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## READING, LEARNING AND THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

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## Introduction

To judge from the arrangements for assessment at the age of seven -- recently published for the National Curriculum -- one might suppose that the intention of the Education Reform Act was being fulfilled. This is not so. Even the belief that national 'testing' is to be conducted after this Easter 1991 is unfounded. Indeed, *less* rigorous testing is likely as schools spend more and more time in the complicated arrangements laid down.

In the case of English, the National Curriculum stands a very fair chance of *lowering* reading standards. One need merely study 'English Attainment Target 2: Reading'<sup>1</sup>, consider the concept of the teaching of reading which is embodied in it and analyse the guidance for assessing reading provided for in the National Curriculum Assessment papers.

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1. Department of Education and Science, *English in the National Curriculum (No 2)*, March 1990. This lays down the targets for reading, and describes the tests by which all those attempting to reach these targets are assessed.



## Methods of teaching reading

The early stages of teaching reading were traditionally based on the nature of alphabetic writing, by means of indicating the correspondences between letters and their sounds. This is known as phonic or phonetic teaching.<sup>2</sup> In the late nineteenth century the phonic method was combined with -- and after the first world war gradually usurped by -- the 'look-say' method in which words are recognised as wholes. Although this leaves the child with no strategy for reading a new word, and may leave a legacy of poor spelling, a superficial impression of facility is created as the child quickly produces reader-like behaviour which impresses adults. It is also easier for the teacher, entrusted with the progress of thirty children at once, to rely on a scheme based on a core 'sight vocabulary'. Hence its popularity.

Definitive studies show that it is more effective to concentrate upon the code aspects of written language than on meaning.<sup>3</sup> Yet the traditional phonic and the more recent look-say methods have recently been supplanted by a reliance on literacy skills 'emerging' from exposure to good children's literature -- 'real books' rather than books designed to help children to read. This emphasis on stories and meaning, rather than on mastery of the code permeates the National Curriculum, as this paper will demonstrate. To speak of introducing written 'literature' to children unable to decode print, however nobly intended, is premature.

### Psycholinguistic doctrine

A new orthodoxy in the teaching of reading pervades the educational establishment. Most citations nowadays refer to the 'psycholinguistic' school of thought.

Even Noam Chomsky, whose work has sometimes been cited by supporters of the psycholinguistic approach, in fact admits that:-

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2. 'The alphabet has been invented only once': its development 'has influenced the whole history of the civilisation of mankind' (Diringer, *The Alphabet*, 3rd edition, (Hutchinson 1968) p. 435). This seems to have occurred in the Hyksos period (1730-1580 BC) in the ancient Near East, among the Semitic peoples of Syria and Palestine. The script was passed on to the Greeks who fortunately assigned vowel values to some superfluous signs. According to Diringer, 'the great achievement was not the creation of the signs. It lies in the adoption of a purely alphabetic system, which denoted each sound by one sign only' (op. cit. p. 163). By contrast Egyptian hieroglyphs, Oriental ideograms and the various syllabaries, half-way measures, are very inefficient. The nearest equivalent to Chinese characters which we have are numerals, signs which stand directly for words, without acoustic correspondence. The acquisition of the Chinese or Japanese written language, word by word, takes many years.

3. See, for instance, the summary of such evaluative studies in Adams, M.J. *Beginning to Read* (Cambridge, Mass.), 1990, p.p. 31-54.

'This relation [of the conventional orthography to the structure of the spoken language] is, I believe, much closer than is ordinarily supposed. So much so, in fact, that conventional English orthography in its essentials appears to be a near-optimal system for representing the spoken language; it is to a large extent merely a direct point-by-point transcription of a system [lexical representation] that the speaker of English has internalised and uses freely.'<sup>4</sup>

This view is consistent with all known research on the teaching of reading: that is, in the early stages emphasis on the technique of reading and writing is more successful than emphasis on meaning, and simple enjoyment of storybooks.

Nevertheless some theories dating from the late 1960s, and perversely stimulated by the work of Chomsky, have had an extraordinary influence in Britain and elsewhere -- even though research has largely overtaken and refuted them so that they are now seen as plain mistakes. The work of Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman, for instance, runs altogether counter to Chomsky's view cited above.<sup>5</sup> Yet their theories have quietly captured Attainment Target 2 of the National Curriculum for English. They represent a narrow and impoverished view of literacy.

