



I'm Trying to Connect You

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[Terry Downie](#) [1]

[37](#) [2]

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Terry Downie reports on a one-day Children's Book Conference organised by the Children's Bookselling Group of the Booksellers Association and the Children's Book Circle

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Books in Schools: Finding Facts and Fighting Fantasy - that was the title. And just in case we didn't get the message that we were to spend the day dispelling myths about what's happening to books in schools (and not attacking Puffin's hugely successful adventure series) the theme was spelled out in the programme. Ten years after Bullock, what is the picture now? What are the new trends in education that the children's book trade must respond to in order to keep pace with the - changing needs of children in schools? The conference aim: to tackle these issues from all sides - teacher, librarian, bookseller and publisher.

Over 200 delegates included 14 librarians and 21 teachers (mostly from teacher education and LEA Advisory and Support services). There were nine speakers in three sessions.

What's Happening Now?

Lord Bullock, having re-read his committee's report, was struck by how much of it is still appropriate and how in some areas - like the discussion of education in a multi-lingual society - it was ahead of its time. Its major concerns are still with us: pre-school experience and parents' involvement; language across the curriculum; continuity of experience; teachers' attitudes. Mastery of the arts of language and communication gives power, a way of making sense of experience. The information revolution does not mean the disappearance of books, nor of the Arts and Humanities. The report's stress on fiction and poetry in schools was right. Education is not just 'skills to cash'; in market-place education it is more than ever our task to keep social and interpersonal communication at the centre.

John Welch (previously ILEA Staff Inspector, now Director of the National Association for Gifted Children) picked up the reading theme. Research in recent years shows children in primary and secondary schools reading only in short unconnected bursts. 'Poor' readers are extracted from classes to do exercises, not to read books. There is no time to learn the language of texts. Saturation in reading is needed and reading to and with other children, mums and dads, not 'experts'.

Michael Marland, a member of the Bullock Committee (now Head of N. Westminster Community School) was in

pessimistic and aggressive mood. Teachers don't read. Worksheets and teacher-made resources create an anti-reading curriculum, encouraging children to circumnavigate print rather than confront it. The loss of faith in learning from books is misconceived. Across the curriculum we do not teach children to use books and to understand the nature of different kinds of texts. The LISC (Libraries in Schools and Colleges) report shows our deep failure to understand what a library is for; the problem is not one of resources but the use we make of what we have. If there are no library-using pupils it is because we lack 'library-intelligent' teachers.

As a parting shot Marland challenged publishers to respond to our multi-lingual society, to the richness of the 'other languages of Britain' and the bilingualism of our children.

Trends and Opportunities

Pat Triggs recognised the crisis of morale among teachers, the growing pressures from all sides; but chose to highlight some significant and encouraging developments. The information-led curriculum makes us examine the process of learning. Libraries are becoming more central: infants are being seen as active enquirers; GCSE will demand new patterns of learning.

Changing attitudes to reading and the spread of school bookshops are blurring for teachers the division between 'educational' and 'recreational' books. We are valuing children's encounters with and responses to the books more highly; we have a better understanding of why some children stop reading and how our teaching methods may be a key factor in this. We see the essential role of story and understand that books not teachers teach reading. 'Real' books and responsive, informed adults are what children need. In the primary school two markets for books - parents and teachers - come together. By and large the books we need already exist; the challenge for publishers and booksellers is telling teachers about them and making them available. Information about books takes a long time to reach the majority of teachers, by which time books are out of print. Publishers have two chances: keep books in print longer or speed up the process by which we find out about them. (They may also have to think about price and producing more in paperback.) Talking to teachers is very different from talking to booksellers. Publishers must learn how to do it, perhaps learn from and support those (like BfK and Signal) who have shown how and have influenced attitudes and practices. More teachers recognise the need for a wide range of books, fiction and non-fiction; they also recognise their own lack of knowledge. Publishers must think long-term and initiate and support moves to reach teachers more effectively.

Ann Parker (Senior Assistant County Librarian, Hertfordshire) pointed to agents of change which can have negative effects- the blitz of curriculum initiatives, centralised funding, national projects imposed from outside education -and suggested positive ways to harness these to better provision and use of resources. When money is short, books go first but massive sums are available for librarians and teachers to tap. We must show that TVEI/TRIST and CPVE need books. Multi-cultural initiatives and Special Needs mean books. CDT work requires wide-ranging information gathering - more books. TV creates a huge demand for books among primary children - do producers and publishers liaise enough to meet this? Children need better illustration, accuracy, indexing, line breaks, clues to support them through texts and no print on shaded/deckled backgrounds. Books are being used and promoted in new areas: **Rosie's Walk** and **Meg's Eggs** in Maths, Briggs' and Foreman's picture books alongside war novels at 14; and exam questions such as 'What sort of books would you choose for a 2 year-old and how would you read them?' appear in Child Care courses.

Margaret Marshall (Specialist in books and handicapped children) mentioned the irony of the 'remedial' children not being allowed to use the library 'because they can't read'. One in ten children has a disability of some kind - and they need books to enjoy and read on their own. Partially and profoundly deaf children, partially and unsighted, brain-damaged, maladjusted, mentally and physically handicapped children have particular needs but it is usually by accident rather than design that these needs are met. Integration into mainstream education must be resourced (and has implications for teaching styles). Margaret Marshall saw the dire results of under-resourced integration in the USA in 1979. Often minor adjustments can make mainstream books suitable for handicapped children. Checklists of technical,

visual and conceptual aspects to consider are available from the National Library for the Handicapped.

The Response from the Book Trade

John Welch (MD Heffers) **Eddie Bell** (MD Collins General Books) and **Brough Girling** (Consultant to Books for Students) looked at schools and asked a lot of questions.

How can booksellers involve and assist children, parents and teachers? Could there be closer links between schools and their local bookshop? Are booksellers too daunting? Too stuffy? A few children's bookshops are very successful - what's their secret? Why do educational publishers trawl schools but not publishers of 'real' books? Was the Book Train just an ego trip for promotions people? TV programmes like Book Tower have much more effect. Why doesn't TV promote books like pop music? School bookshops are a kind of TV set publishers have been slow to switch on; they now spend less time (and money) talking to teachers and librarians than to co-publishers, chain stores, supermarkets and the retail mass markets. Money is used to impress the industry rather than create readers. Are teachers to blame when homework leaves no time for voluntary reading? Why is reading associated with 'work' when it is really play? Why do adults think books always have to be 'improving'? Why do they only give books from their own childhood? How can a school teach reading without a school bookshop? Why do so many adults get in the way of children's reading? The Book Trade, in short, lacks knowledge. There are too few facts and too much fantasy.

From all this (and I've missed out the anecdotes, the stories, the poems) what else? Lord Bullock's remark that when we use the word 'basic' we are usually short-changing someone; the anonymous inspector quoted by John Welch: 'We found the poison cupboard open and the library locked.' Marland's criticisms rang a bell; but it's more complex than he suggests. I hope to spread the word about 'booksharing books' in which parents and teachers of infants tell each other about their children's reading. Ann Parker showed me ways forward - are we making sure the DTI software funding includes spending on programs that demand books and other resources? I'll get Margaret Marshall's checklists and look more critically at resources I see or produce.

It was fascinating and instructive to talk to so many publishers. It should happen more often. As individuals and collectively teachers should be making their voices heard. Lots of people are ready to listen. At the moment a few switchboard operators are doing a good job connecting us up. But remember you can dial direct as well these days.

Page Number:

10

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