamic, dealing with process, contradiction and illusive facts. Historical concepts are not rules but expectations; they are extremely elastic and allow for great irregularity, for example the concepts of “exploitation”, “hegemony”, “class struggle”. History itself is not rule-governed and there is no inevitability about events in the past: when we know how things turned out, that knowledge provides us with a powerful aid to understanding why they turned out that way and not in any other; but there is no sense in which we can appeal to preconceived certainty and say that they had to turn out in that way.

1.3 Ethics, methodology and methods

This study is intended to be a contribution towards our understanding of the dilemma facing early years teachers of reading in the early twenty-first century. The definitive statement cannot be written, due to the political and ideological nature of the positions adopted and debates held. Truth and certainty are elusive but, in the light of the constraints discussed above, my aim is to use the insights I have gained from reading, discussion and practice, together with a degree of that creativity and imagination which characterises the best work, to illuminate and inform current practice.

The integrity of the researcher is essential in three key respects, namely: the statement of their theoretical position and the moral status of their research; honest handling of the evidence; and respect for the subjects of the inquiry. Following these strictures will underpin the ethical credentials of the work.

1.3.1 Moral status of the research

Nixon & Sikes believe educational research should have an explicit educational purpose: “There is an overriding need not only to define research method in technical terms but [also] to make explicit its educational rationale.” (Nixon & Sikes, 2003, p4) In the case of my own study, this is to clarify and illuminate the practice of early years professionals.

Carr describes the tradition of deliberative and reflective inquiry, or practical philosophy, which aimed for “a morally compelling vision” of the ‘good society’ and the role of education in its formation (Carr, 2003, p13). In this tradition, educational questions were always related to political and ethical questions about the type of social structure in which individuals could live satisfying and worthwhile lives. Today’s practitioners have nurtured a continuing awareness of the significance of this practical philosophy. And this they have done in spite of the onslaught of the alternative, government-defined, non-theoretical research agenda which has been in the ascendant since the nineteenth century, when state schooling became universal:

Education is now understood as synonymous with state schooling and hence as an activity conducted for utilitarian and economic purposes, rather than as an ethical activity directed towards morally desirable or socially transformative ends.

(Carr, 2003, p15)

The ends which I desire for my research are that young children should more often be able to have an experience of learning to read which is liberating and enabling rather than deadening and disaffecting. I develop a statement of my guiding theoretical perspective in the next chapter.

1.3.2 Respect for subjects of the inquiry

Ethical considerations regarding empirical research have limited relevance to this inquiry, particularly regarding informed consent. Many of the actors lived in the past and cannot give consent for their lives and views to be analysed and written about. Others are the subject of the reported studies or secondary sources which make up the bulk of the evidence here investigated. Basic respect and courtesy are called for.

1.3.3 Methodology and methods

My methodological approach is that of historical materialism, searching, as Palmer (1997) describes, for “the actual experience of historically situated men, women and children”. I reject the postmodernist view, also for the reasons given by Palmer that the fundamental social relations of the capitalist economy remain unchanged and, therefore, the working class remains the driving force of social change. Historical materialism also accommodates the diverse approaches of more recent concerns, such as feminism, as Thompson (1978) points out, because “historical logic” safeguards the quality and relevance of the work. It does this, furthermore, without detracting from the need for researchers, rightly, to have their own values, which influence their choices of questions to put to the evidence and how they evaluate the answers.

In the next chapter I will argue that the theory of historical materialism remains as apt today as when it was first written. The dialectical relationship between this theoretical position and the historical evidence, notwithstanding its largely secondary nature, will be guided by Thompson’s strictures for the interrogation of facts regarding their historical credentials, their face-value at the time, their role as recorded statistics, their role in a historical narrative, their ability to represent more general phenomena of the same type and their ability to indicate social structure (Thompson, 1978).

The method I will adopt to collect my historical evidence is, following Hearn (1978), to undertake extensive reading, mainly of secondary sources

but also including relevant government and other official publications and to note the points of controversy among scholars which might affect the interpretation. Hearn's pleas for the manner in which his research should be judged, regarding the adequacy, heuristic value and contribution of the work, applies to my own inquiry.

1.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to explain the choice of a historical approach to my inquiry. I have discussed some of the controversies I have discerned within the discipline of history, regarding the ontological status of its subject matter and the relationship between theory and practice. I have sought to identify how my own research needs to attend to the issues raised, including ethical considerations.

The methodological aims and approach of this study are to construct a good explanation of present-day reading practice, based on the belief that history was inhabited by real people whose lives and actions can be examined and represented with respect and, to an unknown degree of accuracy, understanding. The historical context of the work is to give focus and direction to the study, in its turn guided by a materialist theoretical framework, derived from Marx, which will be elaborated in the next chapter. My contribution aims to be informed and systematic. It is part of a dialogue, between those in the past and the present, who have similar or overlapping interests; the main concern is to illuminate and support the work of early years practitioners rather than to achieve the impossible i.e. provide a definitive answer to the question of how we should teach young children to read and at what age we should formally start to do so.

For sources of information I will look mainly to the published scholarship in the field and seek to follow the advice given by Thompson in a footnote: "In its secondary form, it is the accepted 'findings' or accumulating knowledge of historians, which is (or ought to be) passed under continuous critical review." (Thompson, 1978, note 29, p194) Among some of the gaps I am likely to encounter are the voices of the young, working-class children who learned to read, and how they responded to the texts and the experience as a whole. Some evidence in this respect might be found in the textbooks and autobiographies of the time. I will be looking out for any

indications of the responses of the children and their teachers, taking a cue from Andrew's work in an attempt to avoid imposing twenty-first-century, middle-class definitions on the findings.

Chapter 2 Marxism and education: a theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction

The opposing camps in the battles over different approaches to reading pedagogy in the early years can be characterised, loosely, as advocating 'phonics first' or 'meaning first' as the key to reading instruction. This is an oversimplification but one which those involved in the field would recognise. The two approaches are also fairly closely but not exclusively associated with, respectively, 'traditional' and 'progressive' educational ideologies. However, a consensus on the best methods for teaching reading cannot be achieved by empirical research because the protagonists are driven, rather, by their ideologies. For this reason, a means to understand ideology in general and educational ideology in particular is needed to explain the disputes surrounding the teaching of reading during the last two or three hundred years. Furthermore, education is a part of the process by which society is reproduced and therefore needs to be understood in the context of its relationship to the wider social structure. In this thesis, historical materialism provides the theoretical framework to support an understanding and interpretation of the historical record and its social context.

This chapter aims to explain key concepts in Marxist thought. These underlie my reading and guide my questioning of the historical 'facts', whose material nature was discussed in the last chapter. For not only can historical materialism explain social change, with the notions of dialectics and class struggle, but also it can provide the means to understand the structural nature of education and schooling and the role of the individual. This last it does by enlisting the contrasting ideas of superstructure and economic base, and ideology and false consciousness.

Marxist theories of education seek to understand the ways in which schooling supports and reproduces the class structure of society. Explanations include accounts of how people's lived experiences of school and in other institutions of society contribute to the ways in which they perceive their lot in society and tolerate the inherent injustice of the capitalist ownership system. Marx famously stated that the point of studying the world was not to interpret it but to change it. For this reason the theories also make

suggestions for how the participants in education can become activists for social justice.

Marxists have expressed differing views about the nature of progressive education. Some have found its function to be comparable to that of traditional methods of schooling, to maintain the *status quo* rather than to provide a more radical or more savoury means to educate children. Others have pointed not only to the potentially liberating effect of a child-centred curriculum which values a search for meaning but also to the virulent opposition to progressive education of reactionary forces which have deemed it to be subversive.

A Marxist perspective on early childhood education considers the role of progressive and traditional methods of teaching. It also incorporates the part early years education plays in enabling families to fulfil the state's expectations that parents, mothers especially, in this context, should be available to work. This chapter also discusses the controversial nature of the age at which children should start to receive formal literacy instruction.

2.2 Key concepts in Marxist thought

Those involved in the task of understanding and explaining society as a whole and its component social structures and social relationships need to choose between two basic approaches. One, the historical approach, views present-day society as being the product of a dynamic historical process; the other, the functionalist approach, views social structures and social relationships in terms of their perceived functions to maintain the *status quo*. Those seeking to understand and explain social change again need to choose between two basic approaches. One, the materialist approach, believes that society conditions and limits human thinking and behaviour; the other, the idealist approach, gives the edge to human thought and believes that human endeavour and vision guide and develop social change. Marx was a historian and a materialist: he called his approach the "materialist conception of history" summarised by others, later, as historical materialism.

2.2.1 Historical materialism

The origin of humanity's social existence lies in the drive of people to meet their basic, material needs in life for shelter, food and clothing. In other words, historically, economic development comes first, before the

development of such as politics, science, art or religion. And the history of societies is a history of class struggles, which drives social change (Marx and Engels, 1952).

Capitalism was born out of struggle between the previously ruling feudal aristocracy and the emerging bourgeoisie or middle class. Mature capitalism is the ground of conflict between the ruling bourgeoisie and the exploited working class, which capitalism brought into existence. The modern bourgeois society that grew from the ruins of feudal society established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones:

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other — bourgeoisie and proletariat.

(Marx and Engels, 1952, p41)

Members of both classes are defined economically by their relationship to the means of production: as bourgeois owners of the means of production and consumers of labour power; or workers dependent on employment of their capacity to work. The value of a worker's labour power, or capacity to work, corresponds to the value of the means of subsistence of the worker, which must be sufficient to supply the basic needs in life, including reproduction. This is determined in the same manner as the value of any other commodity; that is by the quantity of average, socially necessary labour expended on its production. However, the value of the means of subsistence varies between societies and between historical periods, depending on such as the geographical, social and cultural conditions of the time:

In contradistinction therefore to the case of other commodities, there enters into the determination of the value of labour-power a historical and moral element. Nevertheless, in a given country, at a given period, the average quantity of the means of subsistence necessary for the labourer is practically known.

(Marx, 1974, p168)

Surplus value is created by the labourer working for a longer period than the number of hours each day required to produce the value of the means of subsistence. Class struggle is centred on the distribution of this

surplus value: the employing class seeks to maintain its profit through the extraction of the greatest possible amount of surplus value from the labour power of its workers; workers, for their part, seek to improve their quality of life beyond subsistence level by gaining payment which includes a portion of the surplus value which they have created (Marx, 1974).

The value of the labour power of the more skilled worker is greater because it cost more time and labour to produce; and it creates, in the same amount of working time, proportionally higher values than the labour power of the unskilled worker. However, the extraction of surplus value from the more skilled labourer takes place in exactly the same way as for the unskilled worker (Marx, 1974, p192):

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers.

(Marx and Engels, 1952, p45)

The government in a bourgeois parliamentary democracy represents the interests of the employing class. Marx also believed that, ultimately, the class struggle which characterised capitalism would be won by the working class and a new, cooperative form of society would emerge (Marx and Engels, 1952).

2.2.2 Superstructure and economic base

The economic structure of a society is its foundation and comprises the relations of production of that society at the time. The legal and political systems and all other institutions arise as a superstructure on this base and the consciousness of human beings is also determined by the economic foundation. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." (Marx, 1963, p52)

The nature of the economic base begins to change when the productive forces of a society come into conflict with the ownership of the existing means of production. Thus, for example, capitalist production was at first held back by the nature of feudal property ownership. But with the advancing change of the economic foundation, the superstructure becomes transformed. The ideological forms in which people become conscious of the

conflict and contradictions which drive social change also become transformed and have to be explained in the light of the nature of those material contradictions themselves (Marx, 1963).

The interaction between the economic base of society and the superstructural institutions and relationships, however, is dialectical rather than determined. And only a study of the historical conditions at the time can lead to an understanding of the relative impact of the economic conditions, on the one hand, and the superstructural organisations or individual actors, on the other, in any developments:

All history must be studied afresh, the conditions of existence of the different formations of society must be individually examined before the attempt is made to deduce from them the political, civil-legal, aesthetic, philosophic, religious, etc., notions corresponding to them.
(Engels, 1890)

This study aims to illuminate the nature of the interaction between the economic base and the superstructure, including the role of the individual, in historical developments regarding reading instruction.

2.2.3 Ideology and false consciousness

Individuals are the actors in history but economic conditions constrain them because their consciousness is derived from their material life processes. "Life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life." (Marx and Engels, 1998, p42) In a class-stratified society, these material life processes are determined by an individual's relationship to the means of production and include their work or unemployment, family relationships, schooling, religion and encounters with the law or politics.

The ruling class in a society controls not only the means of material production but also the means of mental production. The ruling ideas in a society are therefore those of the ruling class, which represents its interests as the interests of all the members of society. "It will give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones." (Marx and Engels, 1998, p68)

This might include, for example, the taken-for-granted knowledge that parliamentary democracy is the superior method through which to express the natural equality of all members of society. At the same time, the self-evident, extreme inequalities of ownership and wealth in society are accepted

as in the natural scheme of things and the state is considered to be neutral. This dominant ideology can constrain and subdue the point of view and actions of members of society. And indeed the dominant class takes action to maintain this ideological hegemony when it is threatened.

False consciousness is thus a manifestation of the failure of the exploited to recognise the nature of their exploitation. However, all societies contain within themselves the conditions, arising out of class struggle, for their own destruction, due to the development of the productive forces in society coming into conflict with the ownership of the existing means of production. But for this to happen, a class has to become revolutionary, thereby liberating its members from subjugation to the ideas of the presently ruling class (Marx and Engels, 1998, p60).

In capitalist society, because the working class is the potentially revolutionary class, its members can have more or less clear, authentic understandings of their roles and relationships in society. Marx predicted that class struggle under capitalism would eventually create the conditions in which victory for the working class was possible. Thereafter, all classes would ultimately give way to the emergence of a classless society (Marx and Engels, 1952).

2.3 The Marxist theory of education

2.3.1 Marxism and education

Marxist thinkers have applied Marx's analysis to education and schooling in order to explain their role in the reproduction of capitalism. Education reproduces compliant workers, legitimises the exploitative nature of class society, controls dissent and supports the ideology of the ruling class. This section outlines some of the detail and application of the theory.

A fairly direct, linear relationship between the economic base and the superstructure is posited for schools in the "correspondence principle" by Bowles and Gintis (1976). For them, education plays a dual role to perpetuate the social, political and economic conditions of capitalism. On the one hand it increases the productive capacity of workers by imparting the appropriate technical and social skills and motivation; on the other, it defuses and depoliticises the potentially explosive class relations of production. Thus economic inequality and types of personal development are controlled, but

the education system itself neither adds to nor subtracts from the overall degree of inequality and repressive personal development (Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

The education system does not exercise control in this manner through the conscious intentions of the participants but, rather, through the correspondence between the social relationships which govern personal interaction both in the work place and in the education system. These can be summarised as follows:

- The relationships of authority and control in education replicate the hierarchical division of labour which dominates the work place; power is organised along vertical lines of authority.
- Control of the learning process is outside the control of the learner; the degree of control which pupils in different schools have over their curriculum is comparable to that of workers over the content of their jobs.
- The motivational systems of schools feature rewards (grades, stickers, threat of failure) that are extrinsic to the learning process rather than the intrinsic value of educational achievement; this mirrors the role of wages and fear of unemployment among workers.
- The learning process is fragmented; competition among pupils and the compartmentalisation of the curriculum reflect the fragmented nature of work.
- The relationships of dominance and subordination differ by the type of school, depending on the type of work those who leave are likely to do. At the type of school a working-class student would attend, the rule orientation reflects the close supervision of low-level workers.

(Bowles and Gintis, 1976, p12)

Harris (1979) outlines the mechanisms by which people accept a consciousness that distorts their view of the world and works against their own best interests. Such a consciousness embodies the ideology of the employing class, which is transmitted in the form of “received views”; an example of a received view is that everyone is treated equally. The received views comprise the knowledge that is encouraged and embraced by a society and provide the means to resolve problems arising from the expression of competing ideas. Nevertheless, received views can at the same time be contradictory, not practised and illusory.

The received views are imbibed by people in their every-day social practices and embodied in their lived experience in all social spheres. These social spheres are more or less the same across all classes, for example family, religion, work, marriage, moral and legal obligations, and this

coincidence of lived experiences disguises the class-serving nature of the beliefs.

Received views do get criticised, sometimes vigorously, but this has to be done within acceptable boundaries if the capitalist mode of production is to be protected. Harris terms this domain, in which the received view is refined, by criticism and debate, the “supportive rhetoric”. However, the supportive rhetoric is, in practice, a restriction on criticism rather than a tool for criticism and can never become a serious threat. The supportive rhetoric is totally pervasive, legitimising the overall prevailing received view of a society. It persuades the subordinate classes with large-scale rationalisations and illusions which are determined by and rooted in people’s lived experiences.

Education is just one institution which promulgates the received views. It does this through its content and process and its compulsory nature also impinges on the everyday existence of all individuals: “Education, more than anything else, secures prevailing ideologies and makes them free from threat.” (Harris, 1979, p127)

The content and process of state schooling transmits to the working class selective knowledge as well as ignorance of the inequality and injustice in society. Education presents the unequal social relations of society as natural and forms the concepts, habits, attitudes and values in individuals that are appropriate to the place that they have to occupy in society. Education thus promotes false consciousness by presenting the *status quo* as given and serving all interests in society. School lessons support the ideologies lived in all other social spheres, including religion, family, marriage, work, moral and legal systems. The content may be less flagrant than in the nineteenth century when, for example, children pledged loyalty to god and country. But nothing is included to challenge the *status quo*, thus undermining the ability of people to think of alternatives.

Vigorous debate surrounding the content and process of education takes place within the supportive rhetoric. Fine ideals are expressed by educators but undermined by the conditions of capitalism, which require vast numbers of people to do routine and tedious tasks. Indeed, argument over the content of education mystifies its real purpose. Thus schools successfully

induct people into a set of ongoing, unequal social relations, legitimate those relations and present them as necessary and given, get people to perceive the world in a distorted way and keep people ignorant of what is really going on and how it works against their best interests (Harris, 1979).

Matthews (1980) includes the control of revolutionary literature among the functions of schooling and draws attention to the sexist, racist and anti-socialist nature of school books. He also suggests how teachers can be drawn into practices of which they disapprove, using Marx's notion that ideas can become a material force when they grip the masses. Matthews gives the example of IQ testing, a seriously controversial theory which gained a boost in currency in 1969 after Cyril Burt had popularised genetic studies earlier in the century. Burt's work was later exposed as fraudulent but the ideas nevertheless gripped a large number of educationalists. What was clearly ideological in the promotion of educational practices, such as IQ testing, in former decades becomes more difficult to detect with the passage of time. The practices become accepted, their rationales change and fraudulent research results can be overlooked. Similarly, in the nineteenth century, when universal and compulsory education was introduced, educators were less coy than nowadays about their motives for training disciplined future workers and the purpose of education for social control. Therefore it is important for researchers to adopt a historical perspective for the appraisal of theories because what was clearly an ideological case in earlier work becomes obscured as the decades roll by: the motives were explicit at first but then the system became accepted as the norm and the original motives were hidden. The themes in children's literature have also become more subtle, no longer blatantly teaching children to know their place in society but more carefully disguising the message that inequality of social relationships is the natural state of the world.

Nevertheless, Marxist thinkers are also hopeful about the future and the potential of education to support progressive social change. Freire, for example, analysed the stages of consciousness that oppressed, unschooled peasants might go through, during periods of transition in a colonial society; he described the ways people might see themselves, their rights and obligations, and how they might interpret and understand events in a period

of dramatic social change. A particular kind of active, dialogical, education, based in favourable historical conditions, could contribute to the people's development of a "democratic mentality" or "*conscientização*" and democratic participation in society (Freire, 1973). Lenin and Vygotsky also believed that education could help humans to develop consciousness of the imposition of structures on their lives and, based on that consciousness, take action to change it (Au, 2006, p12).

Freire drew a distinction between the types of educational work which could be attempted in different conditions: 'Systematic education' could be undertaken with the oppressed by a progressive government in power; 'educational projects' could be undertaken with the oppressed by activists in the process of organising them in a revolutionary situation (Freire, 1979).

Simon (1994) allocates education a large degree of autonomy from the economic base and believes education can be an agent in social change in non-revolutionary situations. "The forces primarily involved ... are political and social rather than economic." (Simon, 1994, p.44) But Simon does not suggest that the political and the social gain their character independently of the economic base. He believes that local democratic activity can lead to gains of autonomy for education, which put it in a position to effect social change, although the gains are never permanently achieved. For example, the school boards, elected by proportional representation and including women, were, in his view, able to introduce improvements after 1870; the backlash came with the 1902 Education Act which abolished the school boards. Similarly, the progressive education of the 1960s led, among other things, to the abandonment of rigid streaming in primary schools; but governments in the 1980s reversed these achievements. There is scope for human action because the relationship between education and society varies over time (Simon, 1994).

However, there is a limit to autonomy in the role of the individual. According to Gramsci (1974, as cited in Entwistle, 1978), the state maintains the conditions for capitalism by consent if possible or by coercion if necessary. In parliamentary democracies ruling class supremacy is largely maintained through the consent of the exploited, gained through the hegemonic practices of the ruling class. Nevertheless, ultimately, the

bourgeoisie has resort to coercion through the organs of the state and inevitably that would happen in a revolutionary situation.

Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1980) explain the coherence of capitalist society in terms of the subordination of the labourer by economic and political means and reject the notion that the dominant ideology of the ruling class brings about social integration by the ideological incorporation of the labour force. They point out that class consciousness can take many forms short of a revolutionary ideology underpinned by political action; and that alternative forms do not represent a necessary accommodation to nor acceptance of the dominant ideology. The authors summarise a range of empirical studies to support the view that “many subordinates reject dominant values”. For example:

The evidence that subordinates support the ideology of liberal democracy is hardly convincing. Between half and three-quarters of working-class respondents to surveys endorse statements which suggest that big business has too much power in society, that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor.

(Abercrombie *et al*, 1980, p147)

Rather than society being integrated by the dominant ideology, it is, in fact, fractured and riven by contradictions. This is due to at least three factors: the incoherence of the dominant ideology; the continuing autonomy of working-class culture; and that the survival of capitalism can be explained without reference to the ideology of dominant or subordinate classes, or to the indoctrination of one by the other. Workers accept their exploitation because they have no option other than to sell their labour power in order to live. This does not imply, however, an ideological incorporation in the sense of the working class coming to accept the justice of capitalist relations (Abercrombie *et al*, 1980).

Giddens (1984) stresses the “knowledgeability” of actors and the recursive relationship between individuals and the constraining elements of the social structure. An important element of this is the “double hermeneutic”, which allows people to learn from and be influenced by the findings of surveys and research. But when individuals are unaware of the circumstances which act on them, unintended consequences can be the result. An example given by Giddens of the mechanism of social constraint is taken from the work of Willis (1977), in which disaffected boys choose to take

up unskilled, unrewarding jobs when they leave school, “thus facilitating the reproduction of some general features of capitalist-industrial labour”:

Constraint, in other words, is shown to operate through the active involvement of the agents concerned, not as some force of which they are passive recipients.

(Giddens, 1984, p289)

There is no need, therefore, to exaggerate the indoctrinating role of the school in bringing pupils to accept their place in the jobs market which is waiting for them.