There is, of course, a great danger is that the attainment target for reading will influence the practice of teachers. Indeed, what else are the attainment targets there to do?

Further evidence of the extent of the blight is seen, for example, in a recent BBC series, 'Help Your Child With Reading', and a film for the Open University, 'Making Real Readers for Life', which is repeated in an OU series, *Exploring Educational Issues*.

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4. Chomsky, N., 'Phonology and Reading', in Levin, H. and Williams, J.P. (eds), *Basic Studies On Reading* (Basic Books, New York 1970) p. 4.

5. For example: 'There are no rules of reading, at least none that can be specified and with sufficient precision to teach a child. All proficient readers have acquired an implicit knowledge of how to read, but this knowledge has been developed through the practice of reading, not through anything that is taught at school' (Smith, F. 'Twelve easy ways to make learning to read difficult', in *Psycholinguistics and Reading* (New York) 1973, p.184. And: 'Words taken out of language context cannot be defined, pronounced or categorized.' Goodman, K. 'The linguistics of Reading', in *The Elementary School Journal*, No 64, p.360.



## Reading in the National Curriculum

The National Curriculum proposes that children should appreciate stories, and use cues from pictures, context and story structures in addition to print, in order to 'predict' the sense. By such means children should be 'able to read a range of material with some independence, fluency, accuracy and understanding'.

Now these proposals simply do not provide clear guidelines within which teachers can teach and pupils be tested. And worse, they seem to hallow unproven teaching methods. For instance, the emphasis in the proposed statements of attainment is not on learning to read -- working through the learning sequence of acquiring and combining letters and sounds -- but on personal response, reactions, speaking, listening. At level two, children should 'listen and respond to stories, poems and other material read aloud'. (Attainment Target 1 is 'speaking and listening'.) This implies that written language is learned like spoken language. But there is no foundation for any such view. Man is the only primate born with a capacity for speech; but this does not extend to a heritable capacity for literacy. Unlike natural language, written language is culturally transmitted and can be mastered only by means of instruction. Such instruction is being *undermined* by the National Curriculum.

For example, children are asked to 'use context and picture cues'. But reliance upon context and picture cues is characteristic only of weak readers, not of beginning ones.<sup>6</sup> The ability to read words out of context is precisely what distinguishes skilled from unskilled readers. Bad habits, such as guessing, are not stages in a progression to good habits.

Instead of becoming familiar with the letters and sounds of the alphabet, children are being asked to 'describe what has happened in a story and predict what may happen next'. Experimental work, however, has failed to substantiate the idea of 'story grammars'. A story's main structure, it seems, is still a beginning, a middle and an end.

Without reference to the stages by which reading skills are acquired, children are asked to 'read accurately and understand straightforward signs, labels and notices'. But this emphasis on 'print in the environment' fails to take account of the idiosyncratic nature of

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6. If context is taken to mean syntactic context, the use of sentence structure, then it can be demonstrated that this depends in turn on prior phonological processing. For instance there is experimental evidence that 'phonological information is necessary to provide access to the internal machinery which utilizes sentence structure in the service of better text comprehension.' Ellis, A. and Young A, *Human Cognitive Neuropsychology*, (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hove, 1988) pp. 220-1.

hoardings, mastheads, street signs, packaging material, subtitles on television etc. Nowhere in the National Curriculum is there encouragement for the clear progression in mastery of reading which leads to understanding of the text and to discrimination of meaning.

These 'guessing' methodologies have been discredited in experimental research; all belong to the 'psycholinguistic' persuasion. But all are also alive and well in English Attainment Target 2. Professor Cox, author of the National Curriculum English Working Party report, likes to claim that the teaching of phonics is now 'statutory'. True, there is a single mention of phonics, among other 'cueing systems' (more psycholinguistic theory).<sup>7</sup> But the emphasis within the English statements of attainment is towards institutionalising ineffective teaching methods, not good ones.

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7. The importance that this has for teachers is best illustrated by an excerpt from a Coventry school's published language policy document: "Phonics. See AT2 level 2c for mention of phonics. The staff has agreed that knowledge of phonics does provide readers with another strategy for reading but that we should not labour the point, and that this strategy only helps some children. In addition, phonics should be taught only as the need arises."



