



# Statutory reading

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**Liz Waterland** takes a sceptical look at the requirements of the National Curriculum.

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Suppose we start with some children - a four-year-old, for instance, called Juliet who brought me a book one day and said, 'Mrs Waterland, I've found a spelling mistake in this book. Look, they've spelt giant with a G-for-Gary instead of a J-for-Juliet!' Of, if you prefer, Kevin, who, at three, chose *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* because, 'It's the lady who did the Mog book and I liked it because I got a cat. Cat stories are good and tigers are a bit like a cat.' Then again we could begin with seven-year-old Steven who told me that he'd read five books that week and 'two were true stories and one was the Bible piece for Sunday School and two were made-up stories'. He'd especially liked the Bible piece because it was hard, but sounded nice and the favourite book he'd chosen that week was *Asterix* because of the funny names and 'you learn history too'. Perhaps Lenny would be of interest as well? He was also seven, with severe learning difficulties, and one day told me quite suddenly, 'I know why there's that writing on the door... it tells you the way out.'

Four different children, four different ages, four different pieces of behaviour and understanding. Juliet, Kevin and Lenny couldn't read words at all yet, Steven was a fluent reader. Juliet was looking at a very familiar story. Kevin picked an unfamiliar one by reference to the known. Lenny wasn't talking about books at all. Steven was working with me on a carol for the concert when he volunteered his information, not involved in a reading activity.

Well, from now on we are going to use events like these to provide evidence for our allocation of children to the various levels of the National Curriculum in reading. No longer can a teacher record that the child is 'on Book Four' or 'Yellow Level' and feel that duty has been done. Now there has to be real evidence of what the child can do with a text before he or she can be labelled. This could be a real advance, a chance to use the accumulated experience and knowledge of reading that the teacher has, a wonderful opportunity to show some real learning.

So let's look at the evidence these children have offered and see what it tells us about their attainment in reading according to the Statutory Orders.

Juliet, first, is clearly at Level 2c, '... use ... phonic clues in reading. Use initial letters to help with recognising words.' But, just a minute, she couldn't read words independently at all. She was using the initial letter to help with recognising *something*, but not to read with. Where does that leave us? Plainly with a piece of behaviour which hasn't got a home in the document at all.

Let's try Kevin instead. His choice of book and the reason for it certainly fulfils level 4b, '... demonstrate ... and ability to explore preferences ... given an indication of personal response.' Still, he certainly couldn't 'read aloud ... from a range of familiar literature' so we can't give him credit for his interest in cat books by Judith Kerr yet. And in any case, oh gosh, look; we can't count what he and Juliet did at all ... they were only three and four and Level Two was for the

average seven-year-old and Level Four is reserved for slower eleven-year-olds, so both children are doing it all too soon and in the wrong order. They aren't even supposed to be 'on' the National Curriculum programme in the first place.

We'll try Steven and Lenny instead. At least they are at the end of a Key Stage and so should be allocated their official label.

Steven, then. Well, he is certainly able to 'read a range of fiction, poetry, literary non-fiction and drama, including pre-20th century literature'. His choice 'made demands on the reader' to an outstanding extent for a seven-year-old. Here again, though, we are in trouble. This attainment target is Level 8a, intended for twelve-year-olds. Perhaps we could treat this bright lad as if he was 12? (No one would want to hold him back.) Could he really 'Write essays commenting upon points of style...'? Perhaps not. Although he could certainly 'Write further episodes of a book under discussion' and often did. His story of 'The Three Little Pigs went on holiday and met the Wolf again' was much admired by the critics. This really isn't as straightforward as we thought at first.

Lenny seems easier, however. He is seven and so falls within the scope of the documentation and his response to the notice on the door shows he is a Level 1a (recognising that 'print is used to carry meaning ... in the everyday world'). In all other respects he fits his Level 1 label, a slow learner, obviously, since seven-year-olds are supposed to be at Level 2.

The only child who seems to fit the programme that the National Curriculum assumes for reading is the child with difficulties. This is a depressing thought. The only child whose label will be even half-way accurate is going to leave school one day in early July with a written report telling him, his family and anyone else who finds out, that Lenny is a failed reader. At seven he will realise, for the first time in his life, that he can't read. The pleasure he takes in books and the belief he has that he is a reader will finally be exposed as a trick. He is only Level 1, despite the effort he puts into his reading and the immense distance he has travelled since he entered school, silent, grubby and terrified two years ago.