2.3.2 The Marxist critique of progressive education

Traditional practice is driven by the formal content of the curriculum and its transfer by instruction from the teacher to the learner; progressive education is child-centred and adopts a more informal approach to curriculum organisation. Regarding teaching children to read, the methods of traditional education tend to be ‘bottom up’, starting with drill in letters and sounds, reading words out of context and building up to texts with meaning; the methods of progressive education tend to be top down, starting with meaningful texts and incorporating within this context the study of letters and sounds.

From a Marxist point of view, the primary function of an education system is to maintain and reproduce the class basis of capitalism, regardless of whether the curriculum organisation is of a traditional or progressive nature. However, the class-serving forms of schooling which reproduce our class-stratified society are also characterised by the contradictions apparent in the rest of society and are inevitably a site of struggle. In this conflict, progressive pedagogy is associated by many with a radical tradition of education; but while a progressive approach may gain ascendancy within education, the seeds are at the same time being sown for an inevitable reactionary backlash (Simon, 1994).

Progressive education, however, is not seen by all as radical in this respect and may have met the needs of employers at the time by improving the suitability of the next generation of workers more efficiently than traditional methods would have done. Progressive education appeared under the name of the ‘new education’ in the state elementary sector of schooling following the demise at end of the nineteenth century of the Revised Code.

For forty years the code had constricted and constrained the schools' work, largely to drill in the 3Rs, due to the system of payment by results. Selleck defines as "instrumentary" the traditional elementary education which, he suggests, met the needs of the old Victorian order. But English society was being radically transformed: "New pressures called for a new education and, in the New Education, received it." (Selleck, 1972, pix) Simon (1991) believes that progressive education never got much of a hold in practice in England in spite of its endorsement, as the twentieth century wore on, by teacher training institutions and local authority inspectors and advisors. Nevertheless, the harsh methods of the nineteenth-century state-sponsored schools were eventually superceded in England by a more mellow approach to children's learning.

An early proponent of progressive education, the influential American Dewey, advocated a child-centred approach in schools. He believed this to be a return to children's conditions before the industrial revolution, when education took place naturally in practical, motivated, purposeful every-day circumstances, with clear relevance to the family's life and survival. Schooling changed after this and became the passive learning of lessons. Dewey aimed to recreate in schools the earlier experience of children, with broad, practical, connected, active learning. Dewey also wanted to see close connections nurtured between all aspects of life in society, including the world of employment, and the child's learning in school (Dewey, 2001).

Sharp and Green (1975) argue that child-centred education mirrors, in effect, the hierarchical approaches of traditional methods, its outcome representing a form of social control. This it does in two ways: first, in the narrow sense of achieving discipline in the classroom and second in the wider sense of contributing to the promotion of a static social order generally. Progressive educators are utopian and ineffective because they fail to appreciate the limits on effective intervention that are imposed by the structures of capitalism. Such educators become apologists for the system, which "differentially stifles talent, dispels initiative and individuality and renders the vast majority of the population 'reduced' and 'alienated'." (Sharp and Green, 1975, p226)

Sharp and Green used only some very limited empirical research they undertook in one small primary school to support their theoretical views. Bernstein (1977) also criticised progressive education, on the grounds that it was 'invisible' to many pupils whom, he implied, would learn better if the method of instruction were unambiguously direct. Again, however, Bernstein can be criticised for developing a theoretical stance without reference to any serious study of historical reality (King, 1979).

Sharp and Green (1975) suggest that Dewey's work met the needs of capitalism in America at the time. Similarly, Jones (1983) has suggested that the new education was needed to modernise the English elementary school system in the changed conditions after the First World War. He suggests that, for the next 50 years, many of the techniques associated with progressive education, such as self-directed learning and self-motivation and control, were adopted to promote children's readiness for work.

Indeed, it was precisely because the new education failed to challenge capitalism, according to Jones (1983), that it was superseded by what has proved to be far worse in the hands of the new right. Jones believes that the early proponents of the new education disregarded a key purpose of state schooling, namely to prepare children for an inevitably limited political and economic role. And although the concepts of progressive education at first were challenging to the existing schooling, they could be 'de-radicalised' and used to modernise the school without affecting its basic functions. Thus a contradiction at the heart of progressive education prevented it, ultimately, from playing a radical role:

It was a parcel of loosely connected ideas and practices which combined criticism of the *status quo* with support of techniques that could be used to regenerate, but not to fundamentally transform, mass education; thus its equivocal role: at once the challenger of many features of the school, and a means by which the school adapted itself, the better to survive.

(Jones, 1983, p32)

Right from the start, progressive educators avoided political debate and were largely accepted, if not always warmly welcomed, by the state. Jones gives the examples of Maria Montessori, Margaret McMillan and Susan Isaacs. Jones summarises the continuing, typical, historical features of progressivism in England, demonstrating its inadequacies. It assumed that

social benefits would flow from its concentrating on the needs of the child; it was uninterested in problems of economic development; it was unable to outline the knowledge content of education that would be appropriate to modern society; it was unable to link its idea of the 'self-activity' of the child to political and economic education which would help the child to understand social processes; its political strategy depended on its incorporation into state projects (Jones, 1983, p39).

This political strategy revealed an inherent weakness of the educational radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s, namely that it did not concern itself with programmes of educational change. Rather, without developing an independent rationale, it took advantage of official support for progressive education, becoming unable to defend itself when the official support was withdrawn. But Jones doesn't reject progressive education. Far from it, he mounts a comprehensive defence, for example, of mixed ability teaching. Progressive methods, however, are more complex and difficult for the teacher to work with than the simpler, more straightforward, traditional approach. Jones implies that for this reason standards were neglected when they should have received the same priority among progressive educators as did relevance and child-centredness.

The challenging nature of progressive methods was seized upon by its opponents to undermine confidence in its practice. One of the first of these was Callaghan, the Labour prime minister who launched the 'great debate' on education in 1976, continuing the work of the Black Papers by, for example, Cox and Dyson (1971) in paving the way for the new right attack on state education. Callaghan said:

... there is the unease felt by parents and others about the new informal methods of teaching which seem to produce excellent results when they are in well-qualified hands but are much more dubious when they are not.

(Callaghan, 1976)

Johnson (1989) believes that all forms of state education, both traditional and progressive, have been deeply unpopular among the working class in England especially since the establishment of compulsory state schooling in the late nineteenth century. The main purpose of compulsory state schooling was to undermine independent working-class efforts,

“indigenous forms of popular education to which radicals might give a subversive twist” (Johnson, 1989, p101). But the very unpopularity of, and lack of support gained by, state education has reinforced its reactionary nature. For example, present-day working-class resistance has been conservative in the highly cynical responses of the disaffected. These have been, commonly, to ‘cut and run’ from education as soon as possible or to submit to its minimum requirements in order to gain the certification offered merely as a means to an end:

Place these two strategies side by side – as massively pursued historical patterns – and they are conservative in a deeper social sense. They produce again, in each new generation, the social divisions which are the source of the problem in the first place.
(Johnson, 1989, p108)

Johnson believes that the rise of the new right, which brought Thatcher to power in 1979, was explained, at least in part, by the weaknesses, and especially the unpopular character, of the educational policies which preceded it. “New Right campaigning had exploited this and transformed the educational agenda.” (Johnson, 1989, p95) There is no differentiation in Johnson’s account between traditional and progressive education, thereby implying that they were equally unpopular in the state sector.

The new right policies made schools more conservative by introducing competition for parental choice. Parental choice became an effective weapon in the hands of the Thatcher government after the high profile campaigning undertaken by the authors, such as Cox and Dyson (1971), of the Black Papers, from 1969 onwards, positing low standards, attacking progressive methods and advocating basic education as the means to raise standards. The Education Act introduced by Thatcher’s first education secretary forced schools, in a context of falling rolls and possible closure, to compete for pupils whose parents had been subjected to the media hype regarding the need to go ‘back to the basics’ in education in order to achieve higher standards. This paved the way for a steady conservative pressure to be exerted on comprehensive schools, discouraging them from any progressive experiment: “Such pressure is all the more difficult to resist since it is not

based on any parental involvement in the discussion of educational aims.”
(Jones, 1983, p86)

Thus it was the pressure of the market, rather than pressure from an organised parent movement, which was intended to keep schools in line. The argument applies similarly to primary education, for the Black Papers’ objects of attack were not only comprehensive schools but also the progressive primary schools advocated by Plowden (Jones, 1983). Traditional education, then, compared with progressive education, is seen to be the more reactionary, in its effects to narrow the curriculum and promote the interests of the new right.

Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, was ambivalent towards progressive education and activity methods. In 1929 he wrote of two ideologies which were “fighting it out” in his head: “whether to be Rousseauesque and leave matters to nature which never makes a mistake and is fundamentally good - or on the other hand to be ‘authoritarian’ and to force Nature, introducing into evolution the expert hand of man, and asserting the principle of authority.” (Gramsci, 1974, as cited in Entwistle, 1978, p28) This ambivalence seems to have been resolved in favour of ‘authority’, according to Entwistle

Vygotsky (1978), on the other hand, a psychologist writing in the Soviet Union in the same period, favoured play and a child-centred approach to learning. Vygotsky believed in the materialist development of consciousness and ideas, deriving his notion of ‘conscious awareness’ from Marx and Engels. The materialist basis of his influential work led to his formulation of “activity theory” and the categories of “scientific concepts” and the “zone of proximal development” to explain how children learn (Au, 2007).

Au points out that when Vygotsky’s *Thought and Language* was in 1962 first translated and edited into English, most of his original references to Marx and Engels, and all references to Lenin, were omitted. However, this had been corrected in subsequent editions and Au reinterprets Vygotsky’s work on individual development to draw direct parallels with Lenin’s work on social development. Au posits correlations between Vygotsky’s conceptions of “conscious awareness” and “scientific concepts” and Lenin’s conception of “consciousness”; and similarities between Lenin’s conception of the role of political leadership in the development of working-class consciousness and

the role of Vygotsky's teacher or "more capable peer" in the development of "conscious awareness" (Au, 2007).

2.3.3 A Marxist perspective on early childhood education

In the twenty-first century, the relics of progressive education are to be found in the early years. Vygotsky's work resonates, for example, in the findings of *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002), a study which influenced the play-based curriculum of the statutory 'foundation stage' which was created in 2000. The findings highlight the notion of "shared, sustained, thinking", the manner in which children learn and develop through one-to-one conversation, with an adult or peer, in the context of a child's self-initiated activities in a playful environment.

In contradiction, however, traditional education remains strongly embedded in the early years. This can be seen in the form taken by the teaching methods, for example drilling in phonics, which have been adopted. This is a result of government demands for targets to be met by age five in statutory literacy assessments for, if there are targets to be met, direct teaching will be employed, regardless of the rhetoric and apparent statutory force of the play-based curriculum (Anning, 1998). But it is not only the teaching method which is at stake in the early years but also the age at which formal literacy teaching begins. Advocates of traditional teaching methods call for an early start, sometimes as young as three or four (Rose, 2006). But the REPEY findings also point to the contribution towards children's later disaffection that can be made by a too-early start to formal literacy instruction (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2002). International surveys have also suggested that while English children in general read well, they are less enthusiastic about reading than many of their European counterparts (Whetton, *et al*, 2007). A key difference between countries is the age at which formal teaching begins: in England, we have seen that it is very early; in European countries the age is more often six or seven (OFSTED, 2003).

The early start in England can be explained, at least in part, by the avowed aim of government policies in the early twenty-first century to make it possible for mothers of young children to work. Thus the function of early childhood education is not only to maintain and reproduce capitalism but also to include parents – especially mothers – in the mechanisms of social control.

This was a feature of the debates in the nineteenth century which led to the choice of the early age of five to be the start of compulsory state education, although at that time the government also wanted older children to be available for work. An important function of the first Education Act, therefore, was to ensure that young children would be safely minded in school and off the streets so that it would be possible for all other members of the family to be employed (Woodhead, 1989).

Working-class women have always had to work, although not necessarily the regular and routine hours more typical of working men's employment. Richardson (1994) recounts the fate of early nineteenth century working-class children who were too young to work; fathers and mothers, who both served very long hours in the mines and factories, left the children unattended, sometimes drugged with the opiates which were sold freely in shops. Thus nurseries in the early twentieth century featured a marked 'social rescue' element in their operations. Macmillan, for example, recounts experiences such as finding young children tied to table legs in impoverished families' homes, to prevent the children from coming to physical harm while the adults and older children were at work (Stevinson, 1923).

That mothers of young children should be available for work has been a background factor in debates around the age at which the formal teaching of literacy should start. But that mothers should be available for work has not always been expedient for the employing class. After World War Two, when demand for women workers was reduced, an aspect of, in Harris's terms, the "received view" of society had become that mothers of the very young should stay at home to provide care and early education for their children. At the same time Bowlby popularised a theory of "maternal deprivation", suggesting that mothers and babies had a biological need to stay in contact with each other if mental illness in the child was to be avoided (Bowlby, 1951). Such legitimising theories also change, however, with the needs of employers. This one of Bowlby's has been rewritten such that attachment to a key worker in lieu of the mother is now acceptable. Indeed the notion of "key worker" in publicly funded early years education and childcare, for children from birth to five, is now a mainstay of government policy (DfES, 2007).

2.4 Conclusion

Traditional and progressive education cannot be seen directly to represent the interests, respectively, of the two principle classes. But the struggle between the two can lead to gains for working-class children when the progressive approach is in the ascendancy, for the progressive method, with its search for meaning, has the potential to challenge a child's thinking whereas the traditional method, with its mind-numbing features, does not.

Struggle between traditional and progressive education transferred to the public sector in the twentieth century after independent working-class responsibility for children's education had been usurped by the state and full-time school attendance had become free and compulsory. Before this, working-class education was in many respects 'bottom up', but it was also child-centred, in as much as family members or independent working-class teachers were not interested in class instruction but rather planned lessons in accordance with the individual child's needs. This seems to have been the aim of Mackinder (1923), one of the early practitioners of the new education discussed in the next part, in developing similar, 'bottom up', child-centred methods in order to teach reading on an individual basis to classes of large numbers of children.

Gramsci was right when he suggested that education for the revolution was for adults (Entwistle, 1978). It is necessary, therefore, to separate what is appropriate for adults or adolescents from what is appropriate for children, especially very young children. An early years teacher cannot contribute directly to the achievement of a more just and equal society through the method used to teach a child to read. But the teacher can encourage in the child a life-long love of reading and finding things out, through the choice of method, thereby avoiding disaffection from learning: progressive approaches are more likely to achieve this than traditional drill in the 3Rs.

A government could never allow the type of pedagogy adopted in a state school directly to challenge the capitalist system of production, due to the ultimate rule of society's economic base. But skirmishes in the reading war, having no directly threatening relationship with the interests of the ruling class, can have a relative degree of autonomy. Therefore it is worth studying

the theory and practice of the progressive educators and seek to apply the findings to modern conditions.

Childhood is of itself. We need to make it worthwhile if we can; not give up because selected teaching methods won't change the outcome of the nature of the job that is waiting for a child, or prevent capitalism from impinging on life at school, as it must, as well as at home and everywhere else. A child who enjoys reading, rather than does it because they have to, is in the best position to make choices about their place in the world when the time comes.

This chapter has laid out the theoretical stance of historical materialism which will inform my work. As explained in the last chapter, I will use this understanding to select and interpret the evidence as it is to be found in published, mainly secondary sources. The next three chapters present my findings and the arguments I have derived from them in order to understand the origins and development of the reading war in early childhood education.

Part Two: History of the Reading War in Early Childhood Education

Chapter 3 The 18th and 19th century origins of the reading war

3.1 Introduction

Present-day disputes surrounding teaching young children to read concern not only the teaching methods to be used – traditional or progressive – but also the age at which formal literacy teaching should start. Of interest to this study is the contradiction between the methods which is inherent in the statutory ‘early years foundation stage’, where the play-based curriculum demanded in the official documents (DfES, 2007a) is undermined by the expectation that young children will achieve target numbers of stringent early learning goals in reading, writing and synthetic phonics by the age of five (DCSF, 2009). The existence of the targets, needless to say, is also having an effect on the education of even younger children, with the introduction of formal literacy teaching starting sometimes at age three although this is not officially advocated (e.g. Ofsted, 2001).

Those who teach reading are inevitably party to a war, in which the protagonists can be characterised in a number of ways but whose methods in the early years usually divide along the lines of ‘phonics first’ (bottom up) or ‘meaning first’ (top down). Street (1995) analyses the two approaches in terms of “autonomous” and “ideological” models of literacy. Exponents of the autonomous model study literacy in its technical aspects and independently of the social context. The ideological model, on the other hand, includes the technical aspects of literacy within a context which has a meaning for the participants:

The ideological model ... does not attempt to deny technical skill or the cognitive aspects of reading and writing, but rather understands them as they are encapsulated within cultural wholes and within structures of power. In that sense the ideological model subsumes rather than excludes the work undertaken within the autonomous model.

(Street, 1995, p161)

In this study, the ideological model would correspond with the kind of child-centred approach which stresses the primacy of meaning and context for a child; the place of skills teaching, for example knowledge of letter-sound correspondence, is seen to be in service to the learner’s needs for comprehension and communication. The ability of the child to use a range of cueing strategies, including prediction and substitution, in order to gain

meaning from the text, is considered to be commendable (e.g. Waterland, 1985). The autonomous model would correspond with the type of teaching which stressed the primacy of the alphabetic code and the need for discreet phonics instruction to ensure a child's accuracy in decoding before, in its most extreme version, the child should be allowed access to complete texts; real books are treated with suspicion because they facilitate the use of strategies such as prediction and substitution, derided as "guessing", which are discouraged and deemed to be unreliable (e.g. Lloyd, 2003). Phonics teaching requires drill and rote learning by children even though nowadays these activities are described as "fun" and "games" (Rose, 2006; DfES, 2007b).

However, any analysis along these lines which is intended to cover several centuries is in danger of anachronism. For example, as will be discussed in chapter five, a progressive teacher in the late twentieth century would have adopted a sociopsycholinguistic approach to the reading process made possible only in the light of a paradigm shift that gave rise to Goodman's findings published in 1969. Goodman's work emphasised the primary importance, in both oral and written language acquisition, of language use and abhorred its decomposition into school-room exercises. That the most progressive of earlier approaches to teaching and learning might have included decontextualised skills exercises in literacy instruction reflects historical limits on knowledge rather than failure of vision on the part of the educators (Altwerger *et al*, 1987). In this chapter, for example, the manner is described in which progressive literacy instruction was embedded in the much broader domestic curriculum of the working-class child until well into the nineteenth century; a wide range of resources, including commercial primers, home-made aids to learning and other forms of print in the household, were adapted and combined to meet the learning needs of individuals, starting at the age, conducted at the pace and taken in the direction which was appropriate for the child's needs and interests (Vincent, 1997).

Another aspect of this debate is the lingering unpopularity of state schooling among parents. Few parents express any affection towards the state educational system, quite at odds, for example, with the regard in which

the health service is held (Johnson, 1989). This unpopularity can be discerned in dissatisfaction with the methods adopted at school. For example some parents want more freedom of choice and play for their young children than is permitted in a school committed to an instructional approach (Steiner Waldorf, 2009); other parents object to a child-centred approach because they believe that the sole purpose of a school is to teach the 3Rs and not to mould their children's social and emotional development (Cannella, 2002). This last is reminiscent of working-class parents' objections to the indoctrination of their children in religion and morality by state-sponsored schools in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Responses to this dilemma for parents in the twenty-first century, as in the past, can include private education for those who can afford it; another is to opt for absenteeism, which is a recurrent irritant to governments, or home education. Relatively insignificant numbers of parents educate their children at home but the number may have doubled between 1988 and 1995, for example, to more than 8000 children, approximately 0.09 per cent of the school population (Petrie, 1998).

At the time of writing, the most recent salvos in the reading war regarding methods have been fired from the Conservative Party conference in 2009 by Michael Gove, now Secretary of State for Education, who claimed that standards had dropped and schools had failed to teach millions to read due to "faddy ideologies"; he pledged that setting by ability and rote learning would be among the measures introduced by a Tory government (Curtis, 2009a). A quick response from a group of headteachers rejected this view and claimed that improvements in teaching and learning had increased the number of pupils who achieved and behaved well: "This is what we understand as progressive education, in contrast to the pejorative way in which that term is sometimes used," they said (Curtis, 2009b).

Skirmishes remain commonplace regarding government policy and school practice. Teaching synthetic phonics has arguably become a statutory requirement by its incorporation into changes made both to the English national curriculum programme of study for children age five to seven (DfES, 2007c) and to the early years foundation stage learning goals for children up to age five (DfES, 2007a). These changes were made after publication of the

government-commissioned Rose report on early reading in 2006. The Rose recommendations reflected a campaign by advocates of 'synthetic phonics first', pursued vigorously through websites, for example the Reading Reform Foundation and Synthetic Phonics and in the pages and virtual staffroom of the *Times Educational Supplement* (*TES*) and other media. Early years professionals campaigned against it, in the *TES* and on other platforms (e.g. Barnes, Edgington, Moyles, Pound, Scott and Trudell, 2005). However, notwithstanding the changes that were made, government publications remain permissive of other approaches being used at the same time as synthetic phonics (DfES, 2007a; NAHT, 2006). Indeed an aspect of the government's policy is support for 1:1 tuition in 'reading recovery', condemned by the advocates of 'synthetic phonics first' for its multi-cueing approach, including "guessing" (e.g. McGuinness, 2009).

Regarding the age at which formal literacy teaching should start, present-day arguments are encapsulated in the Cambridge Primary Review (2009). This report calls for the introduction of formal literacy teaching to be postponed until age six, in line with typical European practice. In contrast, a few months earlier, the government-commissioned *Review of the Primary Curriculum* (Rose, 2009) had recommended that the age be reduced to four and this became government policy.

These disputes are the subject of many empirical investigations. But the ideological divide between traditional and progressive approaches to education cannot be bridged by empirical evidence alone. Any attempt to achieve a consensus on method by reference to research is doomed because the disagreements mask the real purpose of literacy instruction by the state, which is to contribute to the social control of children, their teachers and their parents. But now, as in the past, state control can never be absolute while those whose interests are at odds with the dominant class continue to battle for the right to practice progressive methods.

Achieving a better historical and contemporary understanding of the issues in the reading war, in order to gauge the strength of the 'enemy' and to inform appropriate and possible professional practice, is a realistic and worthwhile purpose for this thesis. It will be done through a study of the history of early years education, in which lies the origins and developments of

the disputes. This and the next two chapters present that history, as it unfolded over the last two or three hundred years, in order better to understand the debate as it is manifested in the present. This chapter aims to reveal the origins of the reading war in a wider conflict at the time of the industrial revolution and the emergence of capitalism. The working class, on the one hand, attempted to defend its independent, progressive and child-centred education; the interests of the dominant classes, on the other hand, promoted a controlling, traditional state education. The chapter will argue, first, that the working class has always taught its children to read, using progressive, child-centred methods, and starting the process at the age – sometimes very young – that was appropriate for the child. By the late eighteenth century, with the industrial revolution and the emerging capitalist system well under way, reading was a widespread accomplishment in the working class (Stone, 1969). Literacy was actually and potentially a potent weapon in the struggles waged between the old and new classes and was deemed to be seriously threatening to the security of the dominant classes (Willinsky, 1993).

