

## Chapter 15

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# Why do policy-makers find the ‘simple view of reading’ so attractive, and why do I find it so morally repugnant?

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In answering the two questions that form the title of this chapter I aim to talk about what governments need in terms of clear, simple one-page policy, what Phil Gough actually said about the Simple View of Reading (Reading = decoding  $\times$  linguistic comprehension, or  $R = D \times LC$ ), how the Simple View has been taken up by right-wing groups in the USA such as the Core Knowledge Foundation, for example (Davis 2006), and how it has become associated with the ‘first, fast and only’ model of phonics, and a technician view of the pedagogy of reading. Then, most importantly, I want to give attention to all the things that might get missed with such a narrow emphasis, including fluency, vocabulary, cognitive flexibility, and morphology. My conclusion will be that the Simple View is elegant and compelling, and partly correct, but dangerously over-simple, with shortcomings as well as some merits.

### **Introduction: the Simple View and the ‘elevator pitch’**

In an opening address at the annual research conference of the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency, Jon Drory (2006), a former senior civil servant, argued that educational researchers are desperately poor at simplifying their findings in such a way as to maximise their impact on those who create and shape policy. He suggested that researchers needed to become more skilled at presenting their work in a variety of formats, but particularly, if they wanted it to influence policy, in smaller chunks – the 30-second ‘elevator pitch’ that succinctly captures the attention and leaves an enduring memory trace in the mind of the hard pressed minister, or ministerial advisor. Conversely, Drory pointed out, ministers and their advisors are not won over by research findings that leave questions unanswered, or that leave competing theories in a dialogic balance. Their primary job is to deliver money to their department, and to get that money, they need to win arguments with the Treasury, and to win those arguments, they need not research, but research-informed opinions that are clear, cogent, compelling and confident (whether they need to be alliterative was not dealt with, but I’m guessing that’s a plus).

Were evidence needed that Drory's analysis is spot on in relation to the literacy field, in England at least, we need look no further than the clear, cogent, compelling, confident and Clackmannanshire-informed views that shaped the Rose Report (Rose 2006), as the following words reveal:

Despite uncertainties in research findings, the practice seen by the review shows that the systematic approach, which is generally understood as 'synthetic' phonics, offers the vast majority of young children the best and most direct route to becoming skilled readers and writers.

If we decode this message, Rose is telling us three things: that the research results he encountered were equivocal, that he regards the terms 'systematic phonics' and 'synthetic phonics' as equivalent, and that his analysis of how the nation should teach reading has not been based on research data, but on the good practice he saw during his school visits. Of course this is only part of the story; Rose was impressed by the good practice he witnessed, but he was no doubt also compelled by the cogent and confident arguments of the Clackmannanshire researchers and the Reading Reform Foundation.

But how the Rose Report arrived at its final position on synthetic phonics is not the primary focus of this chapter. The issue I want to consider is the Rose Report's stance on the 'Simple View of Reading' which we are told 'has increasingly been adopted by psychologists researching reading development since it was first proposed in 1986' (Rose 2006: 78). This is an interesting assertion: it is most certainly the case that the Simple View of Reading has been increasingly adopted by policy-makers, and it has most certainly been adopted by the psychologists who advised Jim Rose, notably Morag Styles and Rhona Stainthorp. But the Simple View of Reading has also been roundly attacked by other psychologists, and we shall look at some of the arguments that challenge the simple view later in this chapter.

#### **Four questions about the Simple View**

There are four questions in my mind at this point, the first of which is: 'Is the Simple View of Reading broadly speaking correct?'; the second, 'Is it attractive to government simply because it's simple?'; the third, 'Is the Simple View simplistic?'; and the fourth, 'If the Simple View is broadly speaking correct, why do I still have a feeling of repugnance towards it?'

Let's take these questions in turn. First, is the Simple View of Reading broadly correct? Figure 15.1 shows the diagram presented in the Rose Report of the Simple View of Reading, and Figure 15.2 the Searchlights Model that preceded it in the government's advice to teachers of reading. The assumptions of the Simple View are transparent: there are two key components to reading, word recognition and language comprehension, and thus for reading to be successful, a child needs to be good at both. This would seem to be uncontested: each is a necessary but