As for the others, what will we do with them? How shall we sum up the complexity of their learning about and response to books in the space on their report or record sheet headed Attainment Level? Do we wait until they have attained every thing required by the list of statements for a Level before we 'award' it to them? If so, how do we show all that they have achieved beyond the minimum that the Level suggests? Perhaps we could decide to list all the child's achievements at whatever level? But no, this isn't allowed; a single grade has to sum up the child's attainment in reading and, in any case, what sort of complexity would such a record require and how long would it take to fill in?

The problem is; you see, that the Statutory Orders reflect a view of the learning process that has very little relevance to the learning of real children with real reading behaviours and real work to do. It isn't that children don't do the things that are described in these Statements of Attainment and Profile Components and Non-statutory Guidance and all the rest of it. Unfortunately, though, children aren't the tidy, straight line learners that the organisation of these documents tries to suggest. A child learns as if she were crossing a playground; in fits and starts whilst skipping and hopping, resting and running and, occasionally, spinning round in circles. She hasn't heard of the shortest distance between two points and, if she had, she'd be wise enough to know that you miss a lot of the view while travelling that way.

Not only does children's learning wander through the scenery, it also responds to that scenery. Steven can read at a 'higher' level from **Jim and the Beanstalk** than he can from **The Bible**; he is Level 5 with one and Level 3 with the other. Juliet is able to behave like a reader without actually being able to read ... is this 'counted' or not? If not, why not? The things she is able to do with texts are good things and show a great deal about her knowledge of reading (and that is, after all, part of the title of the Attainment Target, 'Knowledge, skills and understanding in reading'). If we only credit children with the skills ... what will happen to knowledge and understanding which invariably precede skills? In fact, skills cannot develop without knowledge and understanding. They are the vital prerequisite of the acquisition of skills and are often greater than the child can demonstrate.

Certainly, when the National Curriculum first came out there was a feeling of relief among many teachers ... and I also felt it. When we compared what might have been with what was, we realised that we had escaped from our worst imaginings. We could have been forced to use Government Approved Books, we could have been told to teach Look

and Say or Phonics first or ITV. At least the statements were expressed in terms that enabled us to teach as we wished to; at least they reflected something of knowledge about the reading process as many of us recognise it.

Gradually, however, with familiarity and as we struggle to come to terms with the requirements to assess and label, the truth is being revealed. The requirements of this document are impossible. The demand that all children should proceed through the programme of study from Level 1 to Level 10 in a straight line, one attainment upon another, one example after the last, cannot be fulfilled. Not even the Standard Attainment Tasks, which are supposed to override, and provide safeguards against, this sloppy untidy learning that children and teachers are prone to, will do no more than produce a snapshot of a tiny moment in time. They will tell us no more than that on that day, at that moment, with that text and while hungry or full, well or ill, this child did, for some of the time, do this or that... or at least we think he did. It might have been quite otherwise inside his head, or heart.

I saw a cartoon once in which an earnest man walked up to a door over which was a sign saying 'Lift'. Carefully he studied it, then bent down, caught hold of the bottom of the door and, straining and sweating, tried to lift it. He had read the word correctly. He had just failed to understand it. We are faced with a National Curriculum which is labelled 'Lift'. We could break our backs in literal response to it, or we could use our understanding of what it all means, press the button and ride to our destination in style and comfort. That is the lesson we must learn, those of us who must make all this work: that we understand what the message means and that those who would have us believe it means much grunting and groaning and pain are wrong.

Children will continue to roam freely through the playground of literacy; we cannot and will not change that. We'll continue to guide and chart their course according to what we know is true. And when pushed to label the point they have reached, we must say only what we know... that today, for some time and with some words she could do some of this... as far as we can tell. To pretend it is possible to do any more is a confidence trick played on the child, the parents and, of course, ourselves. Luckily, it has been seen through...

**Liz Waterland** teaches infants and is Acting Head of a school in Peterborough, as well as being one of our regular reviewers. She is the author of **Read With Me**, 0 903355175, £2.85, and has recently edited **Apprenticeship in Action: teachers write about Read With Me**, 0 903355 310, £4.75 (see **BfK 61** - March 90). Both are published by Signal and are available from Thimble Press, Lockwood, Station Road, Woodchester, Stroud, Glos. GL5 5EQ. Prices given include postage.

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