

# Rhyme and Ritual: a new approach to teaching children to read and write

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## Abstract

This paper concerns an approach to raising literacy standards which is rather different from the prevailing orthodoxy – the *Rhyme and Ritual* project. The project is run by the Hamilton Reading Project, which comprises a series of initiatives funded by the Hamilton Trust, an educational charity, and implemented in fifteen primary schools in a large and socio-economically deprived city area in southern England. It incorporates both a supposedly ‘old-fashioned’ traditional notion – that children can be supported in learning to read through approaching a text known off by heart (the phrase is important, since the text must not only be familiar but also pleasurable to the individual child) – and also the currently valued approach of expanding and extending children’s appropriation and use of elaborated language, particularly in relation to imaginative, descriptive and expressive writing. It is the former aspect of the *Rhyme and Ritual* project, namely the provision of short texts to be memorised by young children and then read from ‘text only’ books (with decoration but no illustrations) that we believe is uncommon as the basis of an educational initiative with the overt aim of raising literacy standards. The article gives a detailed outline of this initiative, with its two-pronged and ‘pincer’ approach, and also some indication of how it is succeeding.

**Key words:** Reading, language enrichment, imaginative writing, research

## Background

The aim of the Hamilton Reading Project is to raise the achievement of the children in an area of social deprivation and poor educational achievement, classified as an Education Action Zone (EAZ), so that, on leaving primary school at the age of eleven, their scores on national tests and teacher assessments match or exceed the national averages. Two thousand children participate in the projects through their schools, and currently in these schools the attainment at eleven on the nationally administered Standard Achievement Tasks (SATs) is twenty or more percentage points below the target levels. In 2001, only 57% achieved Level 4 in English (the expected attainment level for this age group), while nationally the percentage achieving this level was 76%. Two thirds of the students, when leaving secondary school at sixteen, have reading scores below the level expected of a thirteen-year-old.

*Rhyme and Ritual*, which forms the subject of this paper, is the latest in a series of attempts to raise the literacy achievement of these young children, that is, those aged five to eight. We believe that if the children are enthusiastic, competent readers and writers at the age of eight, then the prognosis for their later attainment in literacy is very good. The first initiative we piloted was therefore a sustained and highly structured programme of phoneme-to-grapheme daily activities, named *Code-Breakers*. This has proved exceedingly successful in helping children to spell – as shown by progress in terms of mean score on a phonic skills test, from 44% in October 2000 to 72% in July 2001.

But so far this programme has appeared to have less effect on the content of children’s writing or their broader reading skills. The tests have also indicated greater improvement in encoding than decoding skills. Similarly, the percentages of seven-year-olds achieving the desired SAT levels increased significantly between 2000 and 2001 in terms of spelling and writing (from 50% to 66% in spelling and from 67% to 71% in writing) while remaining static (at 69%) in reading over the same period. In two of the project schools, the cohort taking the Key Stage 1 SATs (at seven years of age) was the first to have experienced three years of the *Code-Breaker* materials. These schools have shown the greatest improvement in spelling.

So *Code-Breakers* has been acclaimed as a great success, and is now being disseminated in many different areas of the country. Over 80 schools across England are taking part in a national pilot of *Code-Breakers*. This will result in a databank of the assessment results of approximately 1300 children, with regional variations in dialect and accent, different socio-economic backgrounds and varying school systems.

However, in view of the patchy nature of these improved scores, we were anxious to develop a companion programme, which would improve children’s attainments across a wider field of literacy.

## Theoretical framework

### *Acquisition of language*

Infants inhabit a largely oral world. Stating this does not fail to acknowledge that they are surrounded by all

manner of visual images, and exposed to a wide variety of texts. It is, however, to emphasise the extent to which meaning is conveyed to the child through spoken and gestural language. Children learn to speak by being treated as conversational partners from birth onwards, and we know that it is precisely because parents and carers do this – they accord the child both a place from which to speak and a space to speak into – that children (and not chimpanzees or apes) become indeed ‘language animals’ (Steiner, 1988). At an astonishingly young age, children learn to use talk to ‘prod’ the world to achieve their own ends. ‘Bic-bic’ may mean that they are given a biscuit, and the ‘bye-bye’ wave secures hugs and kisses from granny or mummy. Their lives are bounded and ordered through talk; the world is quite literally made ‘sensible’ through the commentary of others, and, eventually, through their own speech.