### Assessing reading

On 7 January 1991 the DES explained how 6-7 year olds are to be 'tested' in English, Maths and Science in the summer term of 1991. Further details have now been given at national training conferences. Damage is lurking in these assessment arrangements.

First, the psycholinguistic orthodoxy of 'real books' has become part of the National Curriculum. It now insists that every statement of attainment must be assessed in the most literal way.

Second, the intention to administer simple, and simply understood, tests has been abandoned. Pupils' progress can be measured by 'summative' assessment, opposed by most local inspectorates, language experts and advisers, who condemn such narrow expedients, and prefer 'formative' assessment, information of use in forward educational planning by teachers.

Third, a 'running record' system of testing has been devised, using commercially available, instead of specially designed, texts. Because there is no check on knowledge of words, there is no gradient of difficulty according to which children at different stages in learning to read might register different scores. Instead, level 1 in effect means that children are unable to read; and level 2 (a major step away) means children have mastered decoding.

Nowhere is it said how to collect, collate or analyse the information from these running records. The exercise is estimated to take ten hours of time per class in the summer term (in addition to 30 hours for other aspects of English, maths and science). And the reporting of levels of attainment (1 to 3 only) in terms of the TGAT framework will not be easily understood by parents. But these features need closer examination.

### The reading tasks

In the English reading assessments at Key Stage 1 (at the end of the infant stage) there are to be three levels, to one of which a seven year old will be assigned according to ability. Such tasks *might* involve reading aloud passages of ascending difficulty i.e. at first ones which include a few common and simple words. Children might then be asked to demonstrate comprehension of these passages. Instead we have the following.

At level 1 there are four tasks which the child must perform satisfactorily:-

- choose a familiar book; show (non-verbal) interest;
- look through the book; make a verbal comment;
- demonstrate knowledge that it is the *print* that must be read;
- identify one word and three letters by name.

There is little here that would not be better addressed by a procedure such as Marie Clay's *Concepts of Print*.<sup>8</sup> If fewer than 2% of seven year olds failed to achieve level 1 there would be cause for dismay. (The TGAT expect that around 15% of children will achieve no higher.) But at level 2, the middle level, the child must satisfy five statements of attainment which do pertain to reading:

- read with understanding three classroom captions or signs, one of which should be a complete sentence: one further sign is allowed if the child makes a mistake;
- select a book from a controlled list; the teacher's guide states, 'The child may have heard or read the book before in the past, but children should not be assessed on a book they already know well';
- have a 'normal experience' of sharing a book with the teacher;
- read a particular passage with no more than eight words supplied by the teacher out of 100;
- demonstrate comprehension of at least two from a list of 'main points' of the story; predict what might happen next;
- find words in a dictionary; or explain how to use alphabetical order; spell a word aloud using letter names.

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8. Clay M.M., *Stones -- the concepts about print test*, (London), 1979. (This is an assessment procedure for the classroom teacher.)



### **What is wrong with such attempts at qualitative criteria for progress in reading?**

First, no control is envisaged over level of difficulty or familiarity when it comes to the use of dictionaries and reading of classroom signs -- and thus no pretence at objectivity. Use of dictionaries, in particular, to 'demonstrate knowledge of the alphabet', is quite advanced: teachers are asked to assess this under 'Writing' when children are required to spell words aloud using the letters of the alphabet. Yet without passing this statement of attainment, the main level -- level 2 of reading attainment -- cannot be passed.

Second, the book-sharing statement of attainment seems to be relevant only to the teacher. No behaviour of the pupil is specified at all.

Third, three statements of attainment (two at level 3) have no necessary connection with reading: they relate merely to responses to stories read aloud, useful skills, admittedly, in an oral culture. Then at level 3 and above skills are expected which require analysis of the material read ('inference, deduction' and appreciation of 'meanings beyond the literal') and use of information sources -- reference books, libraries. We have passed beyond the exercise of reading, with its particular challenge, to literate skills of a higher order associated with verbal intelligence.