Second, the chapter will show how the emergent bourgeoisie developed, for its own children, new, rationalist methods of education based, after Rousseau, on the replacement of rote learning by reasoning and judgment. Elements of the contemporary romantic movement were at odds with the rationalist project, for example favouring for their own children fantasy and play above moral tales and serious investigations of science and technology. But the rising new class was at one in its determination to educate the working class into acceptance of its exploitation, to know its inferior place in society and to be willing to work for the benefit of its betters (Richardson, 1994).

Third, the chapter will argue that state-sponsored education, at first provided and funded by the churches alone, was devised as a means of social control of the working class in order to subdue the class struggles inherent in capitalism. The monitorial system, introduced early in the nineteenth century, attempted to achieve this through coercion, imposing on children, from age six or seven, industrial work discipline, the catechistic method of instruction and mindless literacy drills (Johnson, 1976).

Subsequent chapters will argue that parents vigorously resisted and opposed the state system and steadfastly maintained the tradition of independent, working-class education, including the flexible use of private working-class schools - dame schools and private venture schools (Gardner, 1984). In the face of this opposition, the government became much more closely involved in supporting state schools, in order to coordinate tactics finally to destroy independent working-class education. From 1833, subsidies were offered to the voluntary schools – both elementary and the more recently established infant schools – and a system of inspection was instituted which wrought improvements designed to placate parents. But by mid century, although the monitorial system had been superseded by a more subtle regime, government strategy still wasn't working, in spite of significant investment of state funds.

The origin and development of an infant phase of education, offering a more liberal curriculum than that of the longer-established elementary schools for older children, is similarly explained as a direct challenge by the state to the working-class dame schools which catered for the same younger age group. Ultimately, however, the state was forced to introduce free and compulsory state schooling. This it did in stages, through the Education Acts of 1870, 1880 and 1891, in order finally to defeat the working-class curriculum. But the harsh regime of payment by results, imposed on state schools in 1862 under the Revised Code, led to widespread disaffection among pupils and their parents. Thus the victory over independent education was won at the cost of any working-class affection or loyalty towards state schools. The Revised Code lingered until the end of the century. Thereafter, the reading war, between progressive and traditional approaches, re-emerged as a permanent feature in the state sector of education. Progressive education, known as the 'new education', gained in strength during the first half of the twentieth century but a few decades later it had been beaten firmly into retreat by the 'back to the basics' movement of the new right.

The progressive approach continues to be perceived as threatening to the interests of the employing class but, short of the imposition of a totalitarian regime, it can never be entirely routed. A new controlling strategy

has, however, been developed by the state: progressive methods, for example a play-based curriculum in the early years or a 'creative' curriculum for older children, are expected to be employed at the same time as targets are set for teachers which can only be met by the use of traditional methods; on the face of it an impossible contradiction.

3.2 Traditional working-class education

3.2.1. Learning to read in the domestic curriculum

In the pre-industrial and industrialising environments, children of the common people were fully integrated into the domestic economy of their families. Children learned the routines, rhythms and responsibilities, including, sometimes, becoming literate, of every-day family life and the local economy. They were expected to contribute at an appropriate level, for example by helping with chores and taking responsibility for tasks such as scaring birds (Thompson, 1967). Much instruction was informal and many children in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century never attended a school of any kind. Those that did, attended intermittently, attendance depending on whether children could be released from the duties of the household and local community and whether the fee could be spared (Mitch, 1992).

Working-class children might also work outside the home, in the fields or the factory. In some cases this was alongside family members and in all cases the income was an essential part of the family's survival. This kind of subsistence was at first perpetuated in the factory, with children working alongside or for their parents. At the same time the 'task-orientation' of the way of life typical of pre-industrial societies shifted towards timed labour. While manufacturing industry was on a small scale, children had a part to play in aspects of the work, for example the fetching, carrying and waiting for materials that accompanied the putting-out system. For each of the tasks involved in small-scale manufacturing there were many and varied subsidiary tasks which the same worker or family group must do in one cottage or workshop. "Hence we get the characteristic irregularity of labour patterns before the coming of large-scale machine-powered industry." (Thompson, 1968, p71)

Similarly, until the first decades of the nineteenth century, the irregular working day and working week, frequently incorporating leisure time,

especially for men, on Saint Monday, was a part of the wider, irregular pattern of the working year, including traditional holidays, saints' days and fairs. This entrenched working-class culture was deeply rooted in centuries of custom in a rural way of life. It was highly resistant to the efforts of the emerging employing class to instil work-place discipline and long hours of work on a regular basis (Thompson, 1968).

Children may have attended a private day school – a dame school or private venture school – for a total of about 18 months to two years between the ages of five and 11, when it was convenient for the family and could be afforded. Parents sent their children to these “small, ill-organised, and allegedly inefficient seminaries” (Laqueur, 1976b, p194) because they were integral to the community, in contrast to the public schools, which were alien to working-class culture and imposed from outside. Private working-class schools would inevitably have varied widely in standards and many of them may not have been good; but neither were they inferior to the voluntary schools (Laqueur, 1976b). Nineteenth-century children were also likely to have attended reading lessons at a Sunday school (Laqueur, 1976a).

Children may well have attended more than one day school, due to the sometimes transitory nature of the schools themselves or because, for example, a family moved frequently to avoid paying rent. This was certainly a feature of the experience of the working-class biographers surveyed by Vincent: “Over half of those who attended school at all attended at least two, some more.” (Vincent, 1981, p 98) This lack of stability, together with the generally subsidiary nature of literacy education in the life of a working-class family, in Vincent's view, limited the progress most children could make to a fairly basic level (Vincent, 1981).

But schools alone were not responsible for the growing rates of literacy among the working class during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “Teaching literacy was a task divided between parents, relatives, friends, local old men and women who kept small and highly informal schools and occasionally by masters in endowed or charity schools.” (Laqueur, 1976c, p259).

Evidence of literacy rates have been gathered, estimated and extrapolated from a number of local and national sources, including parish

registers called for by the Marriage Act of 1754; the act required brides and grooms to sign their names or, if unable to do so, make a mark. Data based on the ability to sign suggests that the substantial increase in lower-class literacy which took place throughout the revolutionary decades of the seventeenth century was maintained at between 35 and 40 per cent until the third quarter of the eighteenth century; literacy rates then dipped sharply before recovering in the last quarter of the century. They were to rise, in the first half of the nineteenth century, to 60 per cent and, by the end of the century, to 97 per cent (Stone, 1969).

Interpretation of the data assumes that those who could sign their names could also read because, traditionally, children were taught to write after they had learned to read (Stone, 1969). The fall in literacy rates in the third quarter of the eighteenth century was probably due to the disruption of the working-class domestic curriculum caused by the conditions of the time, a rapidly increasing population subjected to the inhuman living and working conditions and long working hours associated with the mills and mines of the rapidly expanding industrial environment (Hopkins, 1994). The recovery was dramatic and can be explained at least partly in terms of the increase in dame schools and Sunday schools (Stone, 1969).

Not every member of every family became a reader in the pre-industrial and industrialising periods; but those who did were able to instruct the next generation. The learning was done when it was convenient, fitted into the general patterns of family life. Throughout the nineteenth century, the rise in rates of literacy was due to working-class children mastering skills when and how the circumstances permitted (Vincent, 1989).

Methods of teaching children to read pre-dated printing and were 'bottom up' or 'particularist', starting with teaching the alphabet and then syllables. But the context was flexible, child-centred and provided 1:1 support (Vincent, 1997; Gardner, 1984). An example of this approach is described in a book written by Thomas Tryon, born in 1641 into the very poor family of a Gloucestershire tiler and plasterer. Notwithstanding the very unusual occurrence of a book being written by a person of such low status, he gives detailed directions on how women should teach their young children to read with pleasure, based on his own experience:

At a year and a half or two years old, shew them their letters, not troubling them in the vulgar way with asking them what is this letter, or that word; but instead thereof, make frequent repetitions in their hearing, putting the letters in their sight. And thus, in a little time, they will easily and familiarly learn to distinguish the twenty four letters, all one as they do the utensils, goods, and furniture of the house, by hearing the family name them. At the same time, teach your children to hold the pen, and guide their hand; and by this method, your children, un-accountably to themselves, will attain to read and write at three, four, or five years old ...

(Tryon, 1705, as cited in Spufford, 1997, p55)

Spufford points out that the instruction to teach such young children to write is extraordinary, given that, in the seventeenth century, writing usually began at age seven, after a child had been taught to read.

Parents were jealous of their responsibilities towards their children's education, preferring to keep reading instruction within the domestic sphere. Schools were attended more or less intermittently. These included private working-class schools, which taught children on an individual basis, and Sunday schools, after they became widespread in the late eighteenth century. In the Sunday schools the teaching groups were small and work was tailored to the needs of the individual child (Gardner, 1984).

3.2.2 Private working-class day schools

Accounts of working-class day schools, including dame schools and private venture schools, are thin on the ground but a picture has been painted from a range of sources by Gardner (1984) and Spufford (1997). These include records by various official bodies, including the Newcastle Commission, appointed in 1858. The commissioners collected evidence over three years and created cameos of individual, ordinary children's experiences. These are two examples:

Margaret Henderson, a 12-year-old server to a hair-seating weaver in Sheffield: "I think I was nine years old when I first went to work. I was two years at a private day-school before I went to work and now I go to St. Paul's Sunday-school, and to Queen-street evening-school twice-a-week. (Reads very well in the 12th chapter of St. Mark ... Writes well also.)"

(Newcastle Commission, 1861, as cited in Gardner, 1984, p.27)

John Marsden who worked in a pit in the West Riding; he was 8½ ; "... when I was a 'little 'un', I went vary near 'holf' a year to Benjamin Firth's day-school and learn a, b, abs; I never went to Sunday-school."

(Newcastle Commission, 1861, as cited in Gardner, 1984, p.29)

Dame schools and private venture schools were numerous and diverse in character but, regarding their educational aims, had an underlying similarity. In general, dame schools always offered reading and sometimes writing; private venture schools, as well as reading, often also offered writing and some number. The schools were flexible, accommodating sporadic attendance to suit the working-class family's life-style, and much more expensive – about 4d but sometimes as much as 9d a week – than the subsidised voluntary church schools, which charged about 1d a week. The teachers, women and men, were working class themselves, trusted members of the local community, and often had other occupations which they pursued at the same time. This kind of flexibility allowed such schools to exist wherever and whenever there was a sufficient local demand for them (Gardner, 1984, p82). Two more examples:

William Howitt remembered one of his teachers, “William Woodcock, more familiarly Billy Bingo – a little, jolly man, who united the two vocations of schoolmaster and baker, while his wife boiled toffee and barley-sugar for the children.”

(Smith, 1931, as cited in Gardner, 1984, p126)

John Jones, the working-class poet, relates that in his Gloucestershire village, “the only person ... who taught writing at that time was an old man, by trade a stone-cutter, and he only on winter evenings – after his return from his daily labour.”

(Jones, 1831, as cited in Gardner, 1984, p126)

Gardner's enthusiasm makes the working-class commitment to their schools entirely credible: “Between them, the individual method, the absence of teacher professionalism, and the domestic atmosphere of the working-class private school allowed enormous pedagogical and organisational flexibility.” (Gardner, 1984, p169)

3.2.3 Sunday schools

The Sunday school movement was developed by the middle class as a means of social control in the eighteenth century. It grew and changed so as to become a significant feature of independent working-class education in the next century (Laqueur, 1976a). The growth was slow until about 1780 when, for about 20 years, middle-class activists in the Anglican and dissenting churches promoted them to develop working-class morals and deference. While the schools were under the firm control of the churches, reading was

taught but not writing. Around the turn of the century their character changed in response to the working-class demand for secular education; the working class itself took greater control of the Sunday schools and church and chapel lost much control. The principally religious character of the Sunday schools was not restored until after about 1850 (Laqueur, 1976a).

The Sunday school movement spread rapidly to become nationwide and Sunday schools existed on a much larger scale than the charity schools at the end of the previous century. Laqueur estimates that, by 1851, perhaps as many as three-quarters of working-class children from age five were on the books of a Sunday school. The growth of Sunday schools, from about 1770, was almost exactly contemporaneous with the growth of publications for children, “and no other institution was more instrumental in bringing the printed word to working-class children” (Laqueur, 1976a, p113). Working-class families popularly supported Sunday schools while they offered a secular education. Sunday schools also had the advantage over day schools of providing an effective education without keeping children from work during the week. The curriculum of the Sunday schools could be relatively progressive due to the small class sizes:

Undoubtedly the teachers, themselves without much formal education, were less systematic than some observers might have hoped. But the three, four or five hours that were spent each week in small classes devoted to instruction in reading and sometimes writing or arithmetic must have made an impact on working-class children deprived of a prolonged period of weekday elementary education.

(Laqueur, 1976a, p112)

The schools were open for five or six hours and taught reading as well as moral and religious education. Teaching writing on the Sabbath was a controversial issue: some schools did so but others, where it was considered inappropriate, sometimes taught writing at evening classes during the week (Laqueur, 1976a; Lawson and Silver, 1973; Hopkins, 1994). At first the Sunday schools were on a small and simple scale: “Literate working people took the children of their less literate neighbours into their homes or rented rooms each Sunday to teach them to read and write.” (Laqueur, 1976a, p10) Some schools became much larger. Run and taught by volunteers, often working class themselves, they were a congenial means to promote the basic

education of children, the self-education of adults and the cohesion of the local community.

Often the schools were used by parents who couldn't afford the fees of a day school and who needed their children to work, at home or in a work place, during the week; at least 25 per cent and up to 75 per cent of those who attended Sunday school received no other formal education.

Nevertheless, parents contributed indirectly to Sunday school funds on a considerable scale, for example at events such as the annual sermon or anniversary. Laqueur estimates that all but a very few children after 1830 would have experienced at least a few years in Sunday school, except perhaps in London, where they were generally less well supported by working-class parents (Laqueur, 1976a).

Laqueur describes Sunday schools as "strange halfway houses between the private school, which was integrated into the community, and the externally imposed public school" (Laqueur, 1976b, p201). The voluntary schools contradicted working-class mores and ways of life in a catalogue of ways: not only did they demand regular attendance and good time keeping, cleanliness, strict dress codes that included short hair for girls as well as boys, but also they administered corporal punishment (deemed to be the prerogative of a parent), indoctrinated the children in class submission and religion, allowed the children of their neighbours to exercise authority over their own children or exploited their own children in this way and, finally, the schools failed in their attempts to teach the 3Rs (Laqueur, 1976b).

In contrast, the Sunday schools were acceptable because, while they also often promoted cleanliness, punctuality and regular attendance, they were welcoming institutions, their teachers and ethos being largely working class. Furthermore, the effort was needed on only one day of the week:

the practical problems of washing, mending clothes, and doing chores ahead of time were minimised for once-a-week attendance; indeed, they might even become a special treat.

(Laqueur, 1976b, p201)

And the Sunday schools were not deemed to be repressive organisations for, notwithstanding their teaching of allegiance to queen and country, they inspired the loyalty and gratitude of those they taught, including many of the radical working-class leaders of the day (Laqueur, 1976b).

3.2.4 Alternative schools

Alternative schools were never in the mainstream for working class families. The number of radical and socialist Sunday schools, for example, was only ever small and, in practice, they were not much different from the ordinary Sunday schools which met the needs of the working-class communities (Laqueur, 1976a). The early cooperative movement employed teachers and set up schools for the children of its members and there were occasional attempts to set up socialist schools independently of cooperative societies. Many Chartists organised classes for adult workers and schools for children but providing education was always subservient to the over-riding demand of the chartist movement for universal male suffrage. Notwithstanding the gender issues of later times, universal male suffrage, it was believed, by women and men, was the necessary precursor of both democratic education for all and shorter working hours, for children and adults alike, in which to pursue it (Simon, 1960).

Some alternative independent organisations attempted to reform education as a model for reforming the social structure. Examples included, in Blackburn, the members of the Female Reform Society pledging themselves “to use our utmost endeavour to instil into the mind of our children a deep and rooted hatred of our corrupt and tyrannical rulers”. In *The Bad Alphabet for the use of the Children of Female Reformers*, for example, B was for Bible, Bishop, and Bigotry; K for King, King’s evil, Knave and Kidnapper; W for Whig, Weakness, Wavering, and Wicked (Thompson, 1968, p788).

3.2.5 School age

Regarding the age at which children might be taught or the length of time it might take a child to learn to read, in the seventeenth century a bright child could learn to read in a few months at age six. Most children who had been taught would read fluently by age seven at the latest. Writing was taught after reading, from about age seven. Those at school till they were seven could read and those at school till eight could write. Poorer children, who generally started to work for wages at about age six or seven, would therefore have left any school attended before learning to write. Thus reading was a much more socially diffused skill than writing and many schooldames taught reading who

could not themselves write (Spufford, 1997). Gardner (1984) reaches similar conclusions for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This is comparable with the early nineteenth-century monitorial schools, which expected children, who started to attend at age six or seven, to learn to read in 12 months and to write and master some arithmetic in three or four years. But the typical length of attendance at such a school was rarely more than a year, enough to acquire some ability to read but not to write (Schofield, 1968).

A highly motivated lower-class child, such as one among the rare number who subsequently wrote an autobiography, took four to six months to learn to read between the ages of four and six. They were recorded as being able to read at ages as young as three (Spufford, 1997). Similarly, an upper-class mother might have taught her child to read by age four or five (Bathurst, 1905; Whitbread, 1972).

The ages of children in most private working-class schools ranged between two and 11 or 12. Under-fives in school were likely to have come with an older sibling, not only for minding but also to begin to 'say their letters' (Gardner, 1984). But the ages of starting and finishing school and the amount of schooling in between - perhaps a total of 18 months to two years - varied enormously. Vincent, for example, was unable to establish a general age of school entry from his studies of eighteenth-century autobiographers, due to the lack of a clear distinction between child-minders and dame schools and to the wide variation in the ages at which the autobiographers went to schools (Vincent, 1981).

3.2.6 Methods and resources

Resources for home tuition included the limited textual materials which were to hand, perhaps the Bible or Pilgrim's Progress and possibly also a battledore. The nature of the education at home and at working-class day schools, inevitably, was individually planned and geared to the needs of the particular child (Vincent, 1989). Alphabets originally were mainly without illustrations but had become more interesting in the eighteenth century. Battledores were developed from the much earlier horn-books, which consisted of a metal or wooden frame containing a printed sheet of letters, the Lord's Prayer and simple words, protected by a thin sheet of transparent

horn. The battledore was a printed card folded into three with alphabets in various types, a syllabary, aphorisms and small woodcuts. Its alternative use was for playing the outdoor game of "battledore and shuttlecock" (Devon Libraries, 2006).

Spufford describes how school dames and working mothers, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, taught young children, sometimes as young as three, to read, using "the ubiquitous hornbook and primer, which always taught the child the basic tenets of religion as well as reading" (Spufford, 1997, p56). Nevertheless, enjoyment of reading was the aim. Girls and boys, as well as women and men, enjoyed reading. Some of the action stories from the Old Testament, for example, were read for the excitement and other material available, especially after the massively increased production of cheap print in the 1620s, included ballads, chapbooks, playing cards and Aesop's *Fables* (Spufford, 1997).

A growing range of publications produced especially for children was becoming available from the mid-eighteenth century but at first they were rarely found in the homes of the poor, who could not afford them. Vincent quotes the autobiography of John Plummer, poet and son of a staymaker, who bitterly regretted the lack of books in his nineteenth-century childhood:

It would be too long a task to relate my numerous attempts to procure the books which my parents were too poor to purchase for me; or of my haunting the street bookstalls, where I gazed with sad, longing and despairing features on the literary treasures displayed before me, and which the want of a few pence alone precluded me from possessing.
(Vincent, 1981)

The methods of the public schools were never found to be practised in Sunday schools or in the private venture and dame schools. The private schools provided the curriculum, flexibility and respect which were expected by their working-class clients. The teaching was done on a 1:1 basis, to cater for the individual needs of each child and their family. Children were not only of mixed ages and abilities but also their attendance, whether within the same day or over a year, was irregular. Sets of resources were probably unknown and children worked from different books, available at school or brought from home. Each child was given a task to prepare which was appropriate for them. This might have been learning the alphabet, reading a

passage or writing a copy. When the time came, pupil and teacher would work through the task together:

While each child periodically received a few minutes of the teacher's time, the remainder of the group would be working on their individual exercises. This, in effect, was the 'individual method' ...

(Gardner, 1984, p167)

Clearly the children were expected to take a measure of responsibility for their own learning, unlike in the voluntary schools where every moment of the child's day was strictly regulated.

Although the children successfully learned to read, the precise methods used are difficult to determine. The repetition of words after the teacher was an important element, "but most appear to have relied on a traditional progression from alphabet – 'learning your letters'; to construction of syllables – 'I learn a, b, abs'; to three-letter words, then to little phrases, longer words, short paragraphs and finally to short stories":

... an alphabet, possibly alongside an apposite drawing of an animal or object, would have been learned either from an old horn book or, more likely, from one of the numerous cheap spelling books much favoured by private teachers as introductory readers.

(Gardner, 1984, p175)

Spelling books ranged from little penny booklets containing an alphabet, some reading and spelling lessons and a few short stories and poems, to more substantial works like Mavor's *English Spelling Book*, first published in 1538. Some of its hundreds of editions ran to many pages. The 1826 publication, for example, was 168 pages long and contained an illustrated alphabet, progressive lists of syllables, words, phrases and paragraphs, and a collection of unrelated longer reading material and information: Lessons in Natural History, Select Fables, Moral and Practical Observations, Lists of Proper Names, Poetry, Directions for Reading, writing copy, an almanac, an outline of geography and history, and so on (Gardner, 1984).

These publications were used selectively by working-class teachers, however. For example, children in working-class schools were never actually expected to learn lists of syllables, according to Vincent. He believes that, in contrast, the use of the traditional primers in monitorial schools was an attack on the children's natural language learned at home:

At no stage in the domestic learning process had the child spoken in disconnected syllables, or been expected to memorise columns of words which had in common only their length.

(Vincent, 1989, p78)

Rather, a wide range of resources, including commercial primers, home-made aids to learning and other forms of print in the household, were adapted and combined to meet the learning needs of individuals, starting at the age, conducted at the pace and taken in the direction which was appropriate for the child's needs and interests (Vincent, 1997).

