



# Will There Be Any Time Left For Reading?

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**Jeff Hynds** on The Literacy Hour.

The literacy hour is the major plank of the government's strategy to achieve its goal for all 11-year-olds to reach their chronological level age by 2002. But is it too prescriptive? And how easy is it for teachers to identify the 'right' books and the 'right' authors? **Jeff Hynds** investigates.

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New Labour's Literacy Task Force has decreed that, from September, 'the approach to teaching literacy should be based on the National Literacy Project and should be adopted in every primary school'. This centrally prescribed approach will have to be followed by all teachers, 'unless a school can demonstrate through its literacy action plan, schemes of work and performance in Key Stage 2 tests, that the approach it has adopted is at least as effective'. It will, however, be a brave school that chooses to follow this alternative course, particularly as the Director of the Project is on record as declaring that 'it is not feasible for a school to devise its own scheme of work', which is why the Project has produced a scheme 'that all schools can use'.

The Director claims that the scheme incorporates a 'holistic approach, not just a narrow literacy'. The documentation emphasises that 'literate primary children should be interested in books, read with enjoyment and... know and understand a range of genres in fiction and poetry' as well as 'understand and be able to use a range of non-fiction texts'. To ensure that this is properly covered, particular kinds of texts are specified for each of the 18 primary terms. In Year 1, Term 2, for example, children will read 'traditional stories and rhymes, and fairy stories with predictable and patterned language' and in Year 2, Term 3, they will read 'stories by significant children's authors'. Later it will be 'information books on topics of interest with descriptive and explanatory accounts' (Year 3, Term 1), 'stories from other cultures' (Year 4, Term 3), 'realistic novels and stories with contemporary settings' (Year 5, Term 1). In all there are some 30 categories of this kind. Nowhere in the extensive documentation, however, is there any indication of the *quality* of the books the Project has in mind. There is no mention of particular books or authors, or any discussion of the vitally important relationship between quality of text and quality of literacy teaching. Instead teachers are instructed to 'identify the key texts that they intend to use'. With 30,000 children's titles in print, this presents teachers with a monumental task. Which books and which authors? Will any books do? Identifying books to fulfil particular teaching needs is one of the biggest problems of all for teachers of literacy, particularly if those books are to be of high quality.

## The right books?

It is not easy, for example, to find 'traditional stories and fairy stories with predictable and patterned language' of high quality suitable for 5- and 6-year-old children. I have spent several years searching out and categorising such books and I find that most of the quality texts of this kind have a language and a sophistication more appropriate for much older readers. Consider Angela McAllister's **The Ice Palace**, or Brenda Seabrooke's **The Swan's Gift**, for example. These are books of real quality, typical of the best in this genre, but not immediately accessible to 5-year-olds. There are, on

the other hand, plenty of inferior publications. I have in my possession a version of **The Frog Prince**, apparently published with the National Literacy Project in mind (and aimed at 5-year-olds), that is appalling by anyone's standards, though doubtless it could claim to be predictable and patterned. I am told it, and the series to which it belongs, has been selling well in schools. Will it be officially suitable for the National Literacy Project or not? We cannot tell.

### **The significant authors (and illustrators)?**

Then again, when we get to Year 2, Term 3, which authors are we to regard as 'significant'? I know, from talking to teachers about this, that opinions vary widely. Authors as diverse as Roald Dahl, Babette Cole, and James Berry are likely to be mentioned, but would any of them be officially regarded as significant? There is also another element to bear in mind and you have only to look at a picture book like James Berry's **Celebration Song** to realise what it is. Much of the success of this book derives from the dramatic interrelationship between James Berry's text and Louise Brierley's evocative illustrations. So what about significant illustrators? Strangely the National Literacy Project does not appear to mention any, even though, in the making of picture books, illustrators are equally as 'significant' as authors. In fact, amongst all the categories set down for each term, there is no reference to picture books at all! This is a most extraordinary omission. It is widely accepted that the modern picture book has a central part to play in the development of literacy. See, for example, the work of people like Judith Graham (1990), Jane Doonan (1993), David Lewis (1995, 1996), Victor Watson and Morag Styles (1996).

