

UKLA's Response to Beanstalk Questionnaire

- How do you think society's attitudes towards children's literature and literacy have changed during your lifetime? How do you see the current status of children's literacy?

Over the last five decades, public expectations of what schools should do in teaching literacy have risen. Literal comprehension is no longer enough. Level 4 in reading requires a much more thoughtful and skilled approach to the text than was expected of eleven-year-olds in 1960. In 2012 the failure of some 13% of England's eleven-year-olds to demonstrate Level 4 in test conditions was seen as a matter of serious concern. Literacy is, once again, high on the political agenda.

Among education professionals, there is now a much richer understanding of literacy:

- as a linguistic activity, shaped by readers' and writers' experience of oral language;
- as a cognitive activity, shaped by a desire to make sense and to relate what is read to knowledge from other sources;
- as a social activity, shaped by the social practices of home as well as school;
- as, in this electronic age, a multi-media activity, involving non-linear approaches to text on screen as well as linear book-reading, and visual images, and sound as well as print.

Over this time, tests of literacy have become more searching: the International PIRLS and PISA surveys now involve pupils in drawing inferences and making judgements, not just responding to questions on literal meaning. PIRLS also assesses pupils' attitudes towards reading. Such surveys and studies of schools particularly successful in teaching literacy, tell us much about where problems lie and what we might do about them.

But these lessons have been largely neglected by a succession of governments, who have increasingly focused on reading as principally word identification and who see successful teaching as obedience to a programme determined in detail outside the classroom. Literacy has also become the subject of high stakes assessment, with schools castigated for their pupils' low scores.

After more than ten years of this high stakes accountability, and the constraints of the National Literacy Strategy framework, despite teachers' very best efforts, the reading attainment and the enjoyment of reading of England's children, seem to be lower down the international rankings than we might expect.

In my own lifetime, government directives and interventions in literacy have increased exponentially, focusing chiefly on the more easily observable and measurable aspects of literacy learning. Research cited in support of these governmental interventions is often partial, less than rigorous, and 'cherry-picked' to support governmental policy. There is little governmental interest in how children learn. Notions of 'literacy' now seem to focus on easily measurable outcomes, the delivery of a specific – and often narrow – curriculum, and literacy skills rather than children's ability to make important sense of their inner and outer worlds through the medium of the written word, or their readiness to make use of the written word for information or pleasure.

As to children's literature, over this time it has grown in status, reflected in the institution of a number of high profile prizes (e.g. The Costa Children's Book Award, the Smarties Prize). It has also been known for many years that children who enjoy reading get better

at it, and that highly effective teachers of literacy are distinguished by their knowledge of children's literature (Medwell et al., 1998). Yet government initiatives in the name of improving literacy have been chosen to focus on phonics, pushing the reading of engaging texts to the margin, a by-product of success in learning to read rather than the source of many vital lessons in literacy and a powerful motivational force.

- One in eight children in the UK currently leaves primary school without the required levels of literacy. What do you think are the current biggest challenges and barriers to addressing poor literacy amongst children?

It is true that some 13% of those leaving primary school fail to attain Level 4 in the Reading SAT. But before jumping to conclusions, we need to consider the following facts:

- when the NC levels were established, Level 4 was intended to be the mean for children of 11, but has become the 'required' level;
- a timed test, such as the reading SAT, may seriously under-represent the competence of slower but efficient readers;
- a timed reading test cannot adequately reveal a young reader's commitment to a particular subject or author, nor indicate persistence or engagement – key features of good readers;
- children from low-income groups in England often do poorly on reading tests.

We share Mr Gove's concern to "make opportunity more equal". Those encountering real problems in reading need help to achieve the levels of competence and commitment that will enable them to meet the demands of secondary education and the outside world. To give effective help means drawing on research evidence about the nature of such difficulties and the most effective means of overcoming them. Tackling these children's attitudes to reading and widening their experience of it have been shown to be of key importance.