We also know that children learn to speak at least partly through participating in ritualised routines, where performance rather than comprehension is what counts (Bruner, 1983; Halliday, 1975). Thus, very young children participate in routines, such as waving good-bye or peek-a-boo.

*“Mothers respond to any kind of sound or facial expression as if it were a conversational remark . . . the mother’s contribution to these ritualistic interactions provides the child with the opportunity to learn about the structure of conversation . . . Although Piaget would have rejected the view that children as young as three months could participate in a social interaction, Halliday (1975) has argued that the child’s earliest proto-language utterances are primarily interpersonal.”* (Romaine, 1984, p. 160)

Children then must be seen as active meaning makers (Wells, 1986), who at a very young age are capable of using language in a manner one would be hard put to describe as ‘egocentric’. An exchange quoted in Romaine’s work – ‘Mother: I’m cold. Child: I already shut the window’ – demonstrates how subtly the child can ‘see’ the implied directive of another person, and Romaine also cites a four-year-old getting herself invited to dinner by observing that her mother worried if she missed meals, and remarking, ‘You know, I eat almost anything’. Certainly, by the time children come to nursery they are able to use speech in ways that are both subtle and powerful. They are able to moderate their language to address particular people, e.g. using a demand for a parent or younger sibling (‘Gimme a drink!’) but an indirect request for another adult (‘I’m thirsty’). They can interpret the social meaning of various kinds of directives, and are well able to participate in many domestic routines and other social interactions.

In teaching children to read and write, we decided that it was of huge importance that we read seriously the

work on language acquisition, and took pains to start from this. Thus, the first step into literacy for young children is not necessarily from the visible or concrete to the invisible or abstract. It is from the meaningful to the strange, from the known and patterned to the unknown and, as yet, disordered. In this instance, as we have stressed, it is spoken language that is meaningful and known. It is the written texts that are strange and hence mysterious. We start with what the child already knows and understands, with what is familiar – namely spoken language. Careful thought reveals a crucial implication. The sequences of sound between pauses that characterise speech are not words but syllables, phrases, strophes. It is to these measures of speech alone that the young child is accustomed. They have no sense of ‘words’, still less of grammatical boundaries, such as sentences. The nuggets of sound that make up the talk they hear and generate are conceived as units of meaning, not as grammatical elements. The contours of speech are audible, but the phonemes are not individually perceived. The divisions of written text into letters and words, sentences and paragraphs are as foreign to the speaking child as they were to the cultures of pre-history (Illich and Sanders, 1976).

### *Two ways of teaching reading*

*Rhyme and Ritual* is predicated upon this implication – namely that it is the *sounds* of speech that are familiar and meaningful, written *words* that are strange and difficult. Fundamentally, there are two modes in which to approach the teaching of reading. The mode currently widely accepted (*Mode A*) involves facing a child with a text that they do not know. We then help them to derive the meaning of the text. We support their attempts to work out what it ‘says’. The child is, in this scenario, trying to ‘decode’ the text. Concomitantly, they are introduced to the notions of a word, a sentence and a letter. Children are encouraged by their adult helpers to use as many ‘attack’ strategies as possible to support the decoding process. They can look at the pictures, they can re-read the previous words or sentences, they can be encouraged to look at the individual letters, or to fish in their memory for a previous occasion when they met this word. In summary, children are facing an unknown text and attempting to discover its meaning, what it ‘says’. The process is one of decoding.