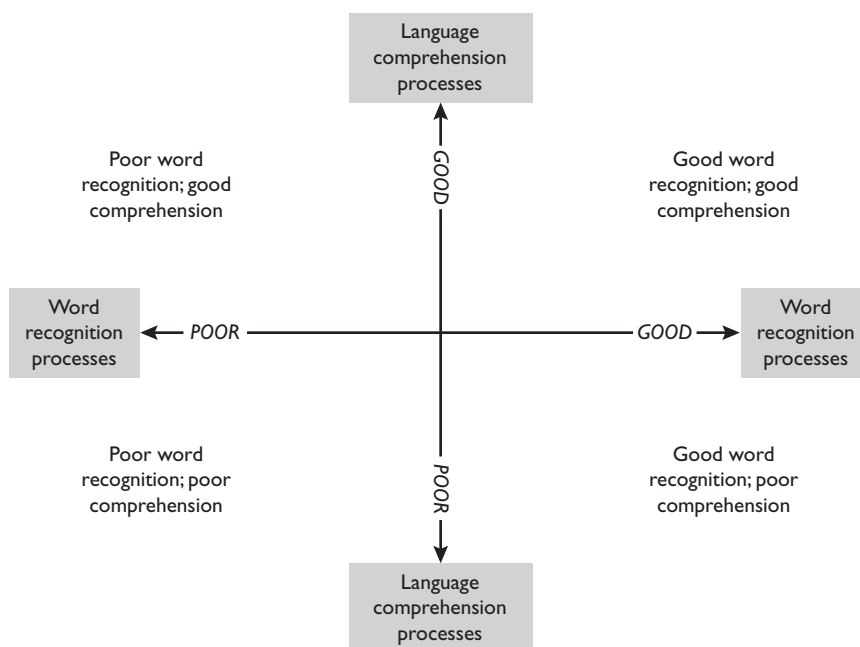


Figure 15.1 The Simple View of reading, as presented in the Rose Report (2006).

not sufficient condition for print to be understood. Are they separate processes? Well again, the intuitive answer would seem to be ‘Yes’. The very fact that many people can do one but not the other would seem to confirm that the two processes are fundamentally different. And two sets of research evidence would also seem to confirm this difference. One was Ron Carver’s finding that word recognition and comprehension still factor out as different skills even in adult fluent readers (Carver 2000). The other is the research of Watson and Johnson in Clackmannanshire, which found that their programme was successful in teaching word recognition, in that children’s abilities improved by an average of three years, but only had a minor effect on the development of comprehension, which improved by an average of three months (Johnson and Watson 2005). If children get better at reading, but do not improve on comprehension, this would seem to confirm that the two are different processes. So on this analysis, the Simple View of Reading would seem to have much to commend it.

My second question, ‘Is the Simple View attractive to government simply because it’s simple?’, is unlikely to be settled by empirical evidence. And in posing it I am not intending to insult policy-makers, either by suggesting that civil servants are incapable of dealing with complexity, or by suggesting that they believe teachers are incapable of dealing with complexity. But clearly its simplicity was an

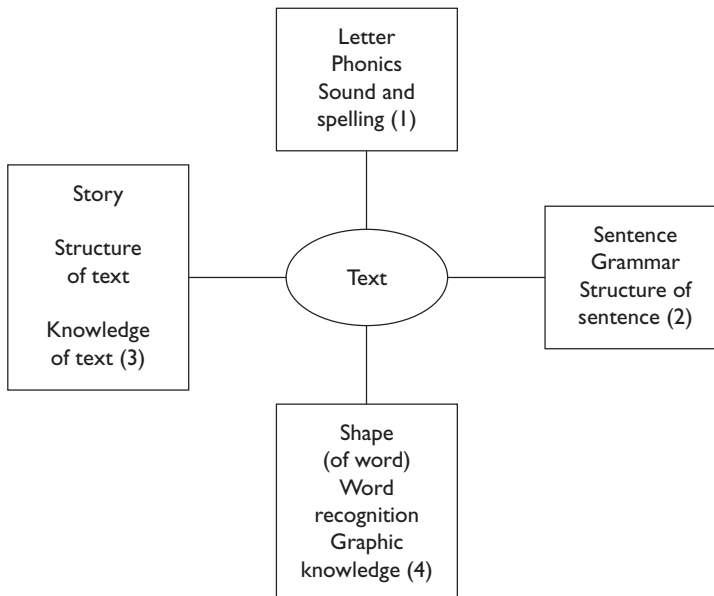


Figure 15.2 The 'Searchlights' model of the reading process, as originally presented in the English National Curriculum.

