

R&D: a reading and language programme for the primary years

Jessie Reid and Margaret Donaldson

London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1984. Level 1 complete £60; Level 2 complete £75; items available at individual prices; Level 1 evaluation pack £11.95; Level 2 evaluation pack £14.95.

I warmly welcome the appearance of this new series, the first two levels of which are now available. It represents the kind of collaboration between theory, practice and presentation which is all too rare these days. Jessie Reid is well known for her work on reading (as coauthor of *Link-Up*, for instance); Margaret Donaldson is well known for her work on child development (especially *Children's minds*), and has also written several children's novels. Macmillan's designers have come up with an appealing layout and full-colour treatment, which is certainly going to appeal to children. It is, in my view, a winner.

There are four levels planned. At each level there is a *Language Book*, a collection of readings called *Fact and Story*, and a selection of other story and information books. Teachers' notes are provided. The programme aims to link reading development to language learning, and to link this in turn with the development of thinking, especially in the context of the curriculum. Graded reading material is introduced to reflect and extend the language work, and there is a related concern to build up skills for the development of writing. The first level is aimed at children with a reading age of about 7½. There is a short screening test with Level 1, which can be used to see whether a child is ready for the programme.

For this journal, there are two main points of interest. The *Language Book* is an object lesson in how to present linguistic information attractively; but apart from this, I found its exposition of basic language concepts up-to-date and effective. A lot of thought has been given to the way language notions should emerge from the child's experience, and several ingenious ideas are introduced to provide motivation and understanding. For instance, at the beginning of Level 1, 'names of things' is the notion to be taught: the preceding short story is about a treasure hunt, in which the crucial words in the clues (i.e. the 'names') have been covered with mud; the missing words are provided, and the children have to put them in the right places. Simple and effective. Later in this book, the concept of word order is taught. However, this is not done arbitrarily, as is so often the case, but by first checking that the reader understands the

basic concept involved (explained by the order with which children come down a slide). Each book treats over 30 topics, such as (Level 1) lexical alternatives, the alphabet, proper nouns, adjectives, sentence order, and (Level 2) baby talk, opposites, syllables, figurative expression and comparisons. Imaginative use is made of colour, typeface and layout. Two appealing cartoon characters turn up at regular intervals.

Perhaps the most important feature of the programme, to my mind, is that several of the topics dealt with in the *Language Book* are deliberately introduced into the *Fact and Story* books: there is a chart in the teachers' book which indicates which topics are used in which story books – for example, proper nouns are focussed upon in the story *Nobody's cat*. This attempt to relate information from the 'structured' world of the language book to the 'creative' world of the reading-books is one of the most innovative features of the whole programme. It is precisely this kind of interdependency which has been argued for in recent years as a way of avoiding the sterile confrontations of 'structure' and 'use', which are still all too common.

The R & D programme has no specifically remedial aims (though disadvantaged children are referred to at one point), but the wealth of ideas it contains, both in terms of conceptualization and realization, will surely attract the interest of all concerned with language work, whatever their calling.

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