By contrast, an older and more traditional mode of teaching reading (*Mode B*) would have presented the child with a known and very familiar text. They approach the text knowing very well *what* it says – what they have to work out is *how* it says it. The children have to *discover the code*. We then help them to ‘map’ what they already know and can say – the audible contours – onto the written text – the grammatical entities, words and sentences. Thus, in previous eras, or in different cultures, reading was

taught by presenting children with prayers, verses from the bible or Q'ran, or other religious texts, which they already knew off by heart,

*"The interiorising force of the oral word relates in a special way to the sacral, to the ultimate concerns of existence. In most religions the spoken word functions integrally in ceremonial and devotional life" (Ong, 1982, p. 74).*

The children could 'read' what the text said, but were engaged in working out which set of written symbols matched which 'nugget' of sound. In this context, children are determining the code; they already know the meaning.

These two modes appear, at first sight, as contraries. In *Mode A*, children do not know what the text 'says'. They have to 'decode' it to discover the meaning. In *Mode B*, children know what the text says, but they have to work out the code. In this case there is an important sense in which the children 'encode' the spoken words, the sounds they can already say. The differences are summarised in Table 1.

However, God made the spectrum and man makes the pigeon holes, as they say. All distinctions creak, and this one is no exception. Although the two modes are very different in orientation, they are not as far apart in practice as this would suggest. Parents and children, by their own preferred activities, often transmute *Mode A* into *Mode B*. Parents read and re-read favourite books. Children often know these off by heart. They 're-read' them for themselves, pointing at the written text as they 'recite' the oral text. Helping children to match spoken sound to written word is one of the ways in which teachers – and parents – routinely support children's early efforts in reading. So although most children are no longer growing up embedded in a culture of memorised prayers or verses, which they then 'read' in written form, nevertheless many do come to school with a small stock of favourite books, which they have learned by heart and can 'read' for themselves.

Table 1: A comparison between known and unknown text

Mode A unknown text	Mode B familiar text
Children have to use clues to discover the meaning of the text.	Children have to map what they already can say onto the strings of written symbols.
Written language is being translated into spoken.	Spoken language is being encoded into written language.
Children decode the written symbols to discover their meaning.	Children encode the sounds to discover the code.
Adult support is needed to help children draw upon pictures, context, sentence structure, genre and antecedent reading to make sense of the text.	Adult support is required in helping children to map the contours of spoken language onto the grammatical divisions of written language.
Children start with something visible and physical – the line of written text.	Children start with what they already know – spoken language, sounds that make sense.

## Outline of the project

The *Rhyme and Ritual* project comprises rather special packs (outlined below) which children in Reception (aged 4 to 5 years) and Year 1 (aged 5 to 6) were given to take home. Altogether, 727 children took home a pack. Each pack of materials contains a specially commissioned, original, picturebook story, two 'snazzy books' and a story tape. These are all created around a particular theme, for example 'bedtime'. The tape allows the child to listen to an oral story, written within the oral story-telling tradition (Ong, 1982, p. 35), and designed to be read aloud. The tape does have some sound effects but, in general, it is the elaborated language of the oral story that creates the required effects – humour or excitement, and so on – and sustains the narrative. The picturebook provides a different story on the same theme, using highly visual means to convey the text. The 'snazzy books' are small 'text-only' books, with a short line of text on each page, enclosed in a brightly coloured, re-closable 'snazzy bag' made of a metallic shiny paper.

It may help to describe one pack in detail (see Figure 2 for details of two others). *Bold The Bad* is the story of a "prowling, growling, yowling cat", who likes nothing more than to eat food left in the kitchen and to slink along the street, growling at passing dogs. One day, Bold falls down a large hole and is rushed to the vet's. Luckily, Bold is very much alive and wakes up in a box

Bold the bad, Bold the beast, Bold the cat Who loves a feast. Wild as a warrior, noisy and rude, Bold is the cat who yowls for his food.	My favourite T-shirt is: My rainbow coloured shirt. My favourite T-shirt is: My Manchester United shirt. My favourite T-shirt is: My whooshing rocket shirt.
Bold the bad, Bold the beast, Bold the cat Who loves a feast. Wild as a warrior, noisy and rude Bold is the cat who whispers for his food	My favourite T-shirt is: My roaring dinosaur shirt. My favourite T-shirt is: My fant astic fireworks shirt. My favourite T-shirt is: My leaping dolphin shirt. My favourite T-shirt is: My glow-in-the-dark shirt.