attraction. We need to remember that the Simple View was replacing the Searchlights Model of reading, which was not only more complex, but perceived by academics as well as civil servants as flawed in a number of ways. The Searchlights Model wasn't a model that had testable properties, and it is not at all clear how its elements fitted together. There is no indication in the Searchlights Model of how the separate processes pass control to each other, and (in a text box that is perhaps the least well-informed by research, box 4) there seems to be an assumption that words are recognised by 'shape', without any letter processing, which would be challenged these days. Worst of all, from a pedagogical point of view, in box 4, 'word recognition' appears but is not connected to and in fact is diametrically opposite to the 'phonics, sound and spelling' box, thereby possibly suggesting that phonics and word recognition are unconnected. Somehow, 'Graphic knowledge' has found its way into the 'Word recognition' box, but appears to be separated from 'Letter, phonics, sound and spelling' of box 1. As I shall argue in the next paragraph, phonics and word recognition are different but related processes. By contrast, the Simple View emphasises a fact just about all experts agree on, namely that, for children learning to read in English, learning to decode is important and necessary, since reading will not occur without it. So the simplicity is attractive, and it is also understandable that those in

government (and those working for government who want to advise teachers) should seek it.

To the third question, 'Is the simple view simplistic?' in that it ignores or glosses over some absolutely crucial aspects of the process of reading, my answer is 'Yes', and I shall talk about the evidence for this claim in some detail below. The main point that I shall attempt to sustain is that it is at best inaccurate and at worst misleading to suggest that if a child has mastered decoding then he or she will be able to read. There are really two parts to this argument. The first is to make it clear that decoding and word recognition are not the same thing, or to put it another way – there is much more to word recognition than meets the eye. Part of the argument concerns fluency and prosody. The Simple View would suggest that once words are decoded from print the brain is able to recognise and interpret them as directly as if they were spoken. There is a good deal of evidence around that suggests that this is not the case. The second area of challenge relates to the assumption built into the Simple View that decoding and comprehension are independent processes. I shall discuss evidence that challenges this, and that in my view makes it clear that the Simple View, though elegant and engaging, oversimplifies the reading process. As Patrick Proctor (2006) put it, the Simple View is 'far too simple to make a meaningful difference in understanding the vast complexities that individual learners bring to the reading process'.

My fourth question, 'if the Simple View is broadly speaking correct, why do I still have a feeling of repugnance towards it?', is a tricky one to answer, because feelings of repugnance are not about scholarly argument, but about feelings and beliefs. There is much in the Rose Report that I would fully endorse. The following, for example:

Two components of reading identified in the simple view of reading first put forward by Gough and Tunmer (1986) are 'decoding' and 'comprehension': according to these authors, 'Reading is the product of decoding and comprehension'. We would not want to suggest accepting this statement as a complete description or explanation of reading; rather, we want to advocate the good sense of considering reading in terms of these two components.

(Rose 2006: 76).

Here, the Report explicitly states that reading is more than decoding and comprehension, but my anxieties are precisely around the fact that the Simple View does not bring these complexities to the fore. There is indeed 'good sense' in giving close attention to decoding and comprehension, but the Simple View diagram reproduced as Figure 15.1 has only two axes. In fact, the Rose Review version of the Simple View that it presents in a diagram does not label the axes with Gough's variables, but puts 'Word Recognition' and 'Language Comprehension Processes', which is an implicit acknowledgement that the Simple View is indeed inadequate, and needs broadening beyond 'Decoding'. The Report quotes with approval the words of Max Coltheart, who also stresses the importance

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of looking not only at the ‘simpler component parts’ but of trying to build a full picture of ‘real reading’:

If we start off by investigating ‘real reading’, seeking for example to discover how readers develop an understanding of what life might have been like in Imperial Russia as they read *The Brothers Karamazov*. No one has any idea about how to carry out such an investigation; so more tractable reading situations have to be studied first. This is done by breaking up ‘real reading’ into simpler component parts that are more immediately amenable to investigation, with the hope that as more and more of these component parts come to be understood we will get closer and closer to a full understanding of ‘real reading’.

(Rose 2006: 75–76; original source: Coltheart 2006).

But there is something wrong here. Is it really the case that ‘no one has any idea about how to carry out . . . an investigation’ of ‘real reading’? Didn’t Louise Rosenblatt show us how we could investigate ‘real reading’ 70 years ago (1938), with her work on reader response? Hasn’t Doug Hartman (1995) done work on intertextuality that showed in some detail how readers brought their knowledge of a range of texts and genres to bear when they were doing ‘real reading’?

