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What counts as reading? PIRLS, EastEnders and The Man on the Flying Trapeze

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Abstract

After briefly reviewing how reading is conceptualised in the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) and the English National Curriculum, this article examines two unofficial reading activities in a class of 10-11 year-olds, to see how far these activities match up with the official definitions of reading, or whether they involve a different kind of interaction with text. While the children's unofficial reading appears trivial, fleeting and fragmentary, analysis shows that they are applying, albeit it in a rudimentary way, the comprehension skills of retrieval, inference, interpretation and evaluation promoted by PIRLS and the National Curriculum. These skills, however, are driven by children's emotional, critical and creative responses to the texts. The children's reading is more imaginative and dialogic than is possible within official curriculum activities; they interweave emotional and moral response with argument and critique in one example and respond humorously to poetic rhyme, rhythm and tone in another. These spontaneous reading activities, where children are active, animated and engaged, provide evidence of important dimensions of literacy which are not adequately addressed in official surveys and curriculum assessment.

1. Introduction

In this article I suggest that examining what pupils do spontaneously with texts in undirected talk can reveal important aspects of reading that have somehow got lost in the face of highly specified assessment procedures and the pressures of accountability. I argue for an expanded conception of reading, in contrast to the more narrow focus on textual comprehension processes in official surveys and assessment, despite their rhetorical acknowledgement of literacy's broader dimensions. I focus on two reading activities which took place, unofficially, in a class of 10-11 year-olds in a multi-ethnic, working-class school in southern England. The first is an intermittent conversation between children about an episode of the British television soap opera *EastEnders*, and the second a sequence of sub-rosa language play around a poem introduced by the teacher. While both of these activities involve engagement with fictional texts, neither appear at first sight to resemble literacy in the English National Curriculum and they would probably not be picked up by the five-yearly large-scale survey of 10 year-olds' reading *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)*. Indeed, I doubt whether the extracts I discuss below would be seen as involving literacy skills by the pupils themselves, who tended to link reading with books and school tests. Yet I want to argue that these unofficial activities *do* count as reading, and that they share some features with what is currently defined as literacy in school. Furthermore, these activities illustrate important emotional, critical and creative dimensions of literacy which are not adequately addressed at the moment by national assessment or standard surveys.

Official literacy

So firstly, how is reading officially defined for 10-11 year-olds? In this section I briefly consider two prestigious and powerful current reference points in England: the PIRLS

International Study which regularly investigates 10 year-olds' reading behaviour, achievement and attitudes in over fifty education systems around the world, and the English National Curriculum. In both cases, while broader dimensions of reading are acknowledged, assessment focuses more or less exclusively on textual comprehension processes.

PIRLS describes reading literacy as 'the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Young readers can construct meaning from a variety of texts. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment' (Mullis et al, 2009, p.11). This view of reading, the survey authors state, reflects theories of literacy as a constructive, interactive process, and acknowledges that children gain enjoyment and information from many different kinds of texts including books, magazines, the internet, and text integrated with video and television media (Mullis et al 2009, pp.11-12). The survey itself involves, firstly, a paper-based individual comprehension exercise which focuses on two main reading purposes, reading for literary experience and reading to acquire and use information. Reading for literary experience involves children becoming engaged in imaginary characters, events, consequences and feelings, enjoying the author's use of language and bringing their own experiences, feelings and knowledge of literary form to the text. In relation to both these purposes, the test addresses four processes of reading comprehension where children:

a. Focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information
b. Make straightforward inferences
c. Interpret and integrate ideas and information
d. Examine and evaluate content, language and textual elements

 (Mullis et al, 2009).

Secondly, questionnaires for pupils, their parents and teachers, gather information on children's wider experience of literacy, asking, for instance, how often students read for enjoyment out of school and play online and video games, the number of books in their home and whether parents had told them stories before they started school. A statistical analysis of the questionnaire data is subsequently carried out, relating the questionnaire responses to pupils' reading achievement in the written test (Trong and Kennedy, 2007).