The testing of reading is embodied in the running record of 100 words, with criteria for administration and assessment. These are revealing: 'It is very important to give the child time to make a guess at unknown words.' Omissions are not counted as errors, nor are wrong guesses. Only when a word has to be 'told' is an error recorded, and this is done only when 'the child asks' and 'in order to preserve the sense of the passage'. Pony, in the familiar example, may be read acceptably as horse. Guessing and asking for help -- marks of a child without a strategy -- are encouraged. The instructions to teachers for En2 Part B, 'Individual Reading and Discussion', are as follows: 'When you come to the running record passage, ask the child to read aloud, making a 'guess' at any unfamiliar words.' Presumably one could tell a story from the pictures, evidence of attainment at level 2, while showing no appreciation that print carries meaning, evidence of attainment at level 1.<sup>9</sup>

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9. An unpublished study by educational psychologists of the performance in December 1990 of 548 children with significant educational difficulties (15% of those in the relevant year groups), isolates statements 2c ('listen and respond to ... material read aloud, expressing opinions informed by what has been read') and 2f, ('read a range of material with some independence, fluency, accuracy and understanding') as containing the main concentration of actual reading assessment: just under half of these children are still unable to attain these criteria, and hence level 2, at age eleven.



One statement of attainment requires children to 'use picture and context cues', including one "'guess' that makes sense in context *and* at least one 'guess' using phonics or word shape". However, children who are able to read accurately (and so do not guess) need not be penalised!

The texts will, no doubt, be changed from year to year. No plans have been published to collect any of this data. Indeed information of this quality is not worth collecting.

### Costs

In the pilot for the National Curriculum Assessment procedures developed by three consortia were tried out on 18,000 in about 600 schools. Their complexity and excessive demands on teachers' time led to disastrous failure. The total development costs were in the region of £6 million. If implemented across the country these tests would have cost about £180 million.

These pilot tests demanded three times as much teacher time as the final version to be administered during the first half of 1991. Some 60,000 teachers are involved in Key Stage 1 assessments, and teacher time, including overheads, may be costed at £25 per hour. The first year of National Curriculum assessment is estimated to take about 40 hours per class. A preliminary and crude estimate, based on teacher time only, sets the cost of the 1991 assessments at £60 million.

By comparison, simple pencil and paper tests, taking about two hours of classroom time per class, would cost about £3 million.<sup>10</sup>

So far schools report that they have devoted between three weeks (uninterrupted) and nine weeks (intermittent) to the informal assessments alone. About 960 decisions (one every 2.5 minutes) must be made by each class teacher. Far from proving a more efficient exercise than the pilot, this necessitates a loss of about 10% of every child's schooling in the top infant year.

The time-consuming but imprecise procedures of this National Curriculum

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10. The costings and estimates quoted here were supplied by the Schools Examination and Assessment Council.

assessment are already being used to justify the abandonment by LEAs of conventional tests. So the chief source of information on reading standards, school by school where these are published, will be lost. And the TGAT model quite explicitly eschews normative assessment, of the sort which tells us about age-related standards, in favour of criterion-referenced assessment.

### The Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT)

At the end of 1987 this group proposed a framework for assessment incorporating ten levels. All statutory National Curriculum subjects had to embrace a system of stages, each one equivalent to two years' progress for the average child. By seven, such a child should be expected to have achieved level 2. The sequence may be represented as follows:<sup>11</sup>

Age*	NC Year	Key stage	LEVELS (average) (range for about 80% of pupils)	
5	R			
6	1			
7	2	1	2	
8	3			
9	4		3	
10	5			
11	6	2	4	2.5-5.5
12	7			
13	8			
14	9	3	5-6	3.5-7.5
15	10			
16	11	4	6-7	4-9
post-16		5		

\* birthday falling within school year

Many critics of this system hold that it cannot be imposed on every subject. Indeed the Chairman of the Group acknowledged the point of view, frequently expressed, that a simpler system would be preferable. But even within its own terms the TGAT framework poses insuperable problems. Here are three:-

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11. Key Stage 1 is the infant stage; R is the reception year; years 1,2 etc. are the National Curriculum designations.



1) Because of the progressive nature of the ten levels, the range of possible achievement increases with pupils' age. This means that at sixteen, 10% of children may be achieving at primary levels and 10% at the upper limit of the scale. However at key stage one (ages 5-7) only three levels discriminate among children whose command of the basic skills at junior transfer is the major factor in determining the course of their later education. The critical 1/2 borderline, in particular, obscures a gradient of achievement of crucial importance.