And here we come directly up against the nub of the Simple View issue: although I truly believe that we should learn all we can from psychological research, as a teacher I become very uneasy when I read that the intention is to focus on the aspects of the reading process that are more ‘immediately amenable to investigation’ in more ‘tractable reading situations’, with the hope of getting back to more of the ‘component parts’ of ‘real reading’ later on. This is because, while it’s fine, if not essential, for psychologists to focus on a subset of the ‘component parts’ in order to advance our collective knowledge of the reading process, as a teacher I get very worried when I encounter a view that suggests that it is therefore desirable for teachers to focus on the same limited set of ‘component parts’ in order to teach reading. The psychologists who advised Jim Rose, and who guided the hand of those who wrote the scholarly sections on the reading process would perhaps be mortified at the suggestion that the Simple View is ‘morally repugnant’, and would find that idea difficult to understand. From their point of view, making it clearer to teachers that they have two important, but rather different jobs to do in teaching reading – teaching decoding and teaching comprehension – is doing a service to the profession, and clarifying some key aspects of pedagogy that were confused and confounded in the Searchlights Model. My antipathy is even more difficult to explain since they know that I am a researcher as well as a teacher.

But it is the teacherly part of me that recoils from the Simple View, and it does so because of a strong negative reaction to an unexpressed but powerful inference that is buried just beneath the surface of the Simple View, which is that children come to school with ‘linguistic comprehension’, and that the teacher’s job is simply to teach the ‘decoding’, and then all will be well. We could call this the ‘Simple

View of Reading Instruction’, and I think that it is this Simple View of Reading Instruction that I find morally repugnant. The authors of the Rose Review, of course, would totally distance themselves from such a position. The latter sections of the Report make it very clear that the authors have a very explicit goal of supporting teachers in the pedagogy of comprehension as well as the pedagogy of word recognition, through making them aware of a range of strategies as well as encouraging them to teach decoding effectively. But the spectre of those in power reducing the teaching of reading to the teaching of phonics, and of reducing teachers from evangelists for the joy of reading to technicians who need to be better schooled in the mechanics of teaching grapheme–phoneme correspondences is not only in the background, it is sometimes in the foreground. Some proponents of ‘phonics first, fast and only’ would have such a technicist view, as would the elementary school principal in California who threatened a teacher with dismissal for introducing real books into a beginning reading classroom before the children had completed their restricted vocabulary phonics course. A more balanced critique of the concept of ‘first, fast and only’ is provided by the Torgerson, Brooks and Hall (2006) review of research into the teaching of phonics. These authors argue that there is plenty of evidence supporting the need for phonics teaching ‘first’, but none from empirical studies supporting the need for it to be either ‘fast’ or ‘only’.

These, then are some of the areas of debate around the Simple View. Let us turn now to a more detailed consideration of what the Simple View asserts, and to what those who have suggested that it is inaccurate or wrong have had to say.

### **The Simple View of Reading: a polarising force in the reading field**

Patrick Proctor (2006) has described the Simple View of Reading as a ‘polarising force in the reading field’, one that has ‘engendered anger’ from researchers for two decades. It is interesting, therefore, that in presenting it as the theoretical and pedagogical hub of the ‘renewed’ literacy strategy in England, the Rose Review suggested that the ‘simple view of reading has increasingly been adopted by psychologists researching reading development’ (Rose 2006: 77). It is one thing to make use of the Simple View in researching reading development, but quite another to use it as the primary framework for instruction. Michael Pressley (2000) wrote the key chapter on how comprehension develops for the *Handbook of Reading Research*, and he had little time for the Simple View, which he regarded as a theory that was attractive to policy-makers because of its simplicity and its emphasis on teaching phonics, but a non-starter as a serious contender for representing the complexities of the reading process:

Although skilled and eventually fluent word recognition certainly facilitates comprehension, it is not enough. This conclusion contrasts with the thinking of some in the educational policy-making community who view word-recognition instruction as a panacea for reading problems, a simple view that

reduces reading to recognizing words and listening to oneself read those words (e.g. Gough, Hoover, & Peterson 1996). If that were all there is to it, then, of course, the many other interventions discussed in the first section of this article would not be as potent as they are. Those who argue that comprehension problems can be solved by taking care of word-recognition problems are ignoring a lot of relevant data.

(Pressley 2001).