### **The surface features of literacy**

This vagueness about such a crucial matter as the actual books that are to be used in school is surprising in a Project where everything else is prescribed in minute detail. Contrast the airy references to books with the detailed manner in which the surface features of literacy are set out. In Term 1 of Year 1, for example, 'pupils should be taught to independently read known familiar simple stories tracking the text in the right order page by page, left to right, top to bottom?'. This is called 'text level work?'. For work at 'sentence level?' they should be taught 'to recognise, identify and locate full stops and capital letters when reading, and name them correctly?'. At 'word level?' they should be taught 'to begin to use the term 'phoneme?' to refer to the smallest unit of sound in a word?', and 'identify final and middle letter-sounds (phonemes) while pointing to the individual letters (reading left to right)?'. In fact, actual readers cannot normally do these things. I have been able to show, for example, that most people, however well they read, are unable correctly to distinguish the separate sounds in spoken words (Hynds 1996). Moreover, these 'teaching objectives?' are intended for children *aged 5 and 6*, in their first term after Reception, which seems a remarkably young age to be introduced to the concept of a phoneme (an abstract and notoriously difficult area in linguistic study which I first encountered in my early twenties). I have not picked out extreme or isolated items. Each term has a list of 30 or 40 items like these that 'pupils should be taught?'. Possibly the Director, like Alice, uses words to mean what he wants them to mean, but for me this is a *narrow* literacy, with little that is *holistic* about it.

### **Reading Aloud? Writing?**

Everything laid down must be *directly taught* to the whole class or to a 'focused group?' within a daily 'Literacy Hour?', and during this hour '100% of the teacher's time must be spent in direct instruction?'. With a programme so detailed (over 700 items all told) it might be supposed that everything important would have been covered. This is the next surprise, for the hour is not to be used for reading aloud to children, or for individual reading time with children (for example, discussing aspects of reading in a 'reading conference?'), or for presenting books and authors to children, or for periods of quiet reading (like USSR - Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading). Additional time must be found for these, as it must for other vital aspects of literacy teaching like monitoring and assessment. Writing *is* included, but it does not receive anything like the same attention in the Project as reading. Most of the time it is tacked on incidentally to some aspect of reading. There is no discussion of the writing process, and no time in the Literacy Hour for USSW or regular 'writing conferences?' or the establishment of writing workshops. Time for such activities must be found elsewhere. Obviously other subjects will suffer. Already there has been an official relaxation of curriculum requirements in areas like the humanities to enable more attention to be given to the so-called 'basics?'. One wonders how, next year, teachers will find time to fit in a 'Numeracy Hour?' as well.

## Pleasure and entertainment?

But above all, and ironically, it seems to me that reading is likely to suffer. The serious omissions from the Literacy Hour outlined above are those very involvements that teach the most about the purpose and function of reading in our lives. With this over-mechanical programme, concentrating as it does mainly on the assumed hierarchical 'skills' of literacy, children are going to be hard put in school to read for pleasure and entertainment, and that kind of self-fulfilment which committed and involved readers regularly experience. Texts in the Project are invariably chosen for 'study', or for 'focused work', not for enjoyment.

It seems probable that the designers of the National Literacy Project have fallen into the same trap that some other literacy 'experts' regularly fall into. Because it is possible to show that there *are* distinguishable skills in literacy learning (there can be no doubt of this, though it is not unusual for some to be imagined, like identifying phonemes), the literacy experts are misled into believing that you have to learn these skills by being taught them separately and in advance of what you actually need them for. This, as every true teacher knows, is a confusing way to teach. You would not teach someone to drive a car by giving them lessons on the accelerator pedal, the windscreen wipers or the cam belt. A far better way to teach literacy, strongly supported by a great deal of international research, is to give children a thorough involvement in the whole experience first, and only later come gradually to investigate the integral parts.

Let me give an example of this kind of teaching.

### Using a Big Book

Select a good quality picture book in enlarged format (a 'Big Book') like **Morse's Horse** by Amanda Graham. (In this story, Morse is trying to dump his lugubrious looking horse on one or other of his numerous acquaintances so that he can go away on holiday. But they all manage to excuse themselves, so that in the end Morse has to take the horse with him in his car.)

Read the story to the whole class and enjoy the humour together. Let the children watch and follow as you turn the pages. Add to the enjoyment by sometimes pointing to some of the amusing words or pictures, preferably with a special pointer. Ask them what they think about the book, and why it makes them laugh. Read other books in a similar way.