Class work was unknown in the private schools and so, therefore, were the methods and innovations of the public schools (Vincent, 1989). The working-class teachers used what was useful in the old-fashioned kind of publication but spurned any later developments, even when the inexpensive texts which were produced for the voluntary schools were available (Altick, 1957). Indeed any changes which might have been taking place in the public schools were deemed to be irrelevant. And as well as their own books, the teachers made full use of books brought from home by the pupils. "In the working-class private school therefore, group teaching would have been rendered impossible by the enormous variety and diversity of reading matter, even had it been thought desirable." (Gardner, 1984, p177)

Official sources portrayed the individual method as "formless and disorganised". One of the experts summarised his views thus: "Instead of the master exerting himself to teach, the scholars are expected to learn, ... of *teaching* I could find no evidence." (Gardner, 1984, p167) However, to drive home that working-class private schools offered a progressive education in reading and writing, Gardner refers to a remarkable, anonymous, school master whose child-centred views were echoed in the next century by the pioneers of the new education:

... he had adopted a system which he thought would at once supply the great desiderata in education – 'it is simply,' he said, 'in watching the dispositions of the children, and putting them especially to that particular thing which they take to'.

(Gardner, 1984, p168)

In practice, the school master was learning Hebrew in order to teach a pupil of about age ten who had "taken" to the language and was just beginning to learn it.

The texts used by working-class teachers were also used in working-class homes, including by family members with limited literacy themselves who could pass on some useful learning to the children. "For the most part it would be a question of adapting books, tracts or newspapers written initially for adults, but there are indications that by the early nineteenth century primers and spelling books were being used in working-class homes." Formal schooling was thus an additional resource and not an alternative to the domestic curriculum, which required skills to be mastered when and how circumstances permitted. "The acquisition of literacy was rarely continuous and infrequently from a single source." (Vincent, 1989, p72)

It can be seen that working-class families used many and various ways to teach their children to read. But a mass working-class readership consuming, by the 1790s, subversive texts such as Paine's *The Rights of Man* was perceived as a serious and immediate threat by the political and religious representatives of the dominant classes (Richardson, 1994).

3.3 New bourgeois education

In the late eighteenth century the land-owning aristocracy was still dominant and the industrial revolution was only beginning to get under way. The emergent middle class was growing in strength and confidence and the conditions were right for a practical, all-round, humanist education to be developed for the sons and daughters of the new class of industrialists (Simon, 1960). The new, rationalist theory and practice was being devised by those who were also engaged in the experimental work of developing scientific and technical expertise for industrial expansion. They were innovating in many ways in the field of production which would be profoundly significant for all classes of the future capitalist era.

The content and methods of the new educational approach was for the children of the middle and upper classes and definitely not for the common people. Nevertheless, the ideas influenced the type of education which was offered to or imposed on the working class in the next century by Robert Owen, for example, in his experimental factory school in New Lanark (Richardson, 1994). Members of the new middle-class were also energetic in their efforts to educate working-class children to know and be content with their inferior place in the new capitalist structures of society.

Traditional educational institutions for the wealthy were based on the belief that innate ideas and instincts were immutable and that a person's mental and moral faculties would unfold through life but were not subject to alteration by education. The rationalists rejected this philosophy and followed the ideas published by Hartley (1749) on associationist psychology. They developed the view that a person's character could be moulded and changed by childhood education that was appropriate for the child's developmental stage; any failure on the part of the pupil was due to deficiencies in the teacher, who needed to adopt an open-minded and experimental approach to meet the child's needs. The new thinking was accompanied by sometimes extremely outlandish forms of experimental education which took place in middle-class homes or in small schools opened for the purpose (Simon, 1960).

The rationalist educators were impressed by Rousseau, who advocated reasoning and judgment to replace rote learning. But ultimately the new approach adopted a more controlling stance than Rousseau towards content and methods. The Edgeworths, for example, in the influential *Practical Education* (1801), advocated the engagement of children in guided experiment and model building so that they could find the answers to set questions (Simon, 1960); and Anna Barbauld brought out an age-graded series of 'Lessons for children', simple stories set in the home to teach reading (Clarke, 1997). An over-riding concern for children's correct moral development led the rationalist women, in particular, to observe young children very closely in order to formulate theories about how they developed and learned (Clarke, 1997).

The rationalists were challenged by the romantic wing of the wealthy classes which, although similarly influenced by Rousseau, came to different conclusions. The romantics advocated fantasy and play in a child's development and rejected the idea that a uniform law could identify common stages of development among children. The romantics were at one with the rationalists, however, in their desire to control and direct children and in opposing rote learning and any form of physical restraint or punishment. The romantics revived and promoted fairy tales in contrast to the moral tales and seriousness which were the legacy of the rationalist educational pioneers

(Richardson, 1994). Gender politics, however, were a significant feature of the middle-class arguments of the time which opposed instruction to amusement, morality to fun and the 'real' world to fantasy. The rationalist women writers - derided by male romantic writers as "Barbauld's crew" and subjected to the sustained attacks of such as William Wordsworth - portrayed the former, thereby countering the cultural view of feminine irrationality. Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, denounced a view of womanhood which was "all idleness, vanity and empty-headedness":

Women who wrote rational literature for children were consciously or inadvertently offering those children, and the adults they would grow into, tools for reappraising their social and political situations.

(Clarke, 1997, p93)

Notwithstanding the colourful arguments which took place between the rationalist and romantic wings of the middle class, the participants were united in their determination to educate the working class out of its deeply-rooted feudal culture and into willing acceptance of an exploited social and economic position in the structures of capitalism. This required no less than a "bourgeois cultural revolution to re-educate the whole population whose mentalities and habits were in the previous feudal mode of production" (Richardson, 1994, p44).

The bourgeoisie also came into open conflict with the landed aristocracy, whose government had instigated a programme of severe political repression against any hint of Jacobinism. This was in the face of middle-class demands for parliamentary reform and religious freedom at home and support for the revolution in France (Simon, 1960). For example, the Two Acts of 1795 made it a treasonable offence to incite the people, by speech or writing, to hatred or contempt of the king, constitution or government. The acts banned meetings of more than 50 people, unless approved by a magistrate, and made defiance of the magistrate's orders a capital offence (Thompson, 1968). The corresponding societies, in which the resources of members were pooled to buy and publish radical literature, were among the democratic working-class organisations which were banned in this period and which illustrated the "engaged and vital literacy" which the middle-class was determined to extinguish (Willinsky, 1993). The middle class had maintained a humanism and all-sidedness in its educational outlook towards

its own children until this political reaction marked the end of the period of social development which had given rise to it. Thereafter, the class would be fighting against the landed aristocracy on the one hand and the rapidly growing proletariat on the other. In these conditions, the educational outlook of the bourgeoisie narrowed to become more utilitarian and doctrinaire (Simon, 1960).

Bourgeois attempts to re-educate the working class took a number of different forms. These included writing and publishing fictional moral tracts, based on the popular chapbook format, for all ages, and reading schemes for children; sponsoring the Sunday schools and voluntary public day schools run by the churches; and Sabbatarianism - extolling a regular day of rest to establish routine, clockwork and regular and continuous rhythms of life in a modern industrial society (Hill, 1969).

The Anglican Sarah Trimmer and the dissenting Hannah More promoted Sunday schools vigorously during the last twenty years of the eighteenth century and they and other bourgeois class activists, often women, including Maria Edgeworth and Barbauld, authored moral tracts which found their way into working-class homes (Thompson, 1968).

The voluntary day schools were established by the churches early in the nineteenth century for children from age six or seven. The schools had the primary aim to teach the morality, dispositions and attitudes, including the habits of disciplined time, required for the moulding of a working class which would be willing to serve the interests of its employers. The monitorial system, described in the next section, was devised to undertake this task. At the same time church and government launched a concerted and continuing attack on the independent educational institutions and wider domestic curriculum of the working class.

3.4 Schools for social control

Schools set up ostensibly for the benefit of common children by those representing the interests of the dominant classes included parish charity schools in the centuries before the industrial revolution and voluntary church schools from the early nineteenth century. The main aim of the charity schools was to make good the moral inadequacies of the home and teach the children of the poor to understand their lowly station in life. Social control

was pursued in two main ways: first through the content of the curriculum, moral and Christian religious instruction having far higher priority than reading or writing; and second through the form taken by lessons, rote learning, catechism and physical punishment being the main methods of instruction (Richardson, 1994; Altick, 1957).

Harsh approaches were, in the voluntary schools, honed into the monitorial system, characterised by regimentation, constant surveillance and humiliation. The system was designed to educate the people out of their feudal attitudes and practices and introduce the discipline of work time, required by the capitalist work place (Thompson, 1968). The avowed aim and priority of the monitorial system was social control of the habits, attitudes and general moral orientation of the working-class child; it has been described as “the most coercive and negative moment in the whole history of schooling.” (Johnson, 1976, p48) Those who attended the schools were likely to have been from the very poorest of homes, children living and working in the most miserable conditions, whose parents were unable to afford the higher fees of the highly regarded independent working-class schools (Hopkins, 1994).

Most of the voluntary schools were owned and run by the Church of England’s National School Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Doctrine and Discipline of the Established Church, set up by Andrew Bell, and some of them by the rival, dissenting British and Foreign Schools Society, originally established by Joseph Lancaster. The schools insisted on cleanliness, smart dress, short hair for boys and girls, punctuality and regular attendance. They were much cheaper than private working-class schools, an incentive to working-class parents to send their children to the schools.

Lancaster’s original system used a variety of texts and taught writing and arithmetic as well as reading, in contrast to Bell’s stress on the Bible and religious teachings alone and his initial reluctance to teach writing and arithmetic. Lancaster’s early schools included libraries and playgrounds and practiced ridicule rather than corporal punishment. Nevertheless, as Lancaster’s influence diminished, the two systems became as good as identical, “continuously more elaborate and more inhuman ... ” (Sturt, 1967, p32).

The monitorial system allocated one teacher to huge numbers of children, sometimes in the hundreds, organised within one large room; the instructional method was based on the factory system and required pervasive, strict discipline. Groups of about ten to 15 children were supervised by a more experienced pupil who had been briefed by the teacher to instruct and drill her or his group in a very tiny and very simple aspect of the syllabus.

As the teachers were children, all the work to be done in the groups was reduced to its elements and written on a card from which they worked. In fact, it was claimed as a merit of the system that, as the children knew nothing beyond what was on their card, they could not digress or waste time.

(Sturt, 1967, p24)

After learning the alphabet the child was introduced to lists of disconnected syllables, such as 'ba be bi bo bu' or 'ba ab ca ac', followed by columns of monosyllabic words which might then be grouped into sentences of a "relentlessly spiritual or moral quality".

Once these had been mastered, the procedure was repeated with words of two syllables, and so the child progressed until, in the case of the more ambitious primers, it was capable of reading lists of up to seven-syllable words.

(Vincent, 1989, p76)

This process of decomposing language into what was thought to be its constituent elements perfectly suited the monitorial systems, designed as they were to emulate the methods of factory production. The sequence of instruction was based on the scheme of rebuilding words to be found in the primers. The early schools were divided into eight classes; the first read and wrote the alphabet; the second, third and fourth, words and syllables of two, three and four letters; the fifth and sixth, sentences of one-and two-syllable words. Finally the child tackled sustained prose from the New Testament, the Bible as a whole and commercial readers (Vincent, 1989).

Reading was taught in the same way as religion. The subject matter of the lesson was committed to memory by repetition and tested by means of question and answer. Pupils were thus catechised in their letters and as they became proficient were set to memorise the Catechism itself. Among other humiliations, children's pronunciation was belittled by teachers; and the schoolbooks imposed were written in unfamiliar dialect, making the children's

encounter with literacy, “a strange and threatening experience” (Vincent, 1989, p82).

Secularisation of the catechistic method of instruction, using set questions and answers, was satirised by William Blake in his poem *The Lamb*. The method was, in itself, a feature of the middle-class assault on the working class (Richardson, 1994).

The working class as a whole rejected and opposed the voluntary church system. Rather, parents maintained their commitment to private schools, notwithstanding the additional cost. This was due to the integral part that the schools played in the traditional domestic curriculum and their success in teaching the 3Rs. Thus the middle-class strategy to control working-class education failed.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has located the origins and early development of the reading war in the wider struggle between the emergent classes at the beginning of capitalism. The nascent working class, steeped in the feudal culture of the common people, incorporated reading instruction, as and when it was convenient, into a much broader domestic curriculum. Every member of a working-class family from a very young age had an important role to play in the family’s subsistence, be it undertaking chores in the home and caring for younger children or working on the land or in industry (Thompson, 1968). Parents or other relatives might have taught children themselves and some children occasionally would have attended a dame school or private venture school when the time and money could be spared (Laqueur, 1976c).

The private schools patronised by working-class families were flexible and informal in organisation to meet their clients’ needs and the needs of the teachers, workers themselves who often pursued another trade at the same time as running the school. The teaching methods were geared entirely to the needs of the individual child and were therefore child-centred and progressive. Literacy nurtured in this curriculum, in the context of an independent working-class culture, was vibrant, radical and potentially subversive of the developing capitalist structure of society (Willinsky, 1993).

The emergent employing class, frightened of the power of independent working-class literacy, devised a range of tactics within an

overall strategy to gain control of the consciousness of present and future generations of workers (Richardson, 1994). The tactics included, at the end of the eighteenth century, the authorship and publication of fictional moral tales, the establishment of Sunday schools, attacks on the efficiency of private working-class schools and, early in the nineteenth century, the founding of voluntary elementary schools, at first funded by the churches, run on monitorial lines, to teach deferential morality and religion to the offspring of the working class.

The tactics failed. This was due, first, to the consequences of the widespread political repression which was undertaken by the government, whose members represented the aristocracy clinging on to its power in the face of massive social change. The repression not only set back the middle class, which was directly challenging the feudal authority of the government, but also targeted the radical literature which was being published by and for the working class. In the face of this assault, the middle-class morality tales proved to be a poor substitute for Tom Paine (Simon, 1960). Second, the Sunday school movement, initiated by the middle class, was usurped by the working class and grew rapidly as a welcome extension to the repertoire of traditional working-class education (Laqueur, 1976a). Third, the curriculum organisation and content of the monitorial schools proved to be unacceptable to their intended clientele and the private working-class schools continued to flourish.

Working-class opposition to the voluntary monitorial schools had two main outcomes, as the next chapter will show. First, the government, as it became more representative of the bourgeoisie, took a closer interest in the church schools and forced, in exchange for state funding, changes to the curriculum which were designed to make it more subtle and thereby more attractive to parents (Vincent, 1989). Second, infant schools were devised, not only to offer a more appropriate curriculum for babies and younger children, but also to make it easier for parents to remain in the workforce or available for work. In the meantime, the rising rates of working-class literacy continued to be attributable to the independent, child-centred, working-class curriculum (Laqueur, 1976c).

The dominant classes eventually balked at the increasing cost of what proved to be a largely unsuccessful state intervention in the voluntary elementary and infant schools. The Revised Code of 1862 was therefore constructed to reduce the cost of schooling to the state by introducing a system of payment by results. The new curriculum remained controlling of pupils and teachers but at the same time was designed to attract parents by narrowing teaching content virtually exclusively to instruction in the 3Rs. The outcome, however, proved to be no more popular with working-class parents than the previous system and the fundamental opposition remained between independent, working-class education and the state-sponsored schooling which was designed to usurp it. The next chapter will argue that, in order at last to destroy this progressive approach to teaching reading, compulsory state education was deemed to have become necessary, leading to the Education Acts of 1870, 1880 and 1891. The private working-class schools were at last defeated and the grip of the Revised Code prevented any significant progressive development in the state sector. This had to wait until the next century, when conditions had changed and what was known as the 'new education' could develop, discussed in chapter five.

Chapter 4 The reading war and state schooling in the 19th century

4.1 Introduction

This chapter continues the story of the reading war in early childhood education. The last chapter argued that the origin of the war lay in the wider struggle between the working class and the emergent bourgeoisie at the beginning of capitalism. The working class was determined to defend its traditional, independent, integrated and child-centred domestic curriculum. The new employing class was equally determined to change the deeply-rooted, feudal attitudes and ways of life of the rapidly increasing ranks of the common people. This was necessary so that future generations of workers would submit to the strict discipline and subservience required by the owners of the factories and mills of the new industrial towns. The strategy was to entice parents to send their children to the state-sponsored schools, initially provided by the churches, designed to train pupils *en masse* to accept their exploited class role in society (Thompson, 1968).

In these conditions, domestic and private education played the progressive role because it was tailored to the needs of individual children; formal skills instruction could start early but the instruction was responsive to the individual child and, being sporadic, sat lightly in the child's life. The elementary schools, by contrast, expected daily attendance and the monitorial regime of drill and rote was dominating and relentless.

Middle-class tactics failed for two significant reasons: first, because independent working-class education was strong, healthy and successful; second, because the monitorial curriculum of the state schools was crude and vicious and failed to teach children to read (Laqueur, 1976b). This chapter shows how the government, on behalf of the employing class, shouldered greater responsibility for working-class education. As a result, tactics changed so as to introduce more humane aspects to the routines and organisation of the state school curriculum and, at the same time, give greater weight to the 3Rs, that part of schooling which was valued by working-class parents. In the elementary schools, for children from age six or seven, this led to the replacement of the monitorial system with the employment of pupil teachers operating more refined teaching methods. At

the same time, a new type of school was being devised to fill the gap emerging in state-sponsored education for babies and younger children.

This chapter will argue that the infant schools, including the infant departments which were opened by elementary schools, aimed to attract working parents in a number of ways which distinguished them from the schools for older children. The infant curriculum, while retaining many controlling features, including formal instruction in the 3Rs, was nevertheless designed to be more gentle and appropriate for babies and younger children. And the schools were intended to make life easier for the rest of the family, releasing parents for work and older children for work or elementary schooling. The middle-class rhetoric of ideal family life and maternal care applied only to the wealthier classes, of course; most women and children had always had to work and for long and unsocial hours.

The provision of infant schools was thus a direct challenge to the domestic arrangements operated by working families, which may have included occasional attendance by the children at a dame school. For most of the time, however, older children might have cared for babies and younger children at home. This would have made attendance at an elementary school impossible unless the older children took the younger ones with them.

The first infant school was the factory school created at New Lanark in 1816 by the employer Robert Owen for the children of his millworkers. The school was the prototype for infant schools in England, which matched the elementary schools in their determination to indoctrinate children into subservience and middle-class morality. Owen's school at its inception eschewed religious instruction but this was exceptional. All other infant schools included heavy doses of Christianity. In their early days, however, the schools favoured physical activity, oral language development and teaching of facts, often by rote learning, above instruction in the 3Rs. And from the start, they had a different ethos to the elementary schools, with a progressive edge that included some concern for child development, for example expecting children to play out of doors for as much as half the day (Turner, 1970). This may have made the schools more attractive to working-class parents than the elementary schools for older children (Whitbread, 1972) although that view is contested by Gardner (1984).

Nevertheless government efforts, to destroy independent working-class education and enrol children in state schools, continued to fail. The policy had also proved to be too expensive. The matter was resolved for the time being in 1862 with the introduction of the Revised Code. This narrowed the elementary school curriculum to the 3Rs and introduced payment by results.

This chapter will show how the Revised Code, highly controlling of teachers, had a detrimental impact on the more progressive aspects of the infant schools. Furthermore, the state's patent failure to achieve its ends in working-class education, together with the threat to employer supremacy perceived in the 1867 Reform Act's extension of the franchise, brought coercion on to the government agenda. The Education Act of 1870 extended the supply of public elementary education considerably beyond that provided by the churches. The subsequent act of 1880 made attendance compulsory, establishing a state-funded, nation-wide system of schools run by the churches and the elected school boards. School boards were permitted to provide school places without charge under the 1870 Act and by the 1890s free places were available for all children (Lawson and Silver, 1973).

The dark period of true Victorian values in education was embodied in the Revised Code: its hold on teachers and children alike prevented any significant progressive development in the state sector until the turn of the century; its legacy was disaffection and hostility in the working class towards state schooling which has lasted to the present day (Armytage, 1970; Johnson, 1970; Pugh, 2010). The next chapter will argue that, as conditions changed in the new century, the new education could emerge and develop. Thereafter, the reading war, between progressive and traditional approaches, was fought out almost exclusively in the state sector.

This chapter opens with government efforts to overcome working-class opposition to the state elementary schools and shows how, at the same time, infant schools and departments for babies and younger children were being devised. Starting with Owen's original school, the chapter follows the rapid development of infant schools in England from the 1820s. The origins of the progressive aspects of these schools is to be found in the work of Owen, Pestalozzi and Froebel; but their ideas did not prevail. Pestalozzi and

Froebel both advocated relatively progressive methods of teaching children to read, but for older children not for infants. None of these early pioneers of infant schooling believed that formal reading instruction should start so young. No attempts seem to have been made in England, before the twentieth century, to apply their progressive methods to the older children for whom they were designed; rather the methods became oppressive devices in the hands of teachers of infants, especially during the reign of the Revised Code.

Representatives of the employing class believed that the controlling curriculum organisation and teaching methods of state-sponsored schools, from an early age, were vital in the moulding of a compliant workforce. Schooling also needed to start early so that it could be completed by age ten, the time favoured in the second half of the nineteenth century for children to start work. These aims were achieved by the Education Acts. Thus the origins of the obsession in England to start formally to teach the 3Rs to children as early as possible can be found in the state-sponsored schooling of the nineteenth century. An early start is also evident in the legacy of the independent working-class domestic curriculum. Working families were reluctant for their older children to spend time at school who could be working at home or elsewhere; younger children were less useful in this respect and so early childhood was the time for them to cram in as much school learning as possible, before it was too late; and the school learning should be that which it was hardest to supply at home, almost exclusively the 3Rs.

The legislation prescribed the very early compulsory starting age of five years. The introduction of formal literacy instruction was also included at that age for, after the acts, schools had to satisfy the authorities that their provision, including instruction in the 3Rs, was “efficient and suitable”. Ultimately, the private working-class schools were unable to satisfy the authorities on this score and by the end of the century had all but disappeared (Gardner, 1984).

4.2 Counters to working-class opposition

The voluntary schools remained highly unpopular with working-class parents, who resisted attempts by successive governments to attract or coerce them into the state-sponsored system. The aim of these efforts was to

strangle demand for the private adventure and dame schools, which subversively supported an independent outlook among those who used them. But parents needed schools to be flexible as far as requirements for cleanliness, dress and attendance was concerned, and to teach the 3Rs, achieving results as quickly as possible. Little else was wanted, especially not moral and religious instruction. Parents also objected to their children being appointed as monitors or being subject to the control of monitors. (Gardner, 1984). Working-class preference for private working-class schools was also based on a sound judgment of their comparative success in teaching the 3Rs. According to Mitch, those who could sign the marriage register, in the middle of the nineteenth century, were more likely to have attended an independent school (Mitch, 1992, p147).

The government, for the first time in 1833, began to impose official inspection on the voluntary schools. It achieved this by offering the churches financial support as a *quid pro quo*. The inspectorate appointed in 1839 started to bring the schools more into line with a system which working-class parents might accept. The newly-appointed inspectors concluded that the monitorial schools were either narrow and inefficient or, at best, that their limited achievements failed to reflect the effort that they made. The inspectors opposed the use of monitors and reliance on rote learning and recommended methods which demanded more participation from the pupils. Pupil teachers were employed and training colleges were founded so that the new methods had largely replaced the monitorial system by mid century (Lawson and Silver, 1973).