Much of that 'relevant data' deals with the argument that, far from being independent, phonological and semantic processes act concurrently in skilled reading (Pressley *et al.* 2009; Cartwright 2007), and we shall consider some of this data later in this chapter. Before doing so, however, it is worth giving some attention to Patrick Proctor's work since it explores arguments about multiple influences on reading, but does so by examining the Simple View from a mathematical viewpoint.

Proctor (2006) offered a critique of the Simple View that was based on an intriguing approach – namely, to test the statistical adequacy of the formula  $RC = D \times LC$  in a variety of experimental contexts. Proctor collected data on 137 Spanish–English bilingual fourth graders (i.e. readers aged nine to ten), the majority of whom had learned to read in Spanish, their native language, and to whom he had given tests of reading comprehension (RC) decoding (D here was pseudo-word reading), and listening comprehension (LC). Using multiple regression techniques, Proctor first asked whether it was indeed the case that  $RC = D \times LC$ , and whether there was a statistically multiplicative relationship between decoding and listening comprehension. What he found was that  $(D \times LC)$  on its own did indeed significantly predict reading comprehension, and that students who were weak in decoding did poorly on reading comprehension, even if their listening comprehension scores were above average. However, Proctor points out that it was not the cross-product  $(D \times LC)$  that was the key predictor, but rather the straightforward additive contribution of the two main effects of D (decoding) and listening comprehension (LC). When these two variables were put into an additive model (i.e.  $D + LC + (D \times LC)$ ), the additional effect of the  $(D \times LC)$  component was non-significant. It explained less than 1 per cent of additional variance in reading comprehension. Put another way, the statistical analysis suggested that the statistical relationship between decoding, listening comprehension and reading comprehension was linear and additive, rather than interactive and multiplicative.

Proctor then went on to carry out some additional analyses (Proctor *et al.* 2005; Proctor *et al.* 2006), this time adding two new variables to the equation: real word reading rate and vocabulary knowledge. Using structural equation modelling, Proctor's group found that when they controlled for the effects of decoding ability and listening comprehension, students' vocabulary knowledge in Spanish made a significant additional and separate contribution to predicting reading comprehension ( $R^2 = 0.30, p < .01$ ). This small but significant main effect was



interpreted by Proctor as revealing that the Simple View is too simple, and omits some crucial variables. A further analysis seemed to confirm this. The measure of 'real word reading rate' was in effect an indication of the reader's fluency, and this variable, too, was seen to play an important additional role in predicting reading comprehension. When all the other variables were controlled, students who both read fluently and had a good Spanish vocabulary scored highly on reading comprehension. There was also an interaction effect: those students who were fluent decoders in English but who had a poor Spanish vocabulary scored much more poorly on the test of reading comprehension. In other words, both vocabulary knowledge and reading fluency seemed to be making independent contributions to predicting reading comprehension, in addition to what could be predicted from their decoding (as measured by non-word reading) and listening comprehension ability. As Proctor (2006) put it, 'reading as a process does not occur in a cognitive vacuum'.

Another researcher who would share Proctor's view is Kelly Cartwright (2007), who argues that what she terms 'graphophonological-semantic flexibility' (GSF) makes a unique and separate contribution to fluent reading, over and above the contributions of D and LC. Cartwright's starting point is cognition, and the wide agreement among scholars who study reading processes that a fluent reader is simultaneously and flexibly dealing with phonological, lexical, orthographic and semantic representations during the reading process. Indeed, she makes the point that it is less fluent readers who are able to deal with only a subset of the features of text that are before them, and who lack the 'flexibility' that is a hallmark of the fluent reader. To measure GSF, Cartwright gave readers a test that required simultaneous processing of phonological and semantic information. Participants had to classify into a  $2 \times 2$  table of initial sound and meaning a set of 12 cards that were in two semantic groups (for example vehicles and animals) and that started with one of two initial phonemes (for example bike, turkey, tractor, boat, tiger, bird, etc.). What Cartwright found, in separate studies with both children and adults, was that GSF came out as a variable predicting reading comprehension performance even when intelligence, phonological processing and semantic processing had been taken into account. As in Proctor's study, adding Gough's 'D  $\times$  LC' to the regression equation did not account for significant variance, but GSF, which Cartwright viewed as 'individuals' flexibility in handling concurrently multiple features of print' seemed to be identifying a 'third cognitive skill' in addition to D and LC that predicted and contributed to reading comprehension ability.