On another day read **Morse's Horse** again, still pointing occasionally, and discussing one or two features of interest, like the snake that swallowed the bagpipes (!)

When you feel, after a number of readings, that the children are fairly familiar with the book, give a group of them a small (prepared) version of the book which you have divided into separate pages. These you jumble up, and then ask the children, working collaboratively, to put back in the right order. At the same time, other groups are given divided up smaller versions of the other Big Books you have been reading with them. In subsequent sessions, these will be exchanged so that all groups eventually meet all versions.

Later make a copy of the text of **Morse's Horse**, and divide this up into the lines of print as they appear in the book. (You could restrict this to the first few pages.) Make these fairly large. Get children in groups to restore the lines to their right order. They will usually come up with alternative possibilities which can provide useful discussion. And, of course, do the same with other books. It is a help to mount the lines of print on velcro-backed card, and then the children can work round a velcro board, which makes it easier for the group to see and discuss alternatives.

It is possible to go as far as dividing up selected sentences into individual words (or phrases) and this can be an absorbing exercise for more experienced groups. Provided the text is not too long, try a whole book occasionally.

At around this stage use a sliding 'masking device' with the (by now) well known Big Books to highlight and temporarily isolate individual words or phrases from their (already familiar) surroundings. These can be read as sight words or scrutinised for word structure or spelling. Note that these will be 'sight words' already met in action, not decontextualized as with flash cards. Make sure that the words you choose at first are meaning-laden 'content' words,

like *bagpipes* or *swallow*, not difficult 'function' words like *as* or *but* or *of*. The advantage of a well-made masking device is that it can be easily adjusted to fit the target word or phrase, and you can use the slide progressively to reveal words or phrases for children to try to predict. With it you can also consider elements of punctuation, different varieties of the same letter, and various other forms and features of print.

Use small pieces of card or plastic with Blu-tack to cover words or phrases in the known text which children then endeavour to read from their memory of the story or the surrounding context.

As time goes on all these activities can be carried out on more taxing and less well known books, not only by the teacher working with a large group but by the children themselves taking turns in small groups. There are many possible variations, for example, separating words and pictures for re-assembly, or writing a text for a wordless book and seeing if others can match it. The activities do not always have to be based on Big Books, of course. Initially some of these materials take time to make, but if they are made quite strongly and laminated or covered in clear 'takibak', they can be re-used many times.

Working in this way I have always found that children learn a great deal about reading (and writing) remarkably quickly. They acquire all the 'skills' within the experience of reading good quality books, and very largely as a direct consequence of the quality, for the books are compulsive and polysemic, and invite re-reading. If activities like these, which I have in fact advocated for years, are permitted in the 'Literacy Hour', they will help to offset the more negative effect that a programme based on the teaching of supposed hierarchical skills is bound to have.

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**Celebration Song**, James Berry, ill. Louise Brierley, Puffin, 0 14 050716 7, £5.99

**The Frog Prince**, Barbara Mitchelhill, ill. Louise Fidge, Stanley Thornes, 0 7487 2169 X, £1.95

**The Ice Palace**, Angela McAllister, ill. Angela Barrett, Red Fox, 0 09 922291 9, £4.99

**Morse's Horse**, Amanda Graham, Era Publications, Big Book 1 86374 246 8, £16.95; Small Book 1 86374 235 2, pack of four £8.75

**The Swan's Gift**, Brenda Seabrooke, ill. Wenhai Ma, Walker Books, 0 7445 4070 4, £5.99

**Jeff Hynds** is available to run courses on the teaching of literacy which include many practical activities like those described in this article. These courses have now been attended by over 20,000 teachers nationally. His book-supplying organisation, known as Jeff Hynds Books, stocks a wide range of specially selected children's books of the highest quality, grouped into a 'core book' system consisting of 15 teaching categories, each of which has a particular part to play in the development of literacy. Also available are special 'Velcro' Boards (with adaptations these can be used variously as Big Book stands, demonstration or group activity boards, or book exhibition stands). Also stocked are specially designed Masking Devices for use with Big Books. For details of courses, and book services, contact Jeff

Hynds Books, 6, Alexandra Road, Biggin Hill, Kent TN16 3NY(Office address), Tel: 01959 572193, Fax: 01959 540162. It is possible to visit the actual Bookstore in Bletchingley which is near Junction 6 of the M25.

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