One of the greatest challenges is to develop assessment of levels of literacy that accurately reflects a breadth of reading and writing competence, experience and commitment. Ignoring all aspects of literacy learning except the most easily measurable does not allow teachers to get to grips with the most fundamental problems.

- What future changes would you like to see in education policy relating to literacy, bearing in mind the economic climate in which schools and charities are operating?

"...since teaching is an extremely complex activity which demands creativity and non-routine decision making, it will also require a greater degree of trust in the capacity of teachers to act as semi-autonomous professionals, rather than as compliant technicians in need of constant direction, monitoring and inspection." (Helsby, 2000: 107)

Trust is, indeed essential if teachers are to regain or reinvent their professional identity. UKLA would like to see politicians engaging in more genuine ways with Subject Associations and professionals, listening and taking more notice of professional concerns about curriculum development, and making more use of a wide range of research evidence, including evidence from highly successful schools and classrooms.

We would like to see a literacy curriculum that puts speaking and listening at its heart. We believe that it is essential that children not only develop oral skills to enable purposeful social interaction, but also gain a rich experience of oral language to support their encounters with written language and, in addition, engage in appropriate dialogue and

exploratory talk to support learning and thinking across the curriculum. Talk is a purposeful tool for social interaction, cognitive development and the clarification of concepts. Through talk, readers at all levels can make better sense of the texts they encounter.

UKLA welcomes the government's current interest in the teaching of reading, although there is currently an over-emphasis on the teaching of decoding using the systematic synthetic phonics approach. UKLA of course supports the teaching of phonics, but as one of a range of approaches. Studies of schools where children are taught to read most effectively show consistently that high achieving classes are characterized by:

- a balanced approach in which attention to word recognition skills is matched by attention to comprehension;
- attention to individual children's literacy skills, experiences and interests through high quality interaction and close monitoring of individual progress;
- high levels of engagement in reading.

To enable them to promote reading for pleasure and reading for meaning, UKLA believes that it important that teachers develop knowledge of a wide range of engaging children's texts: poetry, classic children's texts as well as modern texts that children enjoy today, if they are to truly encourage reading for pleasure and reflect a curriculum for the twenty-first century. UKLA's own research project Building Communities of Readers indicates the importance of teachers being 'reading teachers'. [http://www.ukla.org/publications/view/building_communities_of_readers/]

The range of literature should also include popular culture, digital and multimodal texts, both fiction and non-fiction. We recognise the value of media, popular culture, visual literacy, multimodal texts, and new technologies in supporting children's reading development and encouraging engagement with reading.

Multicultural and multilingual texts, links with the home experience and prior cultural experience, and maintaining home language alongside learning English as an additional language have been established features of effective literacy classrooms for many decades. They have persisted not just because of their positive effect on language development, but also because they lead to higher attainment in academic areas, since those children who can access their prior knowledge through the language and culture most familiar to them can call on a rich array of schemata to support their learning.

UKLA would like to see a literacy curriculum that gives children experience of writing in a meaningful context, with a clear purpose and audience, since the research evidence suggests that this leads to higher attainment. To this end, the interrelatedness of composition and transcription should be clearly articulated. UKLA also stresses the vital importance of the research evidence showing that teaching grammatical structures and terminology out of context (e.g. divorced from the construction of meaningful text) has no beneficial effect on children's performance as writers. We therefore believe that grammatical knowledge should be neither taught nor tested outside the context of purposeful writing.

- **If you had a magic wand, what would you do to change the status of children's literacy for good over the next 40 years?**

Given a magic wand, UKLA would argue for:

- an evidence–informed approach to early literacy teaching, with a focus on successful schools;
- government recognition of the importance of teachers’ professional autonomy in raising standards of reading;
- recognition of the central importance of oral language in children’s literacy development.

Government funding for programmes aimed to:

- develop readers who are committed as well as capable;
- cut the links between parental income and literacy attainment;
- build on the knowledge and experience of language and literacy that all children bring to school.

References

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