The final study to which I want to refer is one by Nagy, Berninger and Abbott (2006). These authors argue that the Simple View omits another very important factor, namely the unique contribution made by morphological awareness to word recognition. A morpheme is the smallest unit of language that affects meaning, so the *-s* in a plural and the *-ed* that turns a verb into the past tense in English are morphemes, but so are other prefixes and suffixes such as *trans-* (as in transplant) or *-est* (as in newest). What Nagy and his co-workers found what that children's

morphological awareness made a significant and independent contribution to their word reading speed and accuracy at fourth, fifth, eighth and ninth grade levels. In other words, as Nagy put it, ‘translating print into speech, at least in English, is not a purely phonological process’. But Nagy goes further than this: he advances the view that morphological awareness impacts comprehension as well as word recognition, in that it seems to be related to vocabulary growth, and one can readily see how this might work, and how it might be related to the continued influence of morphology in the middle years of schooling. What Nagy was thinking was that, as a reader becomes more experienced and more fluent, the ability to spot semantic relationships (between such words as *complete* and *completion*, for example) would impact comprehension as well as word recognition. And such relationships do not always overlap with phonetic information: a reader might correctly deduce a morphological semantic relationship between the words *nation* and *national*, even though the two words are pronounced differently, and making such a deduction would speed up the integration of the word into an emerging model of the situation being described in the text. So morphological awareness and oral vocabulary are related, but not the same thing; Nagy found the two variables to be correlated, but the statistical models showed that morphological awareness made a separate contribution to reading comprehension, above and beyond that of vocabulary.

The data from the study of Nagy and his colleagues adds to this list of variables that need to be added to the simple view, in order to gain a more accurate and complete understanding of the reading process. On this analysis, reading comprehension is the result of a complex interaction of processes that begin with letter analysis, but then include phonological processing, morphological processing that supports word recognition, which in turn may be related at least in part to Kelly’s graphophonological–semantic flexibility, vocabulary knowledge, morphological processing that supports comprehension, fluency and linguistic comprehension.

The researchers who critique the Simple View generally concede that decoding and linguistic comprehension are indeed very important. As Proctor put it, these variables may form a ‘psycholinguistic nucleus’ of the reading process, but research also suggests that other factors need to be part of a ‘complexification’ of the simple view. Proctor argues rather provocatively that

Even the most naïve pre-service teacher will begin to expound on the numerous contextual factors that affect a student’s reading when she is presented with the notion that reading comprehension is simply the act of decoding matched alongside the listening comprehension of a learner.

(Proctor 2006)

This may be an exaggeration, but in my view the point is a valid one: reading does not take place in a cognitive vacuum. It takes place in a social context, and in school it takes place in a pedagogical context, and both these contextual factors will impact whether and how readers engage with texts.

## Conclusions

My own strong negative reaction to the Simple View is not related to any quarrel with Gough's emphasis on the 'psycholinguistic nucleus' of decoding and linguistic comprehension. I also sympathise with the intentions of the Rose Review in England that has used the Simple View to stress for teachers that they have two complex jobs – to teach children to decode and recognise words, but also to teach and develop comprehension. But I do believe that there is a danger that some commentators and some policy-makers will infer from the Simple View of Reading that there should be a Simple View of Teaching, in which the teachers are viewed as technicians whose fundamental role is to teach decoding, and then all the problems of low literacy will be solved. Such an inference would be both naïve and ill-judged, and it is that view that I find morally repugnant, because it misunderstands and misrepresents the complexity and multifaceted constellation of skills that a good teacher of reading brings to her job. Liz Waterland, whose somewhat notorious book *Read With Me* (Waterland 1988) was credited with helping to start the 'real books' movement in England (and thus thought by some to have helped to lower reading standards by reducing an emphasis on the teaching of phonics), was a teacher who turned to real books precisely because she had found that teaching phonics did not result in children's learning to read. Many of the children to whom she taught phonics did learn to decode, but they did not learn to read. They saw reading as a complex and mystifying chore, and having learned to decode they had no wish to use their skill to gain access to the wonderful world of books.

What I am advocating, therefore, is a Complex View of Reading, and a Complex View of the Teaching of Reading. A complex view of reading is needed to take account of the rich seam of research findings that augment and challenge the Simple View, and of which I have done no more than to present a sample in this chapter. A complex view of the teaching of reading is necessary to place appropriate emphasis on the skilled and effective teaching of phonics, but also to acknowledge the crucial importance of the teacher's role not only in teaching decoding, but also in developing comprehension and in leading children into enjoyable experiences with books in a range of pedagogical and social contexts. Such a view would do greater justice to the complexity and professional skills of the reading teacher, and would also contribute more effectively to raising standards in reading.

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