Figure 1: Text of two snazzy books

**Douglas**

The pack contains a picturebook, *Douglas*, which tells of how Douglas hates getting out of bed. His Mum and Dad call him and his baby sister yells. One morning, the sound of his Dad washing his face becomes a wild sea on which his bed is tossed, his Mum's hairdryer becomes a windy sky that blows him to a desert shore, where his pet dog becomes a hungry hyena, his baby sister becomes a screeching parrot, and when his bed finally lands back at home, Douglas is more than happy to get out of bed!

The snazzy books feature rhymes *I hate mornings!* and *Sleepy head*. These are read on the tape, which also features an oral story *Florrie*, the tale of a girl who cannot stop day-dreaming.

**Buddy Gets A Fright**

A picturebook about a dog that thinks he's a cat until, one day, he looks into a mirror and is shocked by the figure staring back at him! The CD contains an oral story *Dog Planet*, the tale of a boy whose love for animals means he is chosen by the citizens of Dog Planet to care for a very important puppy.

Snazzy books contain the traditional rhyme *Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat* and an original text *I Really Want to Be a Cat*.

Figure 2: An outline of two Rhyme & Ritual homepacks

by the fire at home. He begins to prowls around the house, spies the leftovers of dinners, opens his mouth to yowl . . . and no sound comes out! Bold's yowling and growling become a whispered miaow! Together with the picturebook that tells this story, the pack contains two snazzy books, *Bold the Thief!* which tells the story of Bold stealing ice-cream and coming to a sticky conclusion, and *Bold the Bad*, quoted above, and a tape. On one side of the tape, the picture book and snazzy books are recorded. On the other side is an oral story, an extended, elaborated version of the tale in the picture book.

## Theoretical implications of the resources

The resources attempt to address both the ritual aspects of 'reading' a text that is already known and the acquisition of a 'literary bank' of familiar and memorised texts. Each home pack fulfils this dual function through its two distinct parts.

### Ritual

It is not only the repetitive but also the ritualised aspects of both the oral tales and the rhymes that underpin the *Rhyme and Ritual* initiative. Oral stories draw upon ritualised formats in attracting and holding the listener's attention,

*"Fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions . . . can be found occasionally in print . . . but in oral cultures they are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself"* (Ong, 1982, p. 35).

Rhymes, songs, and traditional tales provide the most obvious examples of small family rituals that enable not only memorising but learning. Young children predominantly do not understand the 'meaning' of the

nursery rhyme, nor could they paraphrase it. But this is, rigorously speaking, irrelevant to their purpose. To start with, the parent (or older sibling) sings the rhyme, and the infant's participation is restricted to movement and possibly some, almost inchoate, sounds. However, remarkably quickly the child takes on parts of the rhyme, and interjects a crucial word, often at the end of a phrase or verse. Thus, such rituals provide not just 'what' the child is to say but also the 'place' from which to say it. In sharing in these rehearsals of age-old nursery rhymes and stories, the child is an active participant in a literary event. *Sure Start*, *PEEP*<sup>1</sup> and many other initiatives across the UK and in other countries (for example the Toronto Parent-Child *Mother Goose Project*), testify to the now recognised importance of such literary events in the home. The repetitive function of the ritual is apparent – young children will want these rhymes repeated again and again, and will learn them so as to be able to repeat the 'best bits', a particular word or phrase that the child finds pleasing, for themselves.

It has been noted that the presence of a television in every home, combined with the pervasive effects of computers and video games, has led to a reduction in the use of rhymes, songs and fairy tales between parent and child. Obviously the extent of the demise of this type of ritualised activity in the home is an empirical question. However, these practices are of cardinal importance in young children's learning. It is not only the content that is lost if parents cease to draw upon literary rituals in accomplishing the day's tasks, such as putting toddlers to bed or dressing them. The rhymes, songs and stories then come to form a part of that great bank of active words and phrases, available, consciously or not, to the child in the struggle to find the words to express what she means, or to communicate with others. It is these sounds and symbols, the rhymes and alliterations, the distinctive phrases and traditional patterns, that make up the raw material of the infant's first literary endeavours (Ong, 1982, p. 137). Certainly, without a bank of previously memorised and familiar texts, we have no hope of approaching reading in both the ways outlined above.

### The picture book and oral stories

We know that stories provide children with images, plots, characters, lines of speech, ways of talking and being, which their everyday lives would never have supplied. They are psychologically useful, helping children 'deal' with things and events in their own lives. Following Bettelheim (1975), Fox (1993) describes how children hear their favourite stories as metaphors for their own concerns, their own emotions and their own lives. For a young child, the story tells of something, often in a disguised form, that she knows from her own experience. And in their tellings and retellings of stories, children do not so much 'borrow' from the stories they have heard, and know and love,

they 'transform' the text, the events and the vocabulary. Fox argues that this reliance on stories to provide metaphorical explanations for what happens to and around children explains why many children like to have stories repeated or re-read, without a word being altered.

Re-citing then, is crucial. We know that children like, and need, repetition. The stories they are familiar with become a part of themselves. Phrases turn up in their speech, images in their drawings. Both the picturebook stories and the oral stories fulfil these roles, but the oral story also enables children to acquire a stock of evocative phrases and powerful descriptions, which then turn up in their own speaking and, later, in their writing.

### *Snazzy books*

We described two modes in teaching reading. *Rhyme and Ritual* is predicated upon *Mode B*, and is operationalised through the use of the 'snazzy books'. These consist of rhymes, sometimes traditional or nursery rhymes, and sometimes specially commissioned humorous or exciting verses, presented in a small A6 book-format, with no illustrations. Each page contains a short line of text. The children are introduced to, and memorise, these rhymes, learning them by heart in nursery or at home. By the time they are given their 'pack' of materials, they are well able to recite the rhymes. They then approach the 'snazzy books', with their bright zippy bags and slightly futuristic feel-factor, already knowing what the text says. The children are then able to 'read' the text, mapping the familiar spoken words onto the written grammatical entities on the page. Meek writes of such a repeated reading of *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins, 1969) with Ben, a young 'slow reader', "By the end of the afternoon he could tell the story and nearly match the words, so we said he could read it by himself" (Meek, 1988, p. 11). The absence of illustrations in the 'snazzy books' has the advantage of making the books feel 'grown-up', so that children are the more proud to demonstrate that they can 'read' them. Parental or teacher support consists in helping the child to identify each written word as they speak it.

This approach should not be confused with the reading scheme idea of controlled or limited vocabulary. Rather, the 'text only' books give a memorable poem or short tale which elaborates the themes of the picture books. So, for example, one of the text-only books with the *Spider* pack delights in a 'revolting, repugnant and utterly horrible' range of animals and ends with a positive, "but sometimes . . . I don't feel afraid at all!". Traditional rhymes are used in a similar way, for example *I saw a ship a-sailing* is featured in one of the text-only books used with a pack about the sea. The point here is that children actively wish to learn these rhymes by heart.

### **Impact of the project – some anecdotal evidence**

Throughout the project, issues of ownership have emerged as hugely important. Parents have commented on how their children thought of the homepacks as special, keeping the shiny wrapping of the snazzy books, and packing everything away after using them. Children too seemed proud of their 'ownership' of the texts – that is the fact that they knew the snazzy books off by heart and that they could 'read' the picture books. The children were keen to show the extent to which they knew the texts. "Bold likes hot chocolate", said one Year 1 boy. Asked if he could point to the part in the book that told us this, he did so. "The tape's wrong though", said another child, "It says Bold likes chocolate and he doesn't. He likes *hot* chocolate". He was perfectly right.

In the schools where the homepacks were used, teachers estimate that only 10% of the children have a story read to them regularly at home, and that more than half never have a bedtime story. Set in this context, the provision of taped oral stories becomes crucial to the success of the approach to reading. A parent questionnaire showed that 90% of the children listened to their tape at home. The enjoyment of the oral stories which, for many children, became their story at bedtime, or a story to listen to in the car, was evident in the responses of the children themselves.

"I liked the *Spider* story best because it had a happy ending", one boy told us. "That's the whole point of stories; some have happy endings and some have sad". A few children said they particularly liked the taped oral stories because they could listen to them when it was quiet; "I like to listen [to the tape] in the morning before everyone gets up and it's noisy", said one girl. Some form of identification with the story (for example *Spider* and being afraid of spiders, or *Bold the Bad* and liking cats) was a common reason for particularly enjoying a pack.

Teachers and parents were impressed by the ability of the children to memorise rhymes and, sometimes difficult, vocabulary. Parents with children who were struggling with reading also commented that the tapes had enabled them to feel some confidence in working by themselves. One school commented that, with entry profiles showing that their children lacked imaginative language, the ability of children to learn rhymes and to become increasingly good at doing so is an extremely positive result of the homepacks.

The implications for an increased literary bank are obvious. Before the *Rhyme and Ritual* project, one teacher commented that *Code-Breakers* had helped children to learn to write, but that their writing had no content. Another piece of anecdotal evidence makes explicit the effect of *Rhyme and Ritual*. A teacher played the tape of the oral story, *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, as

her Year 3 class drew and coloured in. The next day, the story was pinned up as the teacher retold it, so that the children could follow the original text if they wished to. In a class discussion, they talked about what the ant might say to the grasshopper were it nicer and, as a follow-on, did a piece of writing looking at what the ant might say to a friend on the phone and, depending on whether the friend was nice or nasty, what the response might be. One child wrote that the grasshopper sang "from dawn until dusk" – a phrase used on the tape, on the poster and in the teacher's re-telling. The child did not know what 'dusk' meant, and wasn't sure of 'dawn', but she thought it probably meant 'evening'. Another child, having had a homepack about a boy who was afraid of spiders, where the spiders are described as 'revolting and repugnant' told his teacher that another word for frightening was 'repugnant'. Of course the differences had to be explained, but it was encouraging that the child was picking up on the word in the context of the book he had read and was comfortable in using a word which some of the parents we spoke to had difficulty in saying.

The building up of a literacy bank, memorised and to be used in creative and imaginative writing, is matched by an approach to reading described earlier as *Mode B*. The children know already what the snazzy books say, having listened to them being read on tape. They were able to approach the book and map the spoken text to the written. The use of this technique together with the emphasis on language enrichment meant that children we spoke to were happy to recite the rhymes and stories they had memorised, elaborating their recollections with 'the best bits', the pattern of words or the adjective they had particularly enjoyed. Having 'read' through the *Spider* snazzy book, for example, one Y1 child told us that this was one of his favourite packs, "because the boy isn't just frightened, he's terrified of spiders".

### In conclusion...

*Rhyme and Ritual* is an unorthodox project. Its main purpose is unashamedly the improvement in educational attainment. It is not modelled on a research-

driven structure, with control groups and pre- and post-testing, and so on. However, we do believe that we can gain some useful empirical data. We are watching for a measurable effect on the imaginative writing part of the SATS and also on reading. In terms of reading skills we would hope for a measurable effect in Year 1. Our motivation for the project is driven by the prospect of finding new and helpful theoretical frameworks within which the teaching of reading and the acquisition of literary knowledge and understanding can be described.

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### Children's Books

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1. In its use of nursery rhymes and traditional tales, the *Rhyme and Ritual* project, for many children we work with, builds on the work of *PEEP*, an early learning intervention, based in Oxford. For further information about the work of *PEEP*, see [www.peep.org.uk](http://www.peep.org.uk).

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