2) Because young high- and older low-achievers may work at similar levels on different programmes of study, it becomes possible to achieve levels out of sequence. For instance a gifted pupil might achieve level 5 at age 11 and level 4 at age 14.

3) The negotiation of parities makes possible -- indeed, has already produced -- grade inflation on a massive scale. Grades A-C at O-level (upper 20-25% of ability range) have been extended downwards so that GCSE grades A-G take in 60% of the ability range, with grade F (CSE grade 4) marking the mid-point of ability. TGAT proposed in 1987 that the F/G borderline should correspond with NC levels 6-7. SEAC now proposes that the correspondence be with levels 4-5. Between the two there is a discrepancy, an unexplained loss, of four years' worth of attainment.

Far more comprehensible to parents and teachers alike would be a system of levels of achievement comparable at each age, ranging, as in Germany, from 1 (Very Good) to 6 (Very Poor). A revived Assessment of Performance Unit could, with Rasch scaling, item banking and light sampling<sup>12</sup>, monitor standards by means of age-related norms, impossible under the present TGAT framework.

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12. Rasch scaling employs a statistical model with comparable units of measurement: an interval scale, like centimetres on a ruler. Item banking is a collection of test items of comparable levels of difficulty. This enables the actual version of any test used to be protected, to prevent cheating, and over time new items can be substituted for old. Light sampling is the use of representative samples instead of testing all children of a given age.

## Conclusion

English Attainment Target 2 is based on discredited theory about teaching reading. Procedures on assessment emphasise unimportant features and blur distinctions between the different stages of mastering the printed word. The extensive programmes of study and innumerable attainment targets may pose no immediate danger to educational standards. But the National Curriculum assessment -- in its elaborate system of levels, and in the way it attempts to control the teaching of reading, the 'core of cores' -- is a very real threat.

### What is to be done?

We must have coherent and simple objectives in the teaching of reading. Assessment in turn should be subjected to simpler, more rigorous, less costly, more informative procedures. Most important, the aim of normative, that is, age-related, standards of achievement, should be restored. This can be done by:

1. The abandonment of the TGAT grid. A friendlier reporting system at key stages 1-3 should be adopted. With the simpler German system, parents would undoubtedly soon learn to interpret progress reported in six consistent levels. Quantitatively these would be sextiles or six, equal age-related bands. (The London Borough of Bromley now reports reading attainment school by school on the Suffolk group test in quartiles, four equal bands of 25 %, which may have much to recommend it.)
2. While not discouraging informal and continuous assessment of younger children in all core subjects, reading and number should be assessed by means of paper and pencil tests. This would be quicker, more reliable and far less expensive. Three satisfactory examples of such tests will suffice: the Suffolk Reading Test (1987) may, for the few poor attainers, be followed up by an individually administered diagnostic test such as the MacMillan Individual Reading Analysis (1990); the Gillham and Hesse Basic Number Screening Test (1976) adequately tests both number concepts and operations.<sup>13</sup>

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13. These are examples of currently available commercial tests. The Suffolk test requires the child to complete a sentence of the following type:- *clouds can be seen in the --- (try, skin, shout, sky).*

The Macmillan test provides short passages for reading and comprehension. The Gillham and Hesse Test contains items for simple counting (pictures of trees), leading up to basic arithmetic (including decimals and fractions).

3. Since security is important it would be feasible to build on the work of the Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) to develop instruments similar in concept to the tests mentioned above, avoid the problem of test aging and permit the historical monitoring of standards.
4. The reform of the National Curriculum should be preceded by suspending the requirement that every attainment target and nearly every statement of attainment be assessed. Nothing has done more to make the National Curriculum ridiculous.
5. Attainment targets should be reduced in number and simplified in specification. The programmes of study should become advisory rather than mandatory requirements.
6. The National Curriculum Council and the School Examination and Assessment Council should have their authority and activities reduced. Contracts for design of pilot tests, item-banking, external marking and reporting, should be awarded by tender to independent organisations unaffected by the ethos of present British education.

Above all, the Government must face this one fact. If objective, precise, quantitative testing does not take place as intended, the curricular reform of the 1988 Act will have failed its own first, last, and only important test. The teaching of reading illustrates this point with great clarity.