The PIRLS test thus provides information about 10 year-old children's individual comprehension strategies and the questionnaires undoubtedly produce a considerable amount of data about the role of literacy in pupils' lives. Bringing these two sources of information together, however, still does not provide a complete picture of pupils' reading behaviour. Apart from the problems of self-report data, which include in this case inconsistencies between children's and adults' reports of reading activities (Twist et al., 2007, p.76), neither the test nor the questionnaires provide insights into the constructive, interactive dimensions of children's reading. These dimensions are features which PIRLS acknowledges are a fundamental part of literacy, in other words what readers *actually do* with texts in the context of social life, whether at home or in school. For instance, parents may say they told stories to their pre-school children but we don't know *how* they did this, yet this is highly significant for children's initial literacy and their later achievement in school (Heath, 1983). What is

missing from the PIRLS data, then, necessarily because of its scope and structuring, are insights into the actual living detail of children's literacy activities, as they interact with others around texts to construct meaning. In addition, while PIRLS acknowledges that children read diverse texts in different media, assessment focuses on pen and paper written comprehension exercises and little attention is paid to links or synergies between their different kinds of reading.

Like PIRLS, the English National Curriculum acknowledges broader aspects of literacy, for instance recent policy documents suggest that more creative responses to text should be encouraged so that pupils 'evaluate ideas and themes that broaden perspectives and extend thinking', 'express preferences and support their views by reference to texts' and 'respond imaginatively, drawing on the whole text and other reading' (DfE, 2011). However, there is also careful attention to the development of pupils' vocabulary, their ability to draw inferences from text, make predictions, recall, summarise and discuss authors' use of language and purposes. This kind of individual close reading comprehension and linguistic description is reflected in the national Key Stage Two Standard Achievement Tests (SATs), which dominated the classrooms I observed. Lessons were filled with practice on former examination papers, feedback to pupils about their performance and children's comparison of each other's grades. The SATs focus strongly on information retrieval, inference and interpretation (Kispal, 2005) and teachers taught children to describe texts through a linguistic lens of grammatical and literary terminology, with the frequent use of meta-language such as 'level 5 sentence opener' or 'metaphor'.

In practice, in the context of the competitive high stakes SATs assessment which currently dominate the lives of English 10-11 year-olds (Hall and Ozerk, 2010), teachers and pupils may have little opportunity to move beyond the attention to textual features demanded by the tests, and more imaginative and wide ranging responses to texts remain unexplored. Indeed, critics have argued that the English National Curriculum silences children's voices, restricts their creativity and does not allow enough time to stimulate their imagination (Hilton, 2006; Burke 2011). It has also been suggested that the SATs attempt to judge complex phenomena via surface features (Burke, 2011), and that literature is reduced to a resource for teaching the linguistic and textual features of written genres (Cremin et al, 2008). As Alexander (2008) puts it, quality is translated into quantity, in this case countable language features, for the purposes of assessment.

Researching literacy practices in school

My research interest is in what PIRLS and English national assessment systems leave out, that is, the living detail of how meanings are constructed through interactions between children around texts of various kinds. In theoretical terms I start from an understanding of literacy as social practice (Street, 1984, 2009), the conceptualisation of learning as mediated through dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978) and the interpretation of children's interactions with texts, and with others, as dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984). While there are good reasons for keeping written symbolic representation central to definitions of literacy across different media (Merchant, 2007), it has long been established that children are also active readers of

television, constructing their own meanings around depicted characters and events and finding pleasure in critique (Buckingham, 1987; Robinson 1995). While recent research emphasises the importance of young people's participatory online literacies (Williams, 2009), the 10-11 year-olds I recorded were just on the cusp of entry into online worlds and still talked extensively about television and films. I shall argue below that there are strong connections between the children's discussion of the television soap opera episode and their unofficial responses to the poem, and that both these involve important dimensions of literacy which are underplayed in official activities.

In the rest of this article, I draw on a linguistic ethnographic study of 10-11 year-olds' uses of language and literacy in school which focussed on on-going talk and interactions among the children themselves. This study was carried out in two Year 6 classes in a multi-ethnic, working-class school in southern England, where over a two week period in 2009, I collected data using a lapel mic attached to a small voice recorder carried in a belt pouch by a number of pupils in turn. A second recorder was moved around the classroom to collect additional recordings. During the recordings I sat at the back of the classroom, observed from the edges of the playground at break and lunchtime and chatted with those children who approached me. I returned two months later to interview the children about issues that had emerged from the tapes and from my previous observations.

Permissions were obtained from the school, parents and children and renegotiated with students at a number of points throughout the research to ensure on-going informed consent (Morrow, 2008). Data collected included fifty hours of continuous recordings of children's spoken language across the school day, twenty hours of recorded interviews, field notes, texts and photographs. In contrast to more quantitative approaches, I rely on the in-depth examination of particular examples of interaction to argue for a more expanded conception of reading. While these examples reflect patterns I observed across the data, they also provide 'telling' cases of particular theoretical points (Mitchell, 1984, p.239).

'I felt like crying': emotion and judgement

In contrast to the virtual absence of any discussion whatsoever about books read for pleasure outside school across the fifty hours of children's recorded on-going talk, children made frequent references to texts from television, films and popular music, which were often re-enacted and discussed. The first example of unofficial literacy below is taken from discussion among children which continued intermittently, over a school morning, about an episode from the British television soap opera *EastEnders* which many of them had viewed the previous evening. This episode provided the climax to a story line about a teenager, Danielle, who was adopted as a baby and returned to seek her birth mother, Ronnie. Ronnie's father, Archie, had always maintained that the baby had died and so Ronnie initially refuses to believe that Danielle is her daughter. In a cliff-hanger moment Ronnie realises the truth and calls to Danielle who, despairing that her mother will ever believe her, is rushing off down the street. Danielle hears her mother, turns and runs towards her, failing to notice a fast approaching car (driven by another character, Janine) with which she collides. The episode

concludes with Danielle apparently dying in her mother Ronnie's arms, surrounded by horrified neighbours including Ronnie's sister Roxy.

In Extract 1, below, the children focus on this climactic death scene. Mel, who is wearing the lapel mic, had referred to the episode earlier to a friend, when both girls talked about how it had made them cry. Mel now brings it up again in a more general conversation across the class. Three interrelated themes are recycled across the interaction: children's emotional reactions to the fictional event, their judgements of characters and an argument about whether Danielle is actually dead. Children's revoicing of the characters, which I discuss later below, is underlined in the transcript.

Extract 1 (see transcription conventions at the end of the article; names are changed to preserve anonymity)

120	Mel	who watched East Enders last night?
121	Ps	me, me
122	Mel	oh my God, I felt like crying
123	P	I know (xxx)
124	Mel	Exactly
125	P	and my sister and my mum cried=
126	Mel	=I actually I actually felt like crying?
127	P	my mum and sister were crying and (xxx)
128	Mel	*(plaintive voice)* <u>'I'm your baby, aby'</u>, and then Ronnie's there and she's like turned her back on her and she's like <u>'baby?'</u> She's like <u>'baby?'</u> and then, I wish I just could <u>freeze</u> it when Janine was that close and then push her out of the way and then pu- play it=
129	P	=well what did you [expect
130	Mel	[I know but that is so cruel for them to do that=
131	P	=(…) I recorded it and I've got to watch it (.) I'm going to watch it today (xxx)
132	Mel	how could you not watch the wedding?
134	P	I was out, it wasn't my fault=
135	P	=I wish Archie wasn't in it any more, I hate Archie
136	P	Exactly
137	Mel	he's evil, Danielle would still be alive if it weren't for him
138	P	do you think she's do you think she's going to survive? That's what Ann said
139	P	she ain't, she's dead you idiot
		(…) sounds of pupils arguing about whether Danielle is dead or not, and a pupil humming the opening of the signature tune 'de de de'which Mel picks up:
149	Mel	dum dum de de de de no she's like *(exasperated)* <u>'don't just stand there'</u> and then she sits there going <u>'A ha ha'</u> *(horrified gasps)*
150	P	(… Janine …) and they're all crying (…)
151	P	she could still be alive
152	Mel	and then she goes <u>'My ba::by'</u> and then it goes <u>dum dum de de de de</u> *(signature tune)*
153	P	I think she's going to survive though
154	P	I think she might
155	P	Why would she shout like *(exaggerated high voice)* <u>"she's dead!"</u>
156	Mel	Maybe she's unconscious
157	P	Exactly