The Minutes of Council of 1840-41, like many official documents offering advice on teaching methods, seems to have been more progressive than the practice which actually took place in the schools. Reading instruction which relied on the child's memory was deemed to be a mistake and some concession was made to the importance of context for a child to succeed in learning to read. Words, rather than arbitrary combinations of letters, should be used for practice, to encourage the children to search for meaning. This was described as the 'intellectual method' and the difficulties were recognised of attempts to combine this with the 'phonic method'. Nevertheless, the Minutes advocated the phonic method and called for

teachers' manuals to be published which would give a step-by-step guide to the systematic teaching of the 'synthetic' or 'constructive' phonic method, attributed to Pestalozzi (Minutes of Council, 1840-41).

These earliest developments changed the teacher's emphasis from repetition to interrogation. Further advice included, in 1852, the 'look and say' method. Rather than disconnected syllables, the pupil was to be introduced to complete, monosyllabic words, preferably in the context of short sentences. The manner in which the words were constructed was to be taught after, not before, the pupil had learned to recognise them. In practice, the inspectors advised teachers to adopt a mixture of look and say and the traditional alphabet-syllable approach (Vincent, 1989).

In the mid 1850s, after the ban on secular reading material was lifted, schools extended their range of texts. Lighter stories in plain language became more common in reading books, albeit with moral messages to reinforce children's awareness of their social inferiority. However the cheap readers which were introduced proved to be unsatisfactory for many inspectors. They complained that the texts failed to appeal to children's imagination and emotions and continued to depend heavily on biblical topics. The inspectors called for meaning and understanding to be taught in lessons as an alternative to the catechistic method. This was reflected in subsequent publications relating to the wider world of myths, legends and the humanities. Nevertheless, the material remained "so circumscribed and penurious" that few children enjoyed reading (Altick, 1957, p154).

This more general liberalisation of the voluntary school curriculum was a gesture towards the hostile working-class parents whom the schools wanted to attract. The new methods also called on teachers to acknowledge the skills and prior knowledge that the children brought with them. For example, the first lessons were expected to include language which was familiar to and already possessed by the child. This approach was designed to counteract the schools' previously humiliating treatment of the children's vernacular, which was deeply resented by parents (Vincent, 1989). At the same time the Sunday schools, which previously offered a largely secular curriculum, became a less attractive option. Their coincidental introduction of

more religious literature was an unwelcome development for many parents (Laqueur, 1976a).

The state's burgeoning role in support of the voluntary schools was a controversial issue in ruling circles, especially in the light of the rapidly rising associated costs. The Newcastle Commission was therefore appointed in 1858 to investigate and make recommendations for a cheaper and more popular system of education. By this time the hostility of parents was fully recognised. The following is from the Newcastle commissioners:

Pupils remembered their experiences of the system without pleasure or profit; 'I cannot read at all or write; I did go to Old Church-school, but 'twas not much good, there was nothing but boys to teach us, they did us more harm than good, they used to get us down and punish us ...'

(Newcastle Commission, 1861, as cited in Gardner, 1984, p169)

The final report identified teaching the 3Rs as central to reconciling the conflicting objectives of the church schools with the needs of the working-class parents who declined to use them. In the words of an assistant commissioner, "the poor in selecting a school, looked entirely to whether the school supplied good reading, writing and arithmetic" (Vincent, 1989, p87). The Revised Code subsequently imposed on the voluntary schools in 1862 therefore narrowed the curriculum to instruction in the 3Rs. This was in addition to the introduction of payment by results and for attendance, in order to reduce the costs of the schools.

For Vincent this was a genuine compromise with parents but, in practice under the Revised Code, pupils were drilled relentlessly in the incomprehensible passages that would be tested by inspectors. Thus the children learned very little of reading and writing. Furthermore, having gained no pleasure and a lot of boredom and misery from the experience of school, the children became disaffected pupils and, in the future, disaffected parents (Armytage, 1970).

4.3 Control of the very young

4.3.1 Owen's factory school

Owen was influenced by the middle-class rationalist views on education devised in the previous century. He opened a factory school for the children of his mill workers in New Lanark in 1818. The school was a prototype for the development of state infant schools in England. The twin aims were, first, to

keep parents in the workforce or available for work; second, to maintain the health of the next generation of workers and mould its attitudes and outlook to conform to the needs of production.

Owen's school catered for children from the ages of two or three during their parents' working hours at the mill; at age ten the children joined the ranks of mill workers. Children stayed in the preparatory department until about age six, the next four years being spent in the monitorial senior school. Play, especially in an outdoor area, was a key feature of the infant school, which was divided into two stages. The curriculum for the older children, in the second stage, included regular lessons in the 3Rs, although Owen stated that this was against his better judgment (Owen, 1816).

Owen gave his views on the teaching of reading to a Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1816. Asked whether parents removed their children from school as soon as they could read and write but before benefiting from the moral education provided by the school, Owen agreed. Furthermore, he believed the teaching of reading and writing should be slowed down:

I have found the children have derived very little benefit from being rapidly instructed in reading and writing, particularly when no attention has been given on the part of the superintendent to form their dispositions and their habits.

(House of Commons, 1816, p425)

Nevertheless, the teaching of reading was progressive in comparison with that delivered to huge classes in the galleries of the English infant schools which included, at times, the use of monitors. In New Lanark the method was, in common with traditional practice, 'bottom up' and started at an early age; but teaching was done in relatively small groups for relatively short periods. This showed some sensitivity to individual children's developmental needs, and the lessons were alternated with free play (Macnab, 1819). Children of two or three to four years old, "as soon as they have acquired habits of speaking", according to the headmaster's report of 1819, were taken in rotation in classes of ten or 12 to learn the alphabet and monosyllables. Of the older children, of four to six years:

They are taught to read short and easy lessons adapted to their capacities; they are permitted to amuse themselves and to receive lessons alternately during the day.

(Macnab, 1819, p222)

This balance of adult-directed and child-initiated activity was not only a progressive feature of Owen's schools, which he bequeathed in some measure to the early infant schools in England, but also it has resurfaced in the twenty-first century in statutory advice based on reputable research (DfES, 2007a; Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2002). On the down side, however, children as young as four, who had made good progress in reading and writing, were sometimes transferred to the schoolroom for older children, a similarly long-lived legacy of this early experiment (Salmon, 1915).

Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, explained that pressure from parents had forced the school to start teaching reading much earlier than he believed was desirable. He hoped that ultimately such teaching could be replaced, "at least until the age of seven or eight", by the subjects of science, geography and history, for the following reason:

... it is following the plan prescribed by Nature, to give a child such particulars as he can easily be made to understand, concerning the nature and properties of the different objects around him, before we proceed to teach him the artificial signs which have been adopted to represent these objects.

(Owen, 1824, p34)

Fiction and information books were discouraged altogether in favour of object lessons and talk. It was this stress on the value of first-hand experience and oral language development which led to Owen disparaging books:

The children were not to be annoyed with books, but were to be taught the uses and nature or qualities of the common things around them by familiar conversation, when the children's curiosity was excited so as to induce them to ask questions respecting them.

(Owen, 1857, as cited in Donnachie, 2003, p3)

Fiction had been important in the publications of the rationalist propagandists against radical working-class literature in the 1790s and it featured in the moral education of middle-class children. But fiction played no part in the formal education provided for or imposed on working class children thirty years later (Richardson, 1994).

Owen lost control of the Lanark schools when his sponsors withdrew their financial backing in 1824, ostensibly on the grounds of Owen's publicly expressed, unorthodox views on religion. But the reasons seem to have been as much due to disapproval of the progressive aspects of the schools for they were run subsequently on monitorial lines (Murray, 1912).

In Owen's original school, although the taught curriculum was controlling of children in subject content, it was at the same time quite broad, including physical instruction, marching, singing and dancing; and for at least half of the long school day, children were free to initiate their own activities in play, frequently out of doors (Donnachie, 2003).

4.3.2 Infant schools in England

The infant school movement developed in England, from the 1820s, independently of factories. The schools also differed from Owen's prototype in the priority given to religious instruction, use of the monitorial method to teach the 3Rs and encroachment on the children's time in the playground.

Wilderspin, who took charge, in Spitalfields, of one of the earliest infant schools, brought them into line with the instructional tradition of elementary schools. Formal instruction in the 3Rs became preparatory for the elementary schools and adopted their monitorial techniques. Infant schools in this mould, supported by an Infant School Society started in 1824, spread rapidly. Infant children were massed together and spent at least half the day seated in a 'gallery', looking, listening and being instructed; and up to half the day they spent in a playground equipped with a range of activities and resources. (Whitbread, 1972) One of the earliest schools, at Walthamstow, even streamed pupils according to ability in order, according to its stated aims, "to prepare them for further instruction in other schools." (Turner, 1970, p157).

Priority in the schools was given to religious instruction: rote learning of biblical passages and references to the Bible permeated all of the schools' activities. The Home and Colonial Society, formed in the 1830s, explained:

If the lesson should be on the subject of a flower, the children should be taught to remember every passage in Scripture in which the word flower is mentioned. The children should be reminded that 'Man cometh forth like a flower and is cut down/ etc'.

(Central Society of Education, 1838, as cited in Salmon, 1915, p85)

In Wilderspin's school, children began their reading instruction by learning the alphabet, at first from alphabet cards. Pupils progressed to learning from brass letters, which could be fixed to a baize-covered frame, placed between runners to form simple syllables, and handled and identified by the children themselves. When they had become familiar with the shapes of the letters, the children traced them on slates on which the alphabet had been engraved. From letters and syllables the children proceeded to simple words, which they learnt by repetition. Wilderspin later devised cards containing a letter of the alphabet and a picture of "some object in nature" - for example A and the drawing of an apple. A refinement of this, called "developing lessons", portrayed a range of insects, mammals and objects with a simple, informative text beneath. The aim was to link words and things, aided by a series of questions from the teacher, and to give practice in spelling and pronunciation as well as knowledge of natural objects. (McCann, 1966)

The Mayos advocated a form of synthetic phonics instruction and recommended a number of suitable primers. Attempts at reading the texts, however, were discouraged until after the children had mastered the prescribed method of decoding. In all things, children should be expected to do only one thing at a time. They should not, for example, have to count balls of different colours for fear of being confused by the different colours. "We also disapprove of *early* reading lessons which require any exercise of thought; it is quite sufficient labour for a child at one time to be practised upon sounds and their symbols." (Mayo and Mayo, 1837, p103) A typical alphabet started as follows:

A is an angel who praises the Lord;
B is for Bible, God's most holy word;
C is for church, where the righteous resort;
D is for devil, who wishes our hurt;

Each letter was painted in upper and lower case on a square of wood. A child stood in the rostrum and held up the square on which "A,a" was painted and called out: "A stands for angel who praises the Lord". The class in front of the child looked at the letter and repeated back the refrain: "A stands for angel who praises the Lord". The procedure was repeated for all twenty-six letters:

Thus the children become familiarised with the letters, and at the same time their little minds are stored with Scripture truths which, under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, may lead them to a knowledge of Him whom to know is life eternal.

(Bilby and Ridgeway, 1834, as cited in Salmon, 1915, p76)

Arguments within the camp of traditional instruction raged then as now as to the best phonics approach. Charles Mayo referred to “the ordinary mode of teaching children to read”, that is using letter names to spell a word and then saying the word, as “unphilosophical and unattractive” (Mayo and Mayo, 1837). But those who advocated the “ordinary mode” defended their ground. By 1905 the debates could be described by a reforming woman inspector as follows:

Hoary-headed men will spend hours discussing whether ‘c-a-t’ or ‘ke-ar-te’ are the best means of conveying the knowledge of how to read cat. I must own to indifference on the point myself, and I sympathize with teachers who are not allowed to settle it for themselves.

(Bathurst, 1905, p121)

When the government introduced state subsidies for schools in the 1830s infant schools were among the first successfully to apply for these grants. But an award of financial support included the condition that the curriculum must cover the preliminary steps of instruction in reading (Whitbread, 1972).

4.3.3 Progressive aspects of infant education

Owen’s legacy played a key part in the infusion of English state infant education with a progressive flavour. This was further enhanced by the growing popularity in England of the work of two educational pioneers from overseas. These were Pestalozzi, who taught in Switzerland from the later eighteenth century, and Froebel, who developed kindergartens in Germany from the early nineteenth century.

Pestalozzi introduced developmental aspects to schooling for older children in marked contrast to the education which had been offered to the poor in the past (Pinloche, 1902). His work with older children included active first-hand experience, for example field-work along a river. Pestalozzi didn’t approve of schooling before the age of six. Until then children should be nurtured by their mothers, who should be trained in child development. In this way, children could be offered the “beautiful guidance of nature” rather than

the “artificial stifling machines” which were the schools of the day (Pestalozzi, 1915).

Froebel, the founder of kindergartens, advocated free play and a child-centred approach to the early years. He also recommended highly structured, adult-initiated activities - but for small groups of children with adults trained in his own developmental methods. His ideas spread to England from the mid 1850s but it was the adult-directed activities that were eventually taken up in infant schools. Kindergartens, more closely in line with Froebel’s original ideas, were opened generally for the benefit of middle-class families (Murray, 1912). Froebel supported a developmental approach to reading and writing instruction, for individual children or in small groups, from age six (Froebel, 1912).

Both Pestalozzi and Froebel allowed some agency in learning to the child and favoured first-hand experience alongside the tightly structured elements of the adult-directed curriculum that they prescribed. But in England it was not the schooling of older children, for whom the teaching methods had been designed, that was influenced. Rather it was the practitioners of early years education who used the ideas of Pestalozzi and Froebel in the instructional work of the English infant schools. This was especially so under the malign influence of the Revised Code when, with huge numbers of children in a class, the object lessons derived from Pestalozzi and the occupations from Froebel became oppressive travesties of the original practice.

Nevertheless, Pestalozzi inspired the formation in 1836 of the Home and Colonial Infant Society to train infant teachers in the more specialised methods of the infant schools. Inspectors in the 1840s noted the beneficial effects of this training, contrasting those who had been trained for early years practice with the teachers steeped in the traditions of the elementary schools and who kept pupils up to age nine to serve as monitors of the youngest children (Whitbread, 1972). Gardner (1984), however, insists that parents rejected infant schools for their moral assault on working-class values and behaviour and for their poor teaching.

Fletcher, a government inspector, in 1845 outlined some of the worst defects of infant schools. These included too little instruction, inappropriate

instruction on monitorial lines, crude use of scripture for rote memorisation and use of the “prodigy system” to promote the quickest children. These undesirable practices, he reported, were slowly being overcome, while “cheerful tunes and healthful play” remained an important feature of the schools (Rusk, 1933).

4.3.4 Parents

Infant school education for younger children may have been more acceptable to working families than that provided by the more widespread elementary schools for older children. In some cases an infant school may have been as attractive as a dame school, not only offering amusements as well as instruction in the 3Rs but also, at 1d or 2d a week, half the cost (Whitbread, 1972). Infants were more likely than their older siblings to be at school because younger children were less productive in the domestic economy and childcare at home might have been difficult to arrange. In the words of a government inspector, a good infant school was “not only a benefit to the child but a relief to the parent” (Bowstead, 1853, as cited in Rusk, 1933, p172).

Fletcher’s report had noted that there existed good and bad of both dame schools and infant schools but that, while most infant schools had serious defects, dame schools in his view, unsurprisingly for an inspector, were worse. He believed that, notwithstanding the continuing popularity among working families of dame schools, some parental allegiance had been transferred to infant schools in recent years, alongside steady improvements in the schools (Rusk, 1933).

Infant schools were obliged by the conditions of government subsidies to teach the 3Rs, in spite of the opposition of some of their founders, but this was also necessary in order to gain the approval of parents. The Mayos, who would have preferred an unmixed diet of religious instruction, conceded as follows:

It would be as well perhaps, if learning to *read* were not attempted in Infant Schools; yet, as the parents in general appreciate very little the development of the intellectual powers, or the formation of moral and religious principles, but look to some positive tangible acquirement, it is desirable to meet their feelings; a still more cogent reason for

teaching to read so early, is, that in many instances a child has no other instruction than that which he receives at an Infant School.

(Mayo and Mayo, 1837, p91)

Parents in general, however, were unconvinced and maintained their allegiance to the independent sector. Parents were in a strong position in this respect because, with very few exceptions, they had complete control over their choice of education, including whether or not their children attended any kind of school at all. The exceptions were where the child was working in a factory covered by the 1833 or 1834 acts; in a workhouse after 1834; or lived in a village where the priest, with the support of local employers, was able to penalise those who refused to send their children to voluntary day or Sunday schools. This last was unusual; but in some rural communities, such as Joseph Arch's home village of Barford, Warwickshire, the priest could use the church school to maintain the feudal influence of church and squire which had traditionally dominated the community (Vincent, 1981).

4.4 The Revised Code

The Revised Code was introduced by the government in an attempt to revamp and bring down the cost of its failing educational policy. The Revised Code was expected to achieve this by narrowing the curriculum to instruction in the 3Rs and imposing on schools a system of payment by results. The result was tighter control exercised by the state over both pupils and teachers. And far from making the state schools attractive to more parents, the narrowness, futility and regimentation of the new curriculum rendered it as objectionable as any of its predecessors.

The Revised Code also marked a victory for those in the establishment who had been opposed to the steady liberalisation of the state school curriculum. For example, there had always been opponents of the more playful aspects of infant schools among those who wanted to introduce reading at the earliest possible moment. An inspector in 1851 expressed this view:

I believe that many a child's mind at the age of eight years is seriously injured for life by having been under a system where the only object has been to communicate knowledge in the most easy and attractive form and where the mental labour has all devolved upon the teacher none upon the learner.

(Turner, 1970, p164)

Such inspectors welcomed the Revised Code's application to young children, one stating: "Schoolwork should be strictly preparatory to the passing of the standard exams." (Turner, 1970, p164) Infant schools thus suffered serious ill effects as a result of the Revised Code even though the youngest children were not officially included under its conditions:

... the Code had an important indirect effect on infant schools and departments, since the strain of preparing children of the age of six to pass into standard I reacted on the teaching of children under that age.

(Board of Education, 1933, p18)

Furthermore, the effort to achieve results in the 3Rs with young children often could lead to infant school staff abandoning the half day in the playground (Bathurst, 1905). Under the code, no payment was to be made for any children who failed to perform successfully for inspectors in tests of up to six standards. The standards applied according to the age of the child, from six at the end of the infant stage to 12, by which time most children had left elementary school and after which no grant would be paid. Every failure by every pupil in every subject cost the school 2s 8d from the next year's grant. Teachers drilled children exhaustively in the meaningless passages that would be tested by inspectors and a new premium was put on rote learning:

... throughout the year every effort was bent toward grinding into the child the sentences or the facts that the inspector might demand of him. The best child (assuming he was not struck dumb) was the one who had memorised the whole book.

(Altick, 1957, p157)

The standards required the following:

- I Narrative monosyllables
- II One of the narratives next in order after monosyllables in an elementary reading book used in the school
- III A short paragraph from an elementary reading book used in the school
- IV A short paragraph from a more advanced reading book used in the school
- V A few lines of poetry from a reading book used in the first class of the school
- VI A short ordinary passage in a newspaper, or other modern narrative
- VII (Added in 1882.) A passage from Shakespeare or Milton or some other standard author, or from a history of England.

(Curtis, 1948, as cited in Altick, 1957, p151)

The first four standards covered the rudiments of reading, spelling and forming words. Standard V, which required some reading skill and an attempt at composition, was not obtained by most children; indeed teaching at that level was rarely provided by the schools because classes were unlikely to be large enough to be cost effective. In the 1880s, for example, there were on average no more than four standard VI passes a year in each inspected institution (Vincent, 1989, p90).

Furthermore, after the Education Act of 1880, most children between 10 and 13 who had reached Standard IV were permitted to leave school. But this standard was very low and those who obtained it were in practice unable to read and write effectively and were left without any motivation to make further progress:

The system of 'Standards' was itself an impediment to the future application of such skills as had been acquired, as it encouraged the child to put a full stop to its intellectual life once the requisite level had been reached.

(Vincent, 1989, p91)

The contribution, if any, of the Revised Code to the rising literacy rates in the nineteenth century has been widely debated. Vincent unambiguously links the rising levels of literacy, measured by ability to sign the marriage register, in the years after 1862, to the introduction of the Revised Code. He believes that, notwithstanding the relentless drilling, the increased attention paid to reading did lead to significant gains in practice. The code also led, eventually, to the introduction of different methods, with more successful outcomes, and to the publication of new and improved textbooks. He cites the example of J.S. Laurie's *Graduated Series of Reading Lesson Books*, which first appeared in 1866. The reader for Standard V started with the alphabet, progressed to complete sentences and then to self-contained passages of prose. And importantly, "for the first time material was included for no other purpose than the entertainment of the pupil." (Laurie, 1866, as cited in Vincent, 1989, p88) However, as Vincent himself points out, standard V was not attained by most children.

Nevertheless, some dissension surfaced in the state system which may have led in some cases to progressive improvements. For example, in 1873, in the midst of the code's rule, an inspector reported his negative

observations of kindergarten activities. They had failed to establish themselves, as they should have done, as the foundation of infant education, but rather were taught in the same way as the 3Rs. The inspector called for more singing, marching and genuine kindergarten work than early instruction in the 3Rs because this approach led to more effective learning later on: “The children eventually progress much more rapidly than when kept hard at their books and slates” (Salmon, 1915, p121).

The most unsavoury aspects of the monitorial system were steadily modified during the first part of the century, in an attempt to placate the antagonism of parents. The Revised Code similarly underwent some adjustments which resulted in more humane and effective teaching. When the code was first introduced in 1862, standard I was examined at age six. The age was raised to seven, ten years later, possibly as part of the concessions which had to be made to working-class parents when the Education Act of 1870 was drafted. Further improvements were made in 1895 when inspection replaced examination for all standards (Whitbread, 1972).

Another factor contributing to the rising literacy rates might have been the increased number of children after 1870 who received any kind of instruction at all in reading or writing. The law compelling all working-class children to school included an unknown number of such children and they must, in the view of Altick (1957), have benefited from daily exposure to aspects of literacy. Laqueur (1976c) suggests that schooling came to make a difference when that part of the population, probably between 65 and 75 per cent, who could become literate through traditional cultural processes, had become so. A 75 per cent rate of literacy had been achieved in England before the introduction of compulsory elementary schooling from the 1870s:

It was for the residual 25 per cent or so who could not learn to decode the written word more or less on their own that schools and even particular reading techniques were most relevant.

(Laqueur, 1976c, p269)

Altick supports this view. He suggests that in order to earn as much money as possible teachers spent more time than they might otherwise have done with the slower pupils because the more able needed much less support to perform well in the tests.

The result was that the schools produced a greater proportion of literates than earlier, when the failure of pupils to learn their letters did not have such immediate financial repercussions. This probably contributed as much to the decline of illiteracy as the steady increase of school population.

(Altick, 1957, p158)

For these reasons, the code may have contributed to the rise in literacy rates. Nevertheless, children suffered at school and often grew into disaffected adults and parents who passed their dislike of school on to their own children. In some cases the antipathy extended to reading in general because the printed word had been the source of so much misery in school (Altick, 1957). That this was not the case for all children underlines the continuing failure of government policy to control working-class education. It also illustrates how, ultimately, total subservience of the minds and literacy of the common people cannot be achieved by a reactionary government. For example, the working-class autobiographies studied by Vincent show that the authors viewed literacy “as an essential tool for freedom of thought and expression” and that they valued their schooling, “however much of a travesty that experience might have been.” (Vincent, 1981, p106)

Evidence that state education had failed fully to control the consciousness of the working class is also to be found in the passage of the Reform Act of 1867. This was the result of massive, organised working-class activity, and for the first time put working-class voters in a majority in the towns. The perceived threat of the extended franchise to the established political and economic order gave added urgency to the government’s efforts to tighten the grip of state schools. The result was legislation to compel attendance (Simon, 1960).

4.5 Victory for state schools

The Education Acts of 1870 and 1880, which introduced free and compulsory schooling, marked the final and irrevocable victory of state education over the independent working-class sector. “Working-class private schooling disappeared from history almost as if it had never been.” (Gardner, 1984, p188) There was nothing in the 1870 Act which banned or outlawed the private schools and only later did the legislation compel attendance at a state school. All institutions had to satisfy the authorities that their provision was “efficient and suitable” and, while at first there was little attempt to discredit

the working-class teachers, because most of them were competent, officials could exploit flaws in their establishments. Furthermore, parents were harassed, cajoled and threatened into sending their children to the public schools so as to undermine the demand for the private schools, a ploy which was ultimately successful (Gardner, 1984).

After the acts, absence due to a “reasonable excuse” could be permitted, non-attendance being a matter for the magistrates. The magistrates were, at times, sympathetic to parents who argued that absence from school was due to the family’s need for the income from their children’s work. This financial necessity for families, together with the continuing demands of some employers, especially in rural areas, caused half-time education for older children to continue until 1918 (Middleton, 1970).

The legislation marked a victory for schooling designed to strengthen the social control of the working class (Johnson, 1970). Schools were also important for safeguarding the quality of future generations of the workforce while their parents were at work. Most employers no longer required older children to be available for work in urban areas, due to the introduction of improved sources of power and more complex machines. Rather, employers believed that children should attend schools which would keep them physically fit for work and prepare them for the discipline of employment from the age of ten. The 1870 act was the first of the education acts designed not only to meet these needs but also to train the next generation of the newly-enfranchised working class to vote for their betters (Simon, 1960). The tedium, repetition and drill of formal literacy instruction served two purposes: it contributed to the control exercised by the school in the moulding of young minds to know their subservient place in society; and it dumbed down and undermined the politically aware literacy of the working class culture from which the pupils were drawn (Luke, 1988; Willinsky, 1993). The methods were certainly barely successful in teaching most children to read with any proficiency or pleasure. The contemporary social researcher Charles Booth confirmed that in 1903 state school pupils were unable to read and write. Popular education had nevertheless been a success, he declared, because young people had become obedient to discipline and the rules of proper behaviour (Armytage, 1970).

These aims of the state were clear to many in the organised working class. The trade unionist Hibbs, for example, a Birmingham gun maker, during the agitation surrounding the Education Bill in 1870, condemned the learning of “unmeaning” sounds and said of the literacy of children who had been to a public school: “the metal has not been smelted or refined but only coated with a thin lacquer, which wears off as soon as it comes into use” (Hibbs, 1870, as cited in McCann, 1970, p148):

Products of such an education became citizens without interests or curiosity, content to have opinions made for them and regarding the operation of government as something beyond their ken.

(McCann, 1970, p148)

But on the whole the trade unions favoured free and compulsory education provided by the state, notwithstanding the controversial nature of compulsion. The argument was won in the unions on the grounds that this was in the best interests of the many children whose families suffered from widespread extreme poverty. The trade union leader Applegarth, for example, told a meeting of the National Education League, “I am here to demand that education shall be placed within the reach of every child, however poor, however degraded.” (Applegarth, 1869, as cited in McCann, 1970, p137) And indeed, when the children “from slum courts and alleys” were rounded up to attend the schools provided under the legislation, the massive scale of the desperate poverty affecting half the population was revealed (Middleton, 1970, p175). The National Education League, including the trade unions, achieved some concessions in the legislation, such as that the curriculum should be non-sectarian. A linked demand in the trade unions’ struggle, highly contentious for the government and employers, was for shorter working hours. This was because children and adults alike needed time to study if they were to benefit from education. (Simon, 1960)

The highly class-conscious nature of the decisions made by government is illustrated in the choice of language. After the 1867 Reform Act, in preparation for the forthcoming legislation on schools, civil servants, government ministers and other ideologues of the employing class were able openly to describe the purpose of public elementary education to be the stabilisation of a class-stratified society. But the use of such blatant language could not continue in a more democratic environment: “...educational aims

were no longer openly proclaimed - instead, class policies were to be disguised by educational phraseology.” (Simon, 1960, p365) For example, the term “education of the poor”, with its evocation of the Poor Law, was changed to “education of the people” and a “Bill for the Education of the Poor”, introduced in 1867, the year of the Reform Act, was withdrawn and re-introduced the following year with a new title, “The Elementary Education Bill” (Middleton, 1970).

4.5.1 School age - the earlier the better

The statutory school starting age of five years was agreed in 1870 with little parliamentary discussion. The debate was more concerned with the issues of compulsion and the role of children in the workforce. The opposition argued that not only would children, compelled to attend school, be prevented from earning a living in their own right but also school-age siblings would be unable to look after the younger children while their parents were at work. Education should be started and completed early, it was finally agreed, to release boys, in particular, to earn a living by age ten. The decision on starting age might have been for six years rather than five. Those in favour of five argued that poor children of that age were often already at work, on such tasks as watching cows in the lane or scaring crows, or to be found in the gutter. School, in their view, was a more benign environment. (Woodhead, 1989).

Before the Education Acts, although few might have attended school systematically, if at all, it was not unusual for children of five and younger to be in dame schools, infant schools or the baby classes of elementary schools. But the choice of five as the statutory school starting age, including the requirement formally to be taught the 3Rs, was out of line with the rest of Europe, where the age of six or seven was typically chosen.

After the first Education Act, school boards provided places for the massively increased population of children in public schools, including those aged three to five. Whitbread estimates that, in 1870, children of three to six comprised one-third of all those attending school and that, throughout the school board period, the number of three-to-five-year-olds, in absolute numbers and as a percentage of those in attendance at school, continued to rise. At elementary schools they were usually organised into two classes: the

babies' class, for children younger than five, and the infants' class, for children from age five to seven. But dreadful conditions developed in babies' classrooms. Very young children were penned into seats for extended periods every day, sometimes causing deformities, and continually rising numbers meant permanent overcrowding. Classes of 50 to 60 babies could be left in the charge of a girl of 13 or 14 and the pressure of the payment by results system led to the ever-earlier teaching of the 3Rs, even in these classrooms (Whitbread, 1972).

Bowstead, Fletcher's successor as a government inspector, was one of many who believed that the four infant years of schooling, from age three to seven, were critically important in a child's life. This was because attendance by older children was likely to be much more sporadic, due to family circumstances, and in any event cut short at age ten. Furthermore, older minds were much less easy to "mould" in the controlling ethos of the state school. Bowstead believed that, for this reason, infant schools were right to undertake instruction in the 3Rs. He reported that children younger than seven could be trained to read the New Testament or a simple secular book fluently and intelligently. Infant schools could also teach children to be obedient and subservient and to adopt a general moral culture, which "distinguishes them at a glance from untrained children of the same class and age":

These results are attainable in every infant school by proper methods, and it would be difficult to over-estimate their value in the case of children who are destined to complete their school education and enter upon the labour of their lives at the early age of ten or eleven.

(Bowstead, 1853, as cited in Rusk, 1933, p170)

The early start was thus deemed necessary because the first few years of education would be the significant part of the total that a child could hope to receive during their short life at school. Schools for babies and young children also played the vital role of releasing parents to be available for work. In the early days of legislation, however, the state was less aware of the need to protect the health and well-being of the children, who would become the next generation of workers. This was revealed, for example, by Bathurst, a government inspector who exposed the cruel conditions at the turn of the century. Huge numbers of very young children were being kept in

schools designed for older infants and children of little more than six years were being sent to the schools designed for older children. She summed up the official view, which she opposed, of what constituted appropriate education at a state school as follows:

In the eyes of both central and local authorities a school is a place where children learn to sit still, to obey orders, and where they receive instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic.

(Bathurst, 1905, p120)

In these conditions, three-year-olds were expected to sit on a hard wooden seat, or step of a gallery, with a desk in front of them and a window too high to see out of behind. Often the children's feet didn't reach the floor and there was no back to lean against. The children were told to fold their arms and sit quietly. This was not only highly inappropriate developmentally but also caused physical damage. Further emotional damage was done by whole-class instruction and chanting in phonics and number, lasting all morning with occasional intermissions for "a little drill or marching". Bathurst, perhaps with the parliamentary arguments for an early school start in mind, colourfully contrasts the child's misery in school with the "delicious liberty and enchanting variety of the gutter" (Bathurst, 1905, p121).

Because kindergarten methods were in vogue, according to Bathurst, a teacher who had a certificate in kindergarten methods was more likely to get a headship than a teacher who didn't. But in practice the schools spent most of the time drilling in the 3Rs because many managers and inspectors looked upon kindergarten methods as 'fads':

... the beginning and end of elementary education in his (the inspector's) eyes is 'Teach 'em to read', and the amount of time devoted to other things in any particular place will depend practically upon his personal bias.

(Bathurst, 1905, p120)

Bathurst condemned the requirements in schools for discipline and order and the introduction of children to the 3Rs at the earliest possible age. This undermined any attempt by teachers to promote kindergarten methods and kept "mites of children" in a tradition of drilling in the 3Rs which was damaging to their physical, emotional and academic health. She said of infant schools:

... the whole atmosphere has been made into a forcing-house for the schools for older scholars. ... The discipline expected is military rather

than maternal, and can only be maintained at the expense of much healthy, valuable, and, as far as the children are concerned, necessary freedom.

(Bathurst, 1905, p126)

By contrast, in a middle-class home, reading instruction was more likely to have been approached in a child-centred and developmentally appropriate way (Bathurst, 1905). The Revised Code for the working class, however, distorted the relationship between teachers and pupils in a way that prevented any progressive development in state schools for years to come. By the end of the century the code was beginning to lose its grip on official policy and was abolished in 1895. Schools were encouraged to experiment with new methods of teaching reading, alternative approaches to arithmetic, and Froebel-inspired methods in the education of babies and younger children. Physical exercises were to be included in the curriculum and visits to museums and other places of interest were to be considered a part of the normal school day for the purposes of the attendance grant. Inspectors were recruited as far as possible who had experience of elementary school teaching (Sutherland, 1971).

But the obstacles remained to a more progressive approach in the infant schools. These included massive class sizes and fixed, tiered galleries. Also, a generation of teachers who had worked only under the strictures of payment by results were, on the whole, unable or unwilling to change. The teachers continued to practice mechanical versions of Froebelian kindergarten exercises and Pestalozzian object lessons and accepted the pressure to teach facts and the 3Rs to the youngest of children. This was especially so while the school leaving age was low: ten until 1893; 11 until 1918 (Whitbread, 1972, p49).

The next chapter argues that conditions for very young children began to change for the better in the twentieth century as it became more obvious to the state that not only did parents need to be released from child-care responsibilities in order to be available for work but also that the children themselves needed to be safeguarded for their future role in the workforce. Nurseries were devised to meet these needs. At the same time, the trickle of progressive developments which had taken place in the state sector, even under the Revised Code, swelled into what became known as the 'new

education'. Thus, after the decisive defeat in 1870 of independent working-class education, the reading war transferred to the state sector.

The legacy of this defeat includes the start of formal literacy instruction at a very early age, a strong current of support for traditional methods, which are perceived to do the job quickly, and a hostility to state education on the part of working-class parents which can be manifested today in high rates of absenteeism and indifference to the work of the schools.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that changes made to the voluntary schools and the development of an infant stage of schooling were tactics in a state strategy to educate future generations of workers to know and accept their place in a burgeoning capitalist society. The monitorial system of the elementary schools had proved to be too blatant an attack on working-class culture, allowing independent working-class education to continue to flourish. The more gentle approach adopted in the infant schools and the modification of the monitorial system into a less harsh regime were designed to win over the parents who had thus far demonstrated widespread intransigence in the face of attempts to woo them into the state sector.

Government efforts, however, not only continued to fail but also became too expensive for the parliamentary representatives of the ruling classes to tolerate. The Revised Code was therefore devised. This stressed the primary importance in the curriculum of the 3Rs which, for many working-class parents, were the only point of a school. The code also imposed payment by results to control teachers and cut costs. The curriculum under this system proved to be no more acceptable to parents than that of previous regimes. Finally, therefore, the children of the working class were coerced into attendance at state schools under the education acts of 1870 and 1880.

Teaching the 3Rs remained a vital component of state education for two main reasons. First, the next generation of workers needed to be trained to the level of technical skill required by their role in the workforce or in the reserve workforce of the unemployed. Second, a legacy of the independent working-class domestic curriculum, and essential to maintain the adherence of parents, was the requirement for schools to teach reading quickly and efficiently and to serve little other purpose. Strictly controlled teaching using

traditional approaches could therefore be acceptable to parents although in the setting of a state school the child-centred approach of the earlier working-class culture was lost to whole-class methods. Traditional instructional methods were certainly in the state's interests, due to their role in controlling the attitudes and outlook and thinking of pupils and teachers alike. Furthermore, as the century progressed, the standardised teaching materials required by these methods in state schools became an expanding source of profit for commercial manufacturers of educational resources (Lowe, 2007; Luke, Carrington, and Kapitzke, 2003).

The next chapter shows how, after the defeat of independent working-class education, the reading war transferred to the state sector. In the schools, progressive methods to teach reading gained ground after the demise of the Revised Code, culminating in their endorsement by the Plowden Report of 1967 (DES). This process was accompanied by a paradigm shift which permitted a sociopsycholinguistic approach to gain hold that burgeoned into a more enlightened mainstream practice. The backlash gained force from the 1970s with the rise of the new right and the subsequent widespread re-imposition of reactionary methods which has continued to the present day.

Aspects of the role of early childhood education, to release parents to be available for work when required as well as to mould children's attitudes to work, remained as continuing features of the reading war. An added dimension in the twentieth century was clearer recognition of the need to safeguard the health and well-being of the next generation of workers. The next chapter argues that attempts to meet these needs were made through the gradual exclusion of babies and young children from formal schooling and the establishment of nurseries; but the struggle between progressive and traditional forces was to be found in every type of educational institution, including the nurseries.

Chapter 5 The reading war and state schooling in the 20th century

5.1 Introduction

We have seen that the reading war – loosely, whole language versus phonics – is not only about reading but also about social control. Underlying the arguments are beliefs regarding how tightly children (and parents and teachers) need to be controlled by the state. After working-class parents were defeated by the nineteenth-century education acts, protagonists could be characterised as progressive or traditional. The progressive approach was child-centred, advocating a flexible classroom organisation in which the developing child could take responsibility and exercise choice. The traditional approach was subject-centred, believing children needed considerable adult direction and control, reflected in more formal classroom organisation and discipline.

The last chapter closed at the end of the nineteenth century after the independent working-class approach to childhood education had been defeated. The Revised Code had become deeply entrenched in the state sector, supporting a form of traditional teaching which left parents and children alike disaffected from school (Armytage, 1970). This was a dark age, educationally, inflicting a harmful school environment on young children.

Nevertheless, a current of progressivism had continued to flow and at the turn of the century the struggle with traditional methods of education re-emerged. The site of the war was now almost exclusively the state sector of education and methods of teaching children to read had ceased to be an obvious matter of class politics. Then, as now, support for progressive methods could be found among members of the organised working class, especially in the teaching unions; then, as now, support for independent schooling and home education could be found among working parents. But, since the turn of the twentieth century, the reading war, and its place within the wider struggle between progressive and traditional methods of education, can be understood in terms of a debate within the “supportive rhetoric” discussed in chapter two. In these terms, the child-centred ideals and beliefs of educators are undermined by the conditions of capitalism, which require a workforce of individuals – children, parents and teachers - socialised to

undertake routine and tedious tasks. Hence all teachers, including progressive teachers, have to maintain “ultimate top-down control over the child’s activities” (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, p39); and the battle between educators over the content or methods of schooling conceals from the participants its true purpose of social control (Harris, 1979).

Nevertheless, as a participant, I argued in chapter two that a progressive approach to reading, with its search for meaning, has greater potential to challenge a child’s thinking than the traditional methods with their more blatant child-controlling features. Furthermore, progressive education in the state sector has undoubtedly been perceived as a threat. This is demonstrated most clearly by the intensity of the assaults launched by the neo-liberal movements in the second half of the century, including the imposition of a prescriptive national curriculum and national strategies to standardise instruction in the 3Rs. The perceived threat is partly ideological, that a free-thinking proletariat might become a stronger adversary or, worse, revolutionary, as witnessed elsewhere in the world (Lowe, 2007); and partly generated by concern for the profits of companies that sell products such as reading schemes to state schools (Shannon and Goodman, 1994).

This chapter seeks to explain the continuing history of the reading war, as it played out in the twentieth century in the state sector, at first featuring the ascendancy of the ‘new education’ but superceded by the methods of the new right. The chapter argues that progressive education was never entirely defeated and eventually re-emerged in the twenty-first century in the play-based curriculum, at first for children from age three to five (QCA, 2000), subsequently for children from birth to five (DfES, 2007a). The threatened submergence of the progressive approach is due to the early start of formal literacy instruction, imposed on children in order to meet the demands of statutory assessment at age five.

Such an early start is a legacy of earlier centuries, when sending very young children to a state-sponsored school was not only a means of social control, to indoctrinate children to know their place in society, but also a means to ensure that parents, especially mothers, remained in the workforce or available for work, to the benefit of capitalism. At the turn of the twentieth century this was being achieved mainly in infant schools or infant

departments of elementary schools but without due regard to the need to protect the health of the next generation of workers. This was revealed starkly by the unfit state of many recruits to the Boer War (Whitbread, 1972). The 'social rescue' element of the earliest nurseries was designed to tackle this problem. Nurseries became eligible for discretionary local authority grants for the first time in 1919 and were supported and developed by the state to the degree that it was deemed necessary in order to maintain an adequate supply of sufficiently healthy present and future workers. Nursery schools and kindergartens became more common, especially in big industrial centres, as children younger than five were progressively excluded from state schools so as to accommodate the increasing numbers of older children. (Whitbread, 1972).

The chapter begins with a discussion of the progressive and traditional features of nurseries in the early twentieth century, manifested in different measure according to the relative influence of Froebel or Montessori. The development within state schools of the new education and the concomitant rise of the new right, with its constraining effects, is then considered. The apotheosis of the new education came in the 1960s and 1970s with the impact of sociopsycholinguistics, a body of research which emerged from the paradigm shift which had accompanied the work of Susan Isaacs at the Malting House School in the early 1920s. The government, which came to regard progressive education as seriously threatening, took steps to undermine and destroy it by manufacturing literacy crises. In these, claims that standards had dramatically fallen were designed to generate panic, followed by an acceptance of phonics instruction as the natural replacement for the culpable whole-language approach. The process started when the burgeoning neo-liberal movement achieved victory with the education acts of the Thatcher government, thus entrenching reactionary schooling until the present day. Finally, the chapter argues that the reintroduction of progressive education in the twenty-first century marks a victory for the strength of early years educators' commitment to the best interests of young children. But it is counteracted not only by the introduction of contradictory requirements for statutory assessment at age five but also in its widespread imposition on children from birth. The emergent battle of modern home educators and

progressive private schools against encroaching state control are evidence of continuing opposition, together with the patient and principled arguments of state teachers and their representatives who continue to resist such as the statutory assessment tasks at age 11.

5.2 Nurseries

McMillan played a key role in the development of nursery schools. She was also willing to accommodate older children up to age seven or eight or older in her nurseries. Her priority was to provide physical, emotional and medical care to the children of desperately poor families, including children who had deformities at age three caused by having to sit all day at school with their legs under a table (Whitbread, 1972). She also saw the dire consequences of children being left unattended at home, for example tied to a table leg, while their parents were at work for long hours. McMillan believed that it was cruel to compel children who were hungry to attend school. Furthermore, the rule-bound environments of state schools worked against the needs of children to learn actively from first-hand experiences and prevented the development of key dispositions such as endurance and self-reliance (Cresswell, 1948).

Montessori similarly condemned the destructive physical, emotional and cognitive effects on young children of attendance at traditional schools in Italy and opened children's houses to promote and develop her theories of individual education (Montessori, 2008).

McMillan and Montessori, in their own ways, were both very controlling of children, heavily influenced by the earlier work with "idiots" of Seguin, who insisted on children's obedience to the authority of the teacher (Isaacs, 1966; Stewart, 1972). But Seguin also influenced the progressive elements of their work which, in their child-centred, individual approaches, permitted some autonomy to children in the choice of their activities. In the case of Montessori, however, this was within a controlled environment containing highly structured apparatus (Isaacs, 1966). In 1843 Seguin had denounced the traditional method of French schools which set "uniform tasks for all". Instead, he advocated that practitioners should plan individual activities for a particular child on the basis of observations of the child (Talbot, 1964).

The methods adopted by McMillan and Montessori to teach reading were traditional, starting with letters then syllables, words and sentences.

McMillan started formal instruction in reading at the traditionally early age for England, between three and five; Montessori, at age four, started much earlier than the traditional six years in Italy. She did, however, wait until the child showed an interest, until age six if necessary, rather than attempt to coerce them into learning. Children who did not show an interest were subject to alternative prescribed activities (Montessori, 2008).

When Montessori first started working with young children she believed, in line with earlier writers and authorities and contemporary practice in Italy, that age six was soon enough to start formal literacy instruction. She claimed that the children's mothers pressed her to teach reading to four-year-olds and she enthusiastically took up the task. Children who showed an interest in the activities she devised were taught writing first and then reading. The children learnt, through a form of synthetic phonics instruction, to recognise letter-sound correspondences, write letters, hear sounds in words and write words in cursive script, soon followed by reading words.

Sandpaper letters were used to teach recognition by sight and touch, children tracing the sandpaper letters repeatedly while saying the sound. Exercises developed arm and finger flexibility in preparation for writing, children first writing individual letters, vowels then consonants, followed by the simple syllables in Italian, a phonetically regular language. Montessori started with the idea that children should learn to write before they learned to read. To this end they were taught first to hear sounds in words in order to write them and then to blend or 'sound out' the letters in written words in order to read them. In practice, regarding the order of learning, she allowed children to follow their own inclinations. According to Montessori, pupils who participated learned very quickly; children of four who had been in a Montessori school for two and a half months, "can write any word from dictation ...":

Our little ones are generally experts after three months' time, and those who have written for six months may be compared to the children in the third elementary.

(Montessori, 2008, p197)

Books were withdrawn from the programme because, using phonic skills, the children decoded the words without gaining any meaning from the text. Instead, Montessori wrote instructions on strips of paper for children to

read and act on, for example: “Close the window blinds; open the front door; then wait a moment and arrange things as they were at first.” (Montessori, 2008, p203)

Montessori taught individual children, although they might practice the skills learned in small groups; McMillan practised both individual and small-group teaching (Talbot, 1964; McMillan, 1919; Montessori, 2008).

Montessori, in marketing her apparatus around the world, was among the early exploiters of the commercial opportunities offered by widespread, publicly-funded education.

The Froebel Educational Institute opposed these approaches because they introduced mechanical and closed methods, which were subject to abuse in the same way as Froebelian kindergarten exercises in state schools. The Institute advocated a more all-round progressive approach to the education of very young children, distinguishing nursery schools from infant schools by their provision of opportunities for individual care and attention, movement and free play and the absence of formal instruction (Whitbread, 1972). Furthermore:

That some children, between four and five, almost learn to read of themselves, is no proof that this is the best employment for them, or that reading should be taught at this age to all children. Froebelian children learn to read and write easily at six.

(Salmon, 1915)

While the proponents of nursery education were developing their work in the early twentieth century, state school teachers were largely quiescent; this was a period when those deprived of any autonomy or professional responsibility under the Revised Code came to retiring age. While this generation of teachers remained largely unchanged in their practice, the pressure on children nevertheless relaxed (Holmes, 1911). New and freer attitudes were spreading, fostered by the inspectorate and some of the training colleges, stronger in the separate infant schools than in infant departments of elementary schools (Whitbread, 1972). The influence of Froebelian and Montessorian approaches eventually came to be felt in the state sector of infant education, from ages five to seven and, to a much lesser extent, in subsequent years. This more progressive approach to state schooling was known as the ‘new education’ and, while progressive teaching

methods may never in practice have been widely understood or consistently applied, the newly ascendant theories marked the beginnings of a more humane official view of young children which has survived into the twenty-first century.

5.3 The new education

The last chapter showed how the Revised Code had an extremely damaging effect on pupils and teachers alike, its drill and rote learning having a significant impact well into the twentieth century and to the present day. Evidence to the Cross Commission, a quarter of a century after the code's introduction, described the mind-numbing rote learning without comprehension that passed for reading as being pretty similar at the beginning as at the end of the period. One witness reported: "I should say that the criticisms that were passed upon Reading by the earlier (Newcastle) Commission of 1861 might be applied to the same subject now." (Cross Commission, 1886, as cited in Vincent, 1989, p88)

Nevertheless, after the defeat of independent working-class education, a current of progressivism continued to flow, however weakly, throughout the period dominated by the Revised Code and payment by results. This was manifested in a number of ways. Not all working-class parents, for example, were acquiescent in the new regime of compulsory attendance at a state school (Middleton, 1970) and some were positively hostile:

... building a Board School was like planting a fortress in an enemy's country. The building was the symbol of tyranny and oppression, and often the school keeper had difficulty in protecting it from malicious damage.

(Philpott, 1904, as cited in Selleck, 1968, p66)

The legacy of this defiance continues to be felt to this day in a significant degree of absenteeism from state schools, especially in deprived areas (Pugh, 2010). Further evidence of surviving progressivism during the period of the Revised Code is to be found in the resilience of the infant schools' less controlling approach to young children and their teachers. The strength of this progressive element, in contrast to the typical practice of the elementary schools, protected children younger than six from being included in the individual examinations instituted under the code (Turner, 1970). An understanding of the importance to child-centred education of observations of

child development also came to be more widely recognised in this period with the growth of the child study movement in the 1880s (Whitbread, 1972).

By the turn of the century, galleries were being removed from some babies' rooms, giving more scope for the children to move, and some infant teachers were beginning to organise periods of free play in the school hall. But many two, three and four-year-olds remained penned into seats at school and subject to extensive mass instruction in the 3Rs. Inspectors increasingly condemned this (e.g. Bathurst, 1905), prompting the official 1905 code and *Handbook of Suggestions* for teachers to go so far as to call for the teaching of the 3Rs to become entirely incidental to children's practical learning and activity. Furthermore, the duration of lessons should be limited to not more than 15 minutes (Whitbread, 1972).

At the time it was widely believed that reading was a perceptual process and that learning to read was a relatively straightforward matter of understanding how to decode text. Technical disagreements mainly centred on the unit of text to start with, whether letters, sounds, syllables or words. Nevertheless, the progressive aspect of learning to read, the creative search for meaning, must always have been evident in some measure, even in the midst of the traditional advocacy of rote learning and accuracy.

For example, the Montessorian approach to teaching reading was taken up and promoted by Mackinder (including the commercial sale of her own graded, self-teaching materials) for individual work in large infant classes (Mackinder, 1923). Her method, like Montessori's, was traditional but her class-room organisation for individual work in a state school was progressive, as were some aspects of her approach to reading. In particular she tolerated comprehension and enjoyment of text by children at the possible expense of correctness, being willing to permit children to read books without supervision from the teacher in order to make sense for themselves:

They may not learn every word in each book, but if they did not understand enough to follow the story they would not read the book. As they follow the story it is surprising, to an onlooker, to see what words they gather from the context.

(Mackinder, 1923, p95)

The earlier work of the American John Dewey, influenced by Froebel, around the turn of the century, aimed to emulate earlier domestic conditions. Dewey sought to restore to children of all ages in schools the broad, practical, connected and active learning that had been such a clearly relevant aspect of the family's life and survival in pre-industrial times. This included, of course, learning to read. Project work was to replace the passive learning of prescribed lessons and pupils were to be taught the 3Rs in context, as and when they were needed, in the course of their practical work (Dewey, 2001).

Susan Isaacs, opposed to the controlling aspects of Montessorian work, applied the comprehensively progressive principles of Dewey in her experimental work in the early 1920s at the exclusive Maltings House School. The experimental school was for a limited number of children from wealthy families. Isaacs broadened her work into the state sector when she subsequently became the head of the newly formed department of child development at the Institute of Education and ran courses for the teachers of large classes of working-class children (Gardner, 1969).

At the Maltings House School, children's interests were followed. Features of the school included extensive environmental print for the children to become familiar with and for teachers to refer to; adults modelling and supporting children's self-chosen efforts at writing for a purpose; and introducing formal materials for teaching reading when children showed an interest. The formal methods favoured a whole-word approach rather than phonics and enlisted resources such as boxes of pictures with descriptive names on loose slips, and whole sentences:

The technical processes of learning to read and write thus fell into their proper places as aids to recording and communication. The value of this was found later on when every one of the children grew eager to master these tools.

(Isaacs, 1930, p45)

In terms of achievement, Isaacs says that children between four and six were most of them behind the "usual standard" in reading and writing for children taught in ordinary or Montessori schools; but towards the end of these years, "they were all marked by their unusual keenness to learn, and most of them easily pulled up to or beyond the normal level in their seventh and eighth years" (Isaacs, 1930, p46).

This, for me, goes to the heart of the dilemma, for not only is the reading war characterised by disputes over method but also the age at which formal instruction should begin.

The Hadow Report, although influenced by Isaac's work, remained in the Montessorian mould in calling for instruction in bottom-up methods, word and sentence recognition as well as phonetic decoding, and practice in reading graded story books. But the language was progressive: learning to read and write should be incidental to the child's developing wider interests; it should appear natural to both child and teacher, "and be no longer a catastrophic change in their relations". Also in line with both Isaacs and Montessori, it was progressive in its discussion of the age at which a child should be introduced to formal teaching, highlighting the following statement in italics:

The child should begin to learn the 3Rs when he wants to do so, whether he be three or six years of age.

(Board of Education, 1933, p133)

The report nevertheless expressed the belief that late starters would catch up with early starters; children who started to learn at age six would be just as capable of reading "a suitable book" when they left the infants at age seven as children who had first expressed an interest in learning to read at a much younger age. Such an expectation, out of line with Isaac's findings, that it might take another year, created a contradiction which worked against teachers acting on the exhortation to follow the children's lead. This is because infant schools and departments were held accountable for the children's achievements at age seven; waiting until age six to introduce the formal teaching of literacy would have been perceived as a serious risk and, therefore, an unrealistic option. The Plowden report sought to solve this problem in favour of meeting children's needs by raising the infant school leaving age to eight years (DES, 1967). But, as will be argued later, the contradiction firmly reasserted itself in the twenty-first century adoption in the early years of both a play-based curriculum and the assessment of literacy attainment for which teachers were to be held accountable.

The progressive aspect of the contradiction was officially maintained in the *Handbook of Suggestions* for teachers of 1937, which developed the idea of children pursuing their wider interests. It called for a balance of adult-

directed and child-initiated activities during the school day and suggested that, for most children, formal instruction in the 3Rs should be postponed until about age six. The handbook recognised the danger that children were likely to learn how to decode text without understanding if teachers were to concentrate on phonics instruction:

Of methods of teaching children to read it may be said that no method is satisfactory which results in attention to the symbol at the expense of the meaning.

(Board of Education, 1942, p93).

The handbook therefore advocated three 'bottom-up' methods, phonics, look-and-say and sentence, and for children to practice in graded reading books. Additionally and progressively it called attention to the value of environmental print and familiarity by the child with favourite whole texts such as nursery rhymes.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, although school practice remained largely traditional, children were working in a more relaxed environment and significant gains had been made in raising the profile of progressive approaches to education (Selleck, 1972). A generation of teachers had been trained and were working who had not been scarred by the era of payment by results and who were supported in progressive approaches by trainers, inspectors and official government documents. Furthermore, the raised school leaving age, from 11 to 14 in 1918 and to 15 in 1944, had relieved some of the pressure felt by teachers to start formal instruction as early as possible to make the most of a child's short life at school (Whitbread, 1972).

But the contradiction between the progressive rhetoric and the requirement for results continued to take its toll. For example, while most working-class children left school at the earliest opportunity, without any qualifications, a small number were identified for a free-place scholarship to a secondary or grammar school at age 11 (Simon, 1991). Such a measure, by requiring children to sit scholarship exams, operated against the progressive movement and contributed to the maintenance of traditional teaching in the 3Rs as did, later, the requirement for children to sit for the 11+ examination and, to this day, standard assessment tasks (SATs) at age 11.

However, evacuation and disrupted war-time conditions accelerated change. Teachers were forced to improvise in unfamiliar surroundings, for example using group and informal methods and taking the children on visits to the countryside. The teachers gained greater confidence in their own judgments and discovered some of the different and varied ways in which children could learn. "Many of the more advanced techniques in our primary schools were worked out at this time." (Simon, 1991, p35)

The education and care of children younger than five became subject to unprecedented official interest in view of the need to release women for war work and safeguard the health and dispositions of the next generation of workers and soldiers. Many day nurseries were opened and, although the standards varied widely, far more children were placed by their parents in nurseries than in the Ministry of Labour's official child-minder scheme. But even here the reading war was being waged. Day nurseries gave priority to children's health and considered pre-school education to be incidental; nursery school campaigners feared that the day nursery ethos would prove a setback to the movement for nursery education, leading to clashes between matrons and teachers in full-time nurseries (Whitbread, 1972).

Working-class education reverted to previous forms after the war, largely unstructured by the 1944 act, which was drafted rapidly by a government keen to pre-empt and eclipse the more radical Beveridge report (Simon, 1991). The official compulsory school starting age was confirmed as the term after that in which a child reached their fifth birthday but the Hadow Report's recommendation for the establishment of a distinct phase of infant education was ignored, the infant phase being subsumed in the new label of "primary". The act favoured nursery education over child care for pre-school children but the provision of nursery education was merely permissive for local authorities, unlike secondary education, which was to become universally compulsory. For progressive educators in the early years, demanding the universal provision of nursery education took second place to defending child-centred methods in the infant phase of the newly formed primary stage of education (Whitbread, 1972).

Thus early childhood education provided by the state remained fragmented. But progressive views continued to be heard, and practised in

some measure, and their official endorsement was confirmed in the Plowden report (DES, 1967). Plowden recommended that the infant phase be extended to age eight and that teaching and learning in the primary classroom, with average class sizes of 35, should be informal, on an individual basis and unstreamed.

Plowden's recommendations on the techniques of teaching reading were similar to government advice which had gone before, to use a range of instructional approaches, including phonic, word and sentence methods, and a selection of graded readers from reading schemes. The report criticised the quality of available reading scheme primers and advocated more and better quality books in schools, books made by teachers and children themselves as well as commercially published children's literature and improved primers. The report called for children to have lots of practice in reading and referred to "a really remarkable change" that had taken place since the war, namely the much improved provision of books in schools. The report, which recommended the establishment of teachers' centres, urged that many more books of all kinds be provided in schools and for teachers to be supported in their use:

One of the functions of teachers' centres would be to house a collection of children's books which could be regularly kept up to date and could provide starting points for discussion by teachers of how children have responded to books.

(DES, 1967, p215)

The report expressed a positive view of information books, in the way that earlier authorities had not, but warned that the teacher must give continuing guidance and support and ensure that the books supported rather than substituted for first-hand experience and investigation. Regarding story, the report called on teachers to read aloud to children and to find time and peace for children to undertake solitary reading. It noted that in primary schools, however, there were too few good-quality books.

The report believed that children should not be started on literacy instruction too early. Its radical recommendation to increase the age of top infant education to eight was designed to give children enough time to develop, unpressured by teachers, and thereby prevent them going into the juniors as failed readers. The report believed that only a very few children

would not have learned to read by age nine and they should be referred to an educational psychologist.

This call for good books, of interest to children, continued to be a strong theme of progressive education and Plowden's questioning of the quality of existing reading scheme books was eventually superseded by theoretical objections to the use of artificial, graded text of any sort. Authentic children's literature or 'real books' were instead recommended, in the context of a much clearer understanding of how children learn to read and the provision of a much broader reading curriculum. This paradigm shift, stimulated by the ideas and practice of the new education, was more fully articulated in the work of psycholinguistics.

In the meantime, after the Plowden report, the language experience approach, using the child's own oral language to describe their personal interests and experiences, was developed. A Schools Council project promoted the ideas through the *Breakthrough to Literacy* scheme (Mackay, Thompson and Schaub, 1970). Remnants of the materials for this, known as sentence makers, are found in many schools even today: word cards were available to sequence into sentences which the child composed; the child either dictated to the teacher so that the teacher could select the cards or the child selected the word cards for themselves. At first the teacher would copy the sentence into the child's book; later the child would copy it for themselves. The child's book then became personal reading material.

In an echo of Montessori, the suggestions also included the teacher using enlarged versions of the word cards to write questions for the children to read and answer. The teachers' handbook included helpful sections on picture books and nursery rhymes and reading scheme books were recommended which, in the authors' view, were better than those criticised by the Plowden report. As well as the sentence makers there were word makers which required the teaching of synthetic phonics for children to segment and spell words (Mackay *et al*, 1970).

At the same time, the application of psycholinguistics to the understanding of how children learn to read was marking a high spot for progressive reading education and provided sound empirical and theoretical support for the kind of practice advocated by Isaacs. It started with Chomsky

who, in 1959, not only discredited the behaviourist theories which supported traditional methods of reading instruction but also supported empirically many of the child-centred progressive educators' intuitive thoughts on language learning (Shannon, 1990).

The subsequent work of Goodman in the 1960s was based on miscue analysis, a method of analysing reader's errors in order to understand how they succeeded in making sense of a text without accurately decoding it. Goodman demonstrated the very active but tentative and idiosyncratic role of readers in their interactions with texts in order to construct meaning; successful readers used predictions, inferences and trial and error to test the text for the significance of its content and rarely employed phonic strategies. Goodman thus exposed as false the view that reading was a simple process of decoding text in order to reveal an unambiguous meaning:

Miscues illuminated how readers made sense of the text. Reading was a psycholinguistic guessing game in which efficiency meant using minimal cues to get to meaning and proficiency was making sense of the text.

(Goodman, 2000)

Smith (1982) reviewed the work of a range of researchers in psycholinguistics, including Chomsky and Goodman, concluding that children learned to read by reading, not through exercises or drills, and that the role of teachers was to make reading easy for them. Comprehension was not a closed process but rather the reader actively used strategies to make sense of a text. This work was first published in 1971, further undermining the view that reading was little more than an associative process based on sound/symbol relationships and that the meaning was "simply sitting there in a text":

Smith's book immediately attracted both huge support and massive opposition and severely divided educationalists. It would not be unfair to describe this division as 'war', with such vitriol were these differences manifested.

(Gillen and Hall, 2003, p5)

Using bold and sometimes polemical language, Smith developed his ideas, uncompromisingly attacking the traditional views of how children learned and should be taught to read. A meaningful context and a more experienced reader were the resources needed by children to identify and learn words:

In natural, out-of-school surroundings, printed words exist not to be associated with *sounds* but with *sense*.

(Smith, 1978, p145)

Word-perfect reading was unnecessary because reading was a matter of getting meaning correct rather than specific words correct. Furthermore, concentrating on the meaning of individual words was stressful and counter-productive because it prevented children's use of prediction, an important strategy in both comprehension and the identification of words. In the face of uncertainty, children should be encouraged to speed up, read on and try to find the general sense of the text; only then, if necessary, should they go back to identify and understand specific words. Teachers should also tolerate children's use of the vernacular to express the comprehension of their reading. This was because a child using their own language, rather than the precise book language, revealed, not errors of making sense of the text but their inability to do two things at once, namely to read meaningfully and at the same time to speak in the unfamiliar syntax of written language. Finally, teachers should trust children's judgment for self-correction and not correct errors immediately; for a word-by-word emphasis on correctness distracted children from the need to learn that the purpose of reading was to make sense (Smith, 1978).

Other authorities affirmed that formal instruction and graded hierarchies of text were unnecessary for a child to learn to read. Children were motivated by their interest in the meanings of print in its social contexts in their own lives. For example Heath, in a study of community life, found that pre-schoolers were able to read many different types of written information that was all around them in their environment. The children achieved this without any systematic intervention by adults, who did not read to the children or consciously model or demonstrate reading and writing behaviours for them. The children learned from environmental print such as trade names of bikes, cars, TV messages, house numbers and license plates. They watched others reading and writing for a variety of purposes and cooperated and participated in the process with older children and adults. They finally read, and often wrote, independently at very young ages, sometimes as young as three (Heath, 1980).

Inspired by the work of sociopsycholinguistics, progressive educators were able to move on from the combination of phonic, whole word and sentence methods, which had continued to be advocated by inspectors (Blackie, 1967), and develop further the ideas tested by Isaacs in the 1920s. Real books were enlisted to provide an authentic, top-down approach. The reading process was supported by the context of the text and the illustrations, together with the child's developing knowledge of the structure of language and the role of letters and sounds. The focus of teaching was on the message in print rather than the print itself (Abbott *et al*, 2003). Using these methods, children could not only learn to read but also to become enthusiastic readers.

The Bullock report (DES, 1975) endorsed the language experience approach and the use of the *Breakthrough to Literacy* scheme although not the synthetic phonics, believing instead that letter-sound correspondence should be taught in a whole-word context and that there was a limited role for blending (or 'sounding out'). The report quoted favourably from the work of psycholinguists such as Goodman (1970) and Smith (1971) and seriously criticised available reading schemes and the philosophy behind their use. Reading schemes could have a debilitating effect on the motivation of parent, teacher and child and adversely constrained authors by their demand for a very limited vocabulary. Furthermore, the subject-matter of the schemes was severely limited in the range of experiences and relationships presented regarding such as parental roles, gender roles and attitudes to authority. In particular, once the child started to read scheme books from a graded series, the temptation became very strong for both parent and teacher to disregard the "excitement and sheer pleasure" to be gained from sharing a real book (although the report did not use the term) and to concentrate instead on the child's rate of progress. And on the part of the child, "the desire to read may become secondary to a desire to perform to please the parent by progressing through the scheme" (DES, 1975, p104).

This view had evidently been gaining ground in the classroom for the report found, in a survey of 2,000 schools in England, that some teachers were successful without recourse to reading schemes. However the report stopped short of calling for reading schemes to be replaced with real books

due to the perceived logistical needs of many teachers of large classes of infants:

If (the teacher) never had to cope with more than a few children she might well manage without a reading scheme, and indeed some teachers do so with great success, however large the class. Nevertheless, many more find it an invaluable resource.

(DES, 1975, p104)

Progressive approaches derived from sociopsycholinguistics received official endorsement through the Bullock report and were certainly acted on in practice by some teachers in some places. Simon (1991) attempts to evaluate how widely the progressive approach to reading instruction spread and concludes that its influence was limited to London and a few other local education authorities. London alone, however, contains a lot of the nation's schools, teachers and pupils. My belief is that the influence of sociopsycholinguistics took a firm enough hold to contribute to the growing strength of a progressive educational movement which, together with other social movements of the time, was considered to be seriously threatening by the forces of reaction. The Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), for example, deemed later by the Thatcher government to represent a countervailing power of similar magnitude to the Greater London Council, undertook an extensive programme of in-service training in sociopsycholinguistic methods (Barrs, Ellis, Hester and Thomas, 1987). The legacy of this work has been protected and continues to be promoted by the Centre for Language in Primary Education, formerly funded by ILEA but which survived the destruction of the authority in 1990 (e.g. Ellis and Barrs, 1996; Lazim, 2008).

Waterland, the headteacher of an infant school in Peterborough, also played a key role in the dissemination of alternative approaches. She became dissatisfied with the outcome of the traditional behaviourist methods she had been trained to use and started to read the psycholinguistic literature. As a result of her new understanding she developed throughout her school an apprenticeship approach to reading authentic children's literature. She recorded her experience and offered advice in an influential book, *Read With Me*, first published in 1985 (Waterland, 1988).

5.4 Ascendancy of the new right

The arguments in the reading war, being ideologically motivated, were never subject to resolution by empirical research. The right-wing defence of traditional methods of teaching the 3Rs – ‘back to the basics’ – is linked not only to their unequivocal role in maintaining social control of both working-class children and their teachers but also to the desire to maintain a lucrative market for commercial companies in the sale of such as reading scheme materials to state schools (Luke *et al*, 2003).

The arguments of traditionalists were relatively uncoordinated while progressive approaches were gaining ground in the state sector during the first half of the twentieth century. They were never silent, however, emerging for example in the files of numerous letters written by members of the public after the war to the new ministry of education (Lowe, 2007). Anti-communist propaganda after the war contributed to the Middlesex Ban against teachers, the British equivalent of McCarthyism, a general swing to the right and, with it, opposition to progressive teaching. The educational right wing continued to marshal its forces while attempts were being made by progressive educators to implement the Plowden report and primary school streaming at all ages was successfully being abandoned (Simon, 1991).

The growing strength and influence of traditional approaches culminated with the legislation of the Thatcher government in the 1980s, presaging a battery of further neo-liberal enactments to the present day. It is unclear how far whole-language approaches to teaching reading have disappeared from English primary schools as new generations of teachers have trained to teach a subject-centred national curriculum, to adopt the tightly prescribed methods of a national literacy strategy and to prepare children for narrowly-defined SATs in the 3Rs. Not all that was progressive was destroyed in one go; rather it has been a continuing process of increasing severity, so that one new controlling initiative after another, each more reactionary than the previous one, has been imposed on schools and training colleges and policed by inspectors.

The progressive movement was still strong enough, in 1988, for example, for the first English national curriculum to have been relatively progressive; but this was superseded, with a changing balance of forces, by

a more reactionary version (Cox, 1995). The Centre for Language in Primary Education has retained its progressive edge, notwithstanding the different emphasis in its change of name to Centre for Literacy. The literacy strategy included group teaching, as well as whole-class methods, and at first advocated significant aspects of the ILEA/CLPE philosophy including, for example, a multi-cueing approach to supporting children's reading development. These progressive remnants were defeated in 2006 when priority was given to systematic synthetic phonics instruction. The first SATs for seven-year-olds, although time-consuming for teachers, prescribed appropriate assessment activities for reading based on a 1:1 experience with the child. The associated training introduced many practising teachers to miscue analysis and the evaluation of oral response to text. This progressive approach was replaced in subsequent years by pencil and paper activities, including closed comprehension questions to test reading.

Teachers, released for a few decades from the strictures of the Revised Code have now, in the twenty-first century, once again been successfully curbed and controlled. Legislation demands punitive inspections of teaching methods and teacher performance and payment by the results of pupil progress, not only in statutory assessments at ages seven and 11 but also on a continuous basis in all year-groups. An additional feature of this control is the stress built in by contradictory official rhetoric, especially obvious in the early years, which seeks to placate advocates of both traditional and progressive approaches. In the infant and junior stages this demands, on the one hand, accountability by the teacher for measured, continuous, incremental progress on the part of their pupils, on a termly basis, through standardised levels in the 3Rs; on the other hand it demands "creativity" in the thematic teaching of a broad and balanced curriculum in line with the programmes of study in the national curriculum. For children younger than five it demands not only a demonstrably play-based curriculum, offering a balance of child-initiated and adult-directed activities (DfES, 2007a), but also accountability by teachers for significant progress at age five in the 3Rs (DCSF, 2009), impossible contradictory demands.

In England, there is now near-total control of work in schools by the government and a new breed of headteachers has been trained to ensure

compliance. A cynical view of educational history has been successfully promoted by the new right to explain curriculum change since the war, namely that discredited child-centred theories and progressivism failed children until the 1990s, when whole-class teaching, standards and targets saved the day (Lowe, 2007). This conclusion is supported by the frequently expressed view of writers on progressive education in the twentieth century (e.g. Jones, 1983; Lowe, 2007; Whitbread, 1972), that the failure to develop a common rationale and theory for child-centred education left differences unresolved and practitioners open to attack in this way from a growing neo-liberal movement.

Western capitalist governments came to regard progressive education as threatening and followed similar methods of attack. They first manufactured literacy crises in order to engender panic and thereby gain acceptance for the cries of 'back to the basics' of traditional instruction, making progressive education appear experimental and faddy and progressive teachers incompetent or subversive (Lowe, 2007). Case studies, from a range of English-speaking countries, have demonstrated this (e.g. Lemann, 1997; Morgan and Robinson, 1976; Soler and Openshaw, 2007). In the USA the 2000 Republican national platform endorsed phonics and the Bush administration tied funding to school programs that explicitly taught phonics. The National Reading Panel set up by Congress, which found in favour of systematic phonics instruction, was produced largely by authors employed by McGraw-Hill, a commercial producer of phonics-based materials for state schools. Notwithstanding its flawed basis, the report by this panel has wielded widespread influence over classroom instruction in the USA and achieved global influence (Carlsson-Paige, 2002). Soler documents the media hype in England in 1990 surrounding the highly doubtful findings of an educational psychologist which purported to show a dramatic decline in reading standards due to the use of real books. Outcomes of the manufactured furore included the introduction of a greater stress on phonics in the revised National Curriculum a few years later and added support for the introduction of national testing in the 3Rs at ages seven and 11 (Soler, 2002).

The claim that standards are going down has on every occasion been challenged and found wanting (DES, 1967; Davies, 1998; Brookes, 1997; Cox, 1995). But such findings have failed to interrupt the inexorable pattern of a manufactured literacy crisis being followed by the call for more phonics.

The English version of the National Reading Panel was supplied by the Rose Review (Rose, 2006) which called for the systematic instruction of pupils in the use of synthetic phonics as their first strategy in decoding and encoding print. Hynds (2007) exposed the dubious research on which it was based and referred to the Rose Review as “a cunningly worded, politically motivated, dogmatic and dictatorial document”.

Nevertheless, the Rose Review’s recommendations have been incorporated into the national strategies for primary schools and the early learning goals which comprise the statutory assessment for children at age five. Additional methods of teaching children to read are not, however, precluded: reading recovery, an intervention derived from the progressive research of Marie Clay (1991), which employs a multi-cueing approach, at the time of writing remains endorsed and funded by the government. There is, therefore, material for progressive educators to defend and further for the radical right to go to achieve their goal of phonics to be used universally as the first and exclusive method of teaching children to read. At the most extreme, the representatives of this reactionary movement seek to deny children access to books before they can blend words accurately, out of any context, using this single strategy (see, for example, the websites of the Reading Reform Foundation and Synthetic Phonics).

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the tactic to control teachers by imposing impossible contradictory demands has been refined by the state. This has taken the form of the two-fold expectation that schools will not only follow a progressive approach – including “creativity” through a themed curriculum in the infants and juniors (DfES, 2003) and “well-planned experiences based on children’s spontaneous play” in the early years (DfES, 2007) – but also, at the same time, will meet punitive targets in children’s attainment in phonics, reading and writing. Stress and fear are thereby built into the teacher’s job.

5.5 Re-emergence of play

Much of the care and education of the youngest children continues to take place outside of the directly maintained state sector, not only by parents and extended family but also, for example, by child-minders, in playgroups and cooperative or private nurseries and private schools, known as the private, voluntary and independent sector (PVI). At least some of the time children spend in these settings is funded by the government and the state has extended its control of the PVI during the twenty-first century, most recently through the introduction in 2008 of the early years foundation stage (EYFS). The EYFS covers the care and education of all children, from birth to the end of the academic year in which they turn five, who are supervised by paid early years workers. All settings are now subject to Ofsted inspection and all children, other than home-educated children, are subject to assessment against numerous detailed developmental statements culminating, at age five, in the statutory EYFS Profile (DfES, 2007a).

This process of formally drawing all of the youngest children into the state-controlled education system started in 1995 with the publication of a set of “desirable outcomes for children’s learning” to be achieved before they started school at age five. The desirable outcomes became statutory in all maintained settings but local authorities were responsible for collecting the assessment data from schools. The outcomes were in six areas of learning but emphasised the development of literacy and numeracy, thus skewing towards the 3Rs the curriculum offered to children in pre-school settings (Anning, 1998).

The desirable outcomes were replaced in 2000 by early learning goals included in the *Curriculum Guidance* for a new statutory foundation stage of education for children of ages from three to five (INCA, 2005). The *Curriculum Guidance* was remarkably progressive in its principles for a play-based curriculum and welcomed by early years professionals. But the progressive aspect of the document was conceded by the government at a cost: the early learning goals in phonics, reading and writing were set at too high a level for most children to be able to achieve without intensive instruction (Bayley and Palmer, 2006).

The early learning goals of the new foundation stage curriculum were incorporated into a foundation stage profile which early years teachers were obliged to complete for each child at the end of the reception year; results were returned to central government. The profile, consisting of 117 separate items under 13 different headings, could be conveniently scored numerically for the dual purposes of the government holding teachers and local authorities accountable and schools subsequently allocating children to their hierarchical grouping systems.

During the same period, all three and four-year-olds became entitled to part-time early education paid for by the state in either the maintained or the PVI sector. Many parents responded to this so that the number of children in EYFS settings grew substantially (Mayall, 2007). Indeed the government's aim in developing the early years legislation was to get working-class parents, especially mothers, into the workforce and off benefits (Harman, 2008) and to establish a prescriptive, formal literacy curriculum at an early age (Bayley and Palmer, 2006). The progressive opposition to the literacy objectives was represented by specialist early years professionals (e.g. Edgington, 2004; Barnes *et al*, 2005; House and Simpson, 2006; Freaan, 2008; Early Education, 2006) on the grounds that early years practitioners would be forced to "teach to the test" and thereby undermine the developmentally appropriate, child-centred, play-based approaches to learning which were at the same time also made statutory.

Thus the system of early years education in the twenty-first century displays the contradictions which have been at the heart of the reading war for centuries; and the historically-rooted primary purpose of state-supported education, to control children and their teachers from the earliest of years, is confirmed; for now, even more than in the nineteenth century, we don't need to start formal literacy instruction early. This is because not only do we have strong evidence of disaffection from learning being caused by too early a start on formal lessons (e.g. Dixon, 1989; David, 1992; Sharp, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2002; Sharp, 2003; Schweinhart, 2004) but also, now that the school leaving age has been raised to early adulthood, the pressure has gone from early years teachers to cram as much as possible of 3Rs instruction into a very short school career.

5.6 Home and independent schooling

Home education, virtually banned by the 1870 Education Act, has been legal in England since the 1944 act obliged parents of children of compulsory school age to ensure that their offspring receive efficient full-time education, “either by regular attendance at school or otherwise”. The number of children educated at home has never been large and cannot accurately be counted because parents are not required to register with the authorities.

Nevertheless, the number of home-educated children was estimated to have more than doubled between 1988 and 1995 to approximately 0.09 per cent of the school population (Petrie, 1998) and in 2010 the number could be more than 40,000 (Badman, 2009). Parents who educate their child at home do not need to have any educational qualifications, follow the national curriculum, school hours, days or terms, have a fixed timetable, give formal lessons or put their children in for tests (Direct Gov, 2010).

However, the freedom of a parent to educate their child at home again came under attack, under cover of child safeguarding issues which were irrelevant to the practice of home education, in 2009 (Bloom, 2009; Carter and Bawden, 2010). Following a review of home education commissioned by the government, proposals for a registering and monitoring scheme were considered in the Children, Schools and Families Bill (Direct Gov, 2010). Under the proposed scheme, all home educators would have been required to get their home education approved and registered by the local authority and, where home education was not registered, the child would have been compelled to go to school. A sample list of reasons why registration might have been refused included “failure to co-operate”, “inadequate information” and the local authority considering that it would be harmful to the child’s welfare to be home educated. These proposals, including the “sweeping subjective criteria” for why registration might be refused, were fiercely contested by home educators, including a group which took the name “Education Otherwise” from the words in the 1944 act. It was in part a measure of the strength of this campaign that all clauses referring to home education were withdrawn from the bill (Education Otherwise, 2010).

Working families have been denied access to private schools, due to the high level of fees, for more than a century and private schools in the

twenty-first century are for the wealthy. Exempt from the national curriculum for children of statutory school age, private schools were, however, included in the legislation which imposed the early years foundation stage on all education and care settings outside a child's own home. This is worth noting because Steiner schools, although inaccessible to most working families due to the fees (e.g. Brighton Steiner School, 2010), have a progressive approach to teaching literacy and do not introduce formal lessons before age seven. The schools waged a successful campaign against being included in the legislation regarding the literacy goals (Ward, 2009) and have thereby become the only early years settings with paid staff to be exempt from compulsory phonics instruction for children of four years old.

5.7 Conclusion

The freedom independently to educate their children, untainted by the reactionary influence of state-supported schools, has been denied to working-class families for more than a century. During this time the reading war has transferred from its nineteenth century site, with the line drawn between the child-centred, independent, working-class curriculum on the one side and the state-supported sector of regulated schooling on the other. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the arguments have centred on how children are to be taught in state schools, whether through progressive methods which value purpose and meaning and pleasure in reading or through methods which give priority to the accurate decoding of print.

This chapter has attempted to follow the historical development of the war as it was waged in the state sector up to the present day. It starts with the development of the new education and highlights the ultimate achievements, from the middle of the century, of the progressive whole-language approach; this was derived from the findings of sociopsycholinguistics made possible by a paradigm shift in our understanding of reading and the learning process. A burgeoning reaction to the rising progressive movement in the 1970s and 1980s started seriously to challenge the new understanding of whole-language approaches. The demand was for phonics teaching to become the first and principle method by which children should be taught to read. But the case for this was intellectually much weaker than the argument for whole language; it was

ultimately successful due to the electoral victory of right-wing governments which harnessed manufactured reading crises to drive public opinion towards accepting the need for reactionary educational approaches to solve the concocted problems.

A famous catch-phrase of Thatcher, a hugely successful prime minister for the new right, was that she wanted to restore the country to Victorian values. This she and her successors have done, in the field of education as elsewhere. The principles of the Revised Code have been revived, not only through the punitive inspections of Ofsted but also by the introduction of payment by results in the form of the performance management of teachers, related to pupil progress.

My argument has been that progressive values have survived to some degree throughout the ascendancy of the new right. In the final conclusion to my thesis, which follows, I will argue that, in the same way that the Victorian Revised Code was ultimately defeated, the restoration of its principles a century later need not become a permanent state of affairs. In this vein I will seek to answer the questions which have guided my work to interpret the historical development of the reading war and, in particular, to discuss how individual teachers might be able to make a difference, whether to the lives of their pupils or in a contribution to the new education which surely must grow in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

My thesis represents an effort to understand the reading war in early childhood education and draw some conclusions about the implications for a state-employed teacher. The story told here, of the early struggles of working-class parents to maintain control of independent means to teach their children to read, is a microcosm of a much larger story about the struggle for control in the era of capitalism and how education relates to society.

The arguments in the reading war are ideological and arise out of the class nature of society. Their roots can be located at the beginning of capitalism in the wider struggle between the emergent bourgeoisie and working class and in the attempts of the former to impose the crude control of the monitorial schools. Over time, the government took responsibility, on behalf of the employing class, for schooling the next generation of workers and ideological conflicts have become subject to more subtle tactics and language. The reading war is now often treated as a technical matter, with pieces of empirical research into aspects of phonics or whole language acting as missiles. But the war cannot be won on this basis; rather the relative strength of traditional or progressive methods is related to the social conditions of the time. In this thesis I have not tried to achieve the impossible, therefore, by providing a definitive answer to the question of how we should teach young children to read and at what age we should start to do so.

Rather, the contribution I have hoped to make is to show how the contradictions and conflicts which are built into the work of early years practitioners are fallout from the reading war. In this way, by clarifying the source of stress, I hope to provide encouragement to practitioners and support for our efforts to maintain a principled approach to our teaching. The belief that we can make a difference to the lives of our pupils by steadfastly championing the value of progressive education is based on the lesson of history. A trickle of progressive practice can help to undermine the reactionary forces of a dark age and flow more freely when conditions change.

The methodology adopted is historical materialism, interrogating the evidence, following Thompson (1978), from a theoretical base. The evidence is drawn from a wide range of secondary sources and original government documents. The length of the period made this choice, rather than the exploration of primary sources, necessary. The writing of critical historians consulted in this research has helped me to evaluate their work alongside the received histories more commonly found in textbooks, in the light of Hearn's stricture to learn from the controversies between scholars in the field (Hearn, 1978). This approach also incorporated the advice of Thompson, that, "in its secondary form, it is the accepted 'findings' or accumulating knowledge of historians, which is (or ought to be) passed under continuous critical review." (Thompson, 1978) I believe this approach has also helped me in some measure to avoid the danger of imposing present conditions on another historical period which Andrew warns against (Andrew, 1985). The methods used, however, prevented me from undertaking the work Kaestle (1992) calls for, to unite historical readers with their texts; for the secondary sources, on the whole, fail to bring young, beginner readers to life in a way that could connect them with actual texts available at the time.

Regarding my theoretical stance, the actors made the history I have narrated but were constrained by the conditions in which they lived and worked. Thus I have found the Marxist meta-narrative a powerful tool with which to question and analyse the evidence around ideology in general and educational ideologies in particular - and thereby begin to understand and explain the disputes surrounding the teaching of reading. The basic nature of capitalism hasn't changed since Marx first started to write and it remains true that education, being part of the process by which society is reproduced, needs to be understood in the context of its relationship to the wider social structure. And the class nature of society, and the inevitability of struggles between the classes, as explained by historical materialism, continues to assist our understanding of how social phenomena, such as methods to teach reading, change and develop.

My findings have in some measure answered the questions posed when I embarked on the research and I attempt to summarise these below, combining the first two questions for the purposes of this conclusion.

What approaches or methods have been used to teach working-class children to read and how are they identified with different educational ideologies?

Throughout the ages, some children have always learned to read effortlessly, without any apparent need for instruction. Most children, however, have benefited from a degree of teaching and a bottom-up approach was typical of methods used before the mid-twentieth century. That which made the instruction progressive rather than traditional was its tailoring to the needs of the individual child rather than expecting a class-full of children to fit into a pre-determined programme. The context of the instruction was also significant, whether it took place within a child-centred or content-based curriculum.

Reading instruction which was embedded in the traditional, broad-based working-class domestic curriculum included teaching by parents or other relatives as well as occasional attendance at a dame school or private venture school. The lessons were child-centred, being individually planned for the particular child and starting at the age that was right for them. Authentic children's literature was available but too expensive for most working-class families and teachers. The texts used to practice reading might have included a battledore to learn the alphabet and extracts from cheap published primers or anything which came to hand, from chapbooks and newspapers to the Bible and Pilgrim's Progress (Vincent, 1981 and 1997; Gardner, 1984).

Reading instruction in the monitorial schools, established to educate working-class children to know and accept their subservient place in society, broke reading down into what were believed to be its smallest component parts. These were then sequenced into a series of simple lessons which selected pupils could master and then use to drill groups of their peers. Military discipline was enforced by a single teacher in order to organise what could have been hundreds of children in one class. This was the nadir of traditional education (Johnson, 1976). Subsequently more subtle approaches were introduced to the state-sponsored schools but the methods continued to be class-based and controlling of the pupils. The infant schools often included more liberal and progressive approaches to the organisation of the

children's day including, for example, extended periods of play out of doors. They nevertheless adopted the traditional methods of the elementary schools to teach reading. Some of the early figures associated with a more humane approach to mass schooling recognised the importance of first-hand experience in education and the importance of oral language development. This, rather than enlightened methods of reading instruction, was their progressive legacy. The objections of Owen, Pestalozzi and Froebel to books referred to the use of information books to teach content knowledge instead of the encouragement of practical exploration by the children and exposition by a teacher. But fiction was also considered an inappropriate vehicle for children's early reading development even though authentic children's literature was available (Richardson, 1994). Extracts in primers were used by Owen and Pestalozzi; Froebel recommended that children should read their own writing.

When independent working-class education had been defeated, the reading war transferred to the state sector. Progressive voices were heard and acknowledged in official guidance for teachers after the turn of the twentieth century but the legacy of the Revised Code was a drag on any rapid change (Selleck, 1968). Nevertheless, progressive education grew in strength and influence, culminating in the Plowden report of 1967 (DES). A paradigm shift had been taking place at the same time. Until then, from before the invention of printing, reading was believed to be a perceptual process and all reading instruction was expected to start with learning the alphabet, followed by syllables or a version of phonics, and was thus 'bottom up' (Vincent, 1989). Notwithstanding the child-centred context, individual nature of the instruction and use of authentic text, the concept of a whole-language approach before this time is anachronistic (Altwerger *et al*, 1987). The mid-century findings of sociopsycholinguistics, anticipated by the work of Isaacs at the experimental Malting House School in the early 1920s, transformed the progressive approach to teaching reading and gave it a theoretical underpinning which it had lacked previously. For the next few decades, with a resurgent and virulent new right, the reading war was fought in highly charged language on both ideological and technical grounds, with

the progressive side espousing top-down methods and the traditionalists advocating bottom-up methods in the form of 'phonics first'.

The age at which formal literacy instruction might start in the progressive, domestic working-class curriculum, together with the pace and direction the teaching would take, varied according to the child's need and, for children who showed the aptitude, could have been as young as three or four (Vincent, 1989; Spufford, 1997).

The state-sponsored elementary schools were designed for children from age six or seven. Separate infant schools and infant departments were established for babies and younger children. Reading instruction was deemed to be appropriate or acceptable for all these pupils and was imposed on all age groups regardless of individual children's needs. A maximum school starting age of five, later to become compulsory, was included in the Education Act of 1870, legislation which heralded the final destruction of independent, working-class education. Much younger children continued to be enrolled by the schools, however, and subjected to mass reading instruction.

It can be seen how deeply rooted is the early start to teaching reading in this country. The early start is reactionary in its mass application to all pupils given that, regardless of early gains made, it is developmentally inappropriate for many children and can lead to disaffection later on (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2002). The age of starting becomes progressive when it is incorporated into a child-centred approach which in pace and content responds to the individual child's needs.

Are traditional and progressive approaches or methods equally reactionary in practice?

Many Marxists have found traditional and progressive approaches to education to be equally supportive of the *status quo*, rather than that progressive education provides a more radical or more savoury means of educating children. Bowles and Gintis (1976), for example, believe that the progressive movement of the twentieth century was a force for new types of social stability for capitalism rather than the standard bearer for equality and human development. I find this stance to be not only counter-intuitive but also unsupported by the historical evidence. This leads me to favour the views

adopted by Freire and Vygotsky, both Marxists and educationalists who championed learner-centred approaches as a means to achieve greater personal autonomy and independent thought (Vygotsky, 1987; Freire, 1993).

The historical evidence reveals the potentially subversive and radical nature of progressive approaches. This aspect of independent, working-class literacy, applied to highly political ends, terrified the dominant classes at the end of the eighteenth century and led to the struggle over children's schooling (Thompson, 1968; Willinsky, 1993). The progressive education which gathered strength during the twentieth century and was invigorated by the findings of sociopsycholinguistics, came to be widely accepted as established good practice. Ultimately it was deemed by the new right to be as threatening as the forms it had taken in previous centuries and the backlash unleashed by the first Thatcher government has continued to this day, although never unchallenged.

Traditional and progressive approaches to teaching reading do not directly represent the interests of the principle classes; but the struggle between the two can lead to gains for working-class children, especially when progressive education is in the ascendant. This is because progressive reading education's search for meaning in text has the potential to challenge children's thinking in a way which traditional instruction, with its mind-numbing features, does not. Explicit education for the revolution, however, is for adults. The task of the teacher is to make childhood as worthwhile as possible for the children and to help them to think for themselves.

Can a teacher employed by the state make a difference?

The Revised Code of the nineteenth century and the analogous 'back to the basics' regime of the twenty-first century have asserted tight state control over both pupils and teachers. For this reason the opportunities available to an individual practitioner to adopt unbridled progressive approaches are severely limited. Nevertheless, the progressive movement, never entirely defeated in practice, has officially re-emerged in the play-based curriculum of the statutory early years foundation stage (DfES, 2007a) and the expectations of "creativity", or themed learning, in the curriculum of older children in primary schools (DfES, 2003). This progressive rhetoric, however, is gainsaid by the demands of statutory assessments from age five onwards

which can be met only by substantial amounts of traditional instruction in the 3Rs. This brings great stress to teachers, who have to achieve the impossible, namely, to show Ofsted that the progressive aspects of the curriculum are in place and, at the same time, to meet their pay-related performance management targets to achieve results in assessments of the 3Rs.

The findings of my thesis do not change any of this. What I hope they do is to give hope and encouragement to practitioners. Every day that we argue the benefits of progressive practice with our colleagues, every lesson that encourages a degree of autonomous learning in our pupils, every vote in a union ballot and, ultimately, any action we are called on to take, enables us to re-engage with the struggle in our daily teaching for a more just and democratic society for ourselves and our children.

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