158	Mel	She might be
159	P	Maybe she's *unconscious*
160	Mel	I'm just trying to find a happy *(turns to the picture she is drawing)* he he d'you want to see? d'you want to see? HE HE HE
161	P	(xxx) then you've got to write GA or something on the top
162	Mel	HE HE HE sorry he he he I'm just going to write Newforest *(name of school)*
163	P	I hate Archie
164	Mel	Danielle would still be alive if it weren't for him. I wish I could pause it
165	P	She might not be dead
166	Mel	I know that's what I said to them, I said she could be unconscious. I wish, when Janine was that close, I pulled the TV, jump into the TV, push Danielle away, come back in and play it. Don't you wish that was so sad, though. *Ma mia* (high voice) <u>'you're my mother'</u>. Why is Archie such an idiot?
		(…) *Talk about a netball match and how many goals individuals scored, then back to the argument about whether Danielle has died*
203	Mel	She could be unconscious you never know
204	P	Exactly (xxx)
205	Mel	cause, because they did that in Hollyoaks once, they said she was dead and she was actually unconscious
		Argument continues

In contrast to the official teacher-led discussions of school texts which emphasised vocabulary, information retrieval and close comprehension, in the talk about EastEnders children's strong emotional responses lead into comments about characters' feelings, moral judgements of their actions and comments about the story line. For instance, Mel's emotional reconstruction of Danielle and Ronnie's dialogue in turn 128 is followed by a complaint about the producers in turn 130 'that is so cruel for them to do that' and when a child comments: 'I wish Archie wasn't in it any more, I hate Archie' (135), Mel responds 'he's evil, Danielle would still be alive if it weren't for him' (137). In the course of their emotional and critical responses, children also retrieve information, infer and interpret. For instance, they use evidence from the script to argue about how particular events should be interpreted, and they evaluate aspects of the plot, and the producers' decisions. Examples of children's comprehension processes, as stipulated in PIRLS and the National Curriculum, are provided in Table 1. This table also notes examples of emotional response, moral judgement and creative revoicing, which I discuss below.

Table 1 Reading comprehension processes in the EastEnders discussion

information retrieval	Why would she shout like *(exaggerated high voice)* "she's dead!" (155)
Inference	maybe she's unconscious (156)
Interpretation	Danielle would still be alive if it weren't for him (137, 164)
Prediction	She might not be dead (165) She could still be alive (151)
questions to extend understanding	Do you think she's going to survive (138)

	Why is Archie such an idiot? (166)
Critical comment on author decisions (and recognition of generic features)	That is so cruel for them to do that (130) Well what did you expect ? (129) Because they did that in *Hollyoaks*, once (205)
emotional response	I felt like crying (122); that is so cruel (130); I hate Archie (163)
critical moral judgement	He's evil (137)
creative revoicing	Turns 128, 149, 152, 166

Other researchers have also pointed out children's use of media to explore moral issues and dilemmas (Buckingham, 1987; Burn et al, 2011) and in their talk together Mel and her friends jointly mark particular kinds of actions as reprehensible ('he's evil') and share emotional reactions to family tragedy. They are also learning about the visual representations of affect and its construal in story-telling (cf Painter, 2003), and developing the 'social referencing' skills (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1989) used to monitor and understand other people's affective displays which are crucial to young children's social and cognitive development and continue to be important for older children's sociability, for instance in the development of friendship. As Buckingham (1987) also found in children's discussion of EastEnders, Mel and her friends move easily between treating the episode as a recognisable 'slice of life' containing emotional and moral dilemmas, and commenting critically on it as an artful text, created by the producers. Their comments about the construction of the storyline (continued in other conversations not discussed in this article) could be seen as the beginnings of critical media literacy.

In addition to highlighting the importance of emotional, critical and moral dimensions of reading, this extract illustrates the voicing techniques which are central to children's collaborative meaning-making (Maybin 2006, 2007). In turns 128, 149, 152 and 166, Mel recreates and embellishes fragments of the final dialogue between Ronnie and Danielle. There were actually only a few words in the original interaction, and none of these came from Danielle. In the broadcast episode Ronnie rushes out to the street calling 'Danielle, Danielle' then, as her daughter stops and turns, she whispers 'Baby'. When Danielle starts to run towards her into the path of the oncoming car Ronnie screams, then, as she kneels by her daughter's body sobs 'She's dead. She's dead'. Mel, however, gives Danielle a much more agentive role in initiating the recreated dialogue '"I'm your baby, aby" and then Ronnie's there and she's like turned her back on her and she's like "baby?" She's like "baby?"' (128) and in turn 166 Mel again voices Danielle: 'Ma mia *(high voice)* "you're my mother"'. Mel's reading thus involves an element of rewriting, a creative intervention (Pope, 2005) which foregrounds Danielle. Furthermore, Mel highlights the central idea of the Danielle/Ronnie storyline in turn 128 in her emphasis on the indexically rich term 'baby', with its double meaning as an endearment and also a reference to Danielle's original identity. 'Baby' resonates with the back story, completing a narrative circle through joining together the beginning of Danielle's life, when she was removed from Ronnie, with their final fleeting reunion seconds before Danielle's death.

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Ronnie's outburst at her sister Roxy "Don't just stand there !" (turn 149) is also a new addition to the original script, and Mel and Jess elaborate on this when they go into the girls' cloakroom fifteen minutes after the exchange recorded in Extract 1. Here, the friends produce a much more playful, parodic re-enactment of Ronnie's distress (turns 242-3) and her sister Roxy's horrified reaction, which Jess embellishes with high-pitched screams:

Extract 2

242	Mel	'don't just stand there' I need go toilet
243	Jess	'don't just stand there' go 'AH:' *(screams) he he*
244	Mel	*he he*
245	Jess	and then when she when she closes her eyes yea, Roxy goes over to her and she's like 'AH::::'
246	Mel	I *know [he he he*
247	Jess	['AH::::, AH:::'
248	Mel	'AH::' *he he he* go toilet *(sound of running) he he he* She's lying on the floor, *(to Jess)* pretend to be Roxy *he he*
249	Jess	'AH::::'
250	Mel	*He he he* I know, but that's how she really said. Why can't she be unconscious, they only just found out o::: I hate the bloody producers

While in Extract 1 the revoicings of Ronnie and Danielle enable children to feel their way inside the story, momentarily inhabiting the characters and vicariously experiencing their emotions, in the cloakroom the hyper-stylisation of the voices (Bakhtin 1984) and high hilarity tips the performance more strongly into parody, despite Mel's insistence on the accuracy of Jess's reproduction of Roxy's scream 'I know, but that's how she really said' (250). Mel is also prompted by the reconstruction to complain once more about the producers' decision to kill Danielle when she and her mother had 'only just found out' (250), illustrating again how re-enactment, appreciation and critique are interlaced within the children's talk (see also Buckingham, 1987, p.200).

I've suggested that the replaying of emotions and judgements of characters' actions and producer decisions, together with the argument about whether Danielle is dead, drive comprehension processes such as inference and interpretation, which are central to official conceptions of literacy in PIRLS and the National Curriculum. In addition, children reproduce and embellish textual voices and play with tone and meaning through parody,

suggesting a more constructive, creative kind of reading than the comprehension exercises required by the SATs. Rather than regurgitating the text, pupils respond to it, and each other, in a more dialogic, heteroglossic manner (Bakhtin, 1981).

Three ways to read a poem

The second, very brief, unofficial reading activity displays some similar patterns to the pupils' discussions of EastEnders above: children again reproduce and play with textual voices, they mix appreciation with parody and they respond dialogically and subversively to the tone of the text. In this case, however, children's creative interventions involve taking on and revoicing the poetic rhyme and rhythm, as well as responding to the poem's tone and mood.

In Extract 3 below, an unofficial literacy activity is interleaved within an official teaching activity centred around Jack Prelutsky's 'The man on the flying trapeze'. This is a highly rhythmic, rhyming poem which describes a trapeze artist's performance using plenty of alliteration ('dangerous dives', 'spectacular swoops') and a fair amount of humour. The tone is lighthearted, for instance 'As the audience roars for the king of trapezes/ he takes out his handkerchief, waves it . . . and sneezes'. Ms T. introduces the poem firmly within the context of the national assessment tests 'It could be that you get a poem to read in your SATs and you have to be able to understand that'. One pupil cuts in: 'And you have to read it and say why you like it'. Ms T., however, ignores this first suggested approach and, in order to prepare the children for the kinds of questions they will encounter in the SATs, presents a second kind of reading which focuses much more closely on the poet's language. She uses the poem as a vehicle for extending pupils' vocabulary and for teaching them about poetic devices. She says 'And the reason why I've chosen this is because it's going to help you with vocabulary as well.' As she reads the poem, she pauses 'there's quite interesting words in this'. After the reading she asks the pupils the spellings and meaning of words such as 'sporting', 'cavorting' and 'perilous', and tells them to write these down, with definitions. She moves on later to ask about the rhyming pattern, 'the formula for this poem- is it aabb or abab?' and for examples of a metaphor and simile.

The pupils clearly enjoy Ms T's performance of the poem, laughing at humorous lines and occasionally joining in. For instance, as Ms T ends the poem: 'He seems not to notice the perilous height/ as he stands on his left hand and waves with his right', some children chorus with her 'waves with his right'. Almost immediately, a pupil suggests an alternative ending 'It should be "he waves goodnight" and another pupil, Akeem, echoes this '"And he waves goodnight". That'd be good'. These comments introduce a third kind of reading, where the children don't discuss the meaning of words or label rhyming schemes or tropes, but respond to the poem by reproducing, reversioning and playing with particular lines. Significantly, in doing this, they take on the poet's humorous, playful tone. In the extract below, this third kind of reading is pursued by Mel and her friends in sub rosa talk among themselves while the teacher starts off the official follow-up writing activity. The friends' private sotto voce exchange is underlined in the transcript. After Mrs. T's introduction (turn 1) an interaction around borrowing a pen (turns 2-9) is omitted.

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Extract 3

1	Ms T	There's quite a lot of ambitious vocabulary here so what I'm going to ask you to do first of all, is we're going to just make a list of some of these words and just make sure that you know what they mean, put some meanings by them…
		right. The man on the flying trapeze. Take a new page
10	Ms T	Right, Jake
11	Mel	*(quietly)* the man on the flying trapeze
12	p	=ah go:d=
13	p	=fell and broke his knees. Ah, got one=
14	Mel	=the man on the flying=
15	p	=wait
16	Mel	trapeze / fell over and broke his (.) trapeze
17	Ms T	You need to bring a pen to em [(xxx)
18	Jess	[the man on the flying trapeze, fell off and broke his knees
19	p	Jess, they should have put 'and or then his left hand then waved good night'
20	Ms T	come on boys now
21	p	'The man on the trapeze' *he he*
22	Ms T	*(loudly)* right, okay. First word.
23	p	the man on the trapeze, finding he's made out of cheese *he he*
		[*he he he*
24	Ms T	['Sporting and capering high in the breeze' Why has he used that word 'sporting' Karen, what does it mean?

25	Karen	Er
26	Ms T	in that sense
27	Karen	Dunno

The alternative reading is initiated after Mel repeats the title of the poem in turn 11, 'The man on the flying trapeze', as she writes it on a fresh page in her exercise book. The children then play with various possible new follow-up lines, all suggesting various catastrophes. There is a particular dialogic sensitivity to rhyme, rhythm and ideas here as pupils respond to the poem's title (repeated by Mel in turn 11) and each other:

Table 2 Dialogic sensitivity

	Turn	*Dialogic links*
11 Mel	The mán on the flýing trapéze	repeats poem title
13	féll and bróke his knées	a pupil picks up on the poet's humorous tone and the rhyme, but doesn't quite echo the rhythm
16 Mel	fell óver and bróke his trapéze	Mel suggests 'trapeze' rather than 'knees' and adds 'over' so her line echoes the rhythm in the poem's title
18 Jess	fell óff and bróke his knées	Jess echoes the line in turn 13 but adds 'off' to rhythmically match the poem's title and turn 16

In contrast to the three feet in the title, the lines in the body of the original poem all include four feet, and in turn 19 a pupil suggests an alternative final line to the poem which attempts to scan with the original ending:

original final line: 'as he stánds on his léft hand and wáves with his ríght'

turn 19: 'and or thén his léft hand then wáved good níght'

The children's humorous suggestions for new lines thus display sensitivity to rhyme and to the metre of both the title and the poem itself, as well as to each other's previous turns. Rather than explaining the vocabulary or labelling the rhyme scheme, they collaboratively reproduce the musicality of the poet's language and his humorous tone, taking this a stage further into subversive comment as they replace the acrobat's virtuosity with farcical disaster.

So how might this unofficial collaborative reading, which is focussed on humorous dialogic revoicing rather than serious monologic explication (Bakhtin, 1981), meet the criteria of official classroom literacy? At first sight the playful parody seems very different from Ms T's use of the poem to teach linguistic and technical features of written genres, with her requests to label and explain rather than to engage and respond (Cremin et al, 2008). However, Mel

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and other pupils do in fact select and retrieve information, quoting and referencing the text of the poem and they address (and subvert) its central theme, that is, the humorous representation of the acrobat's skills. They interpret and play with the poet's technique and tone, reproducing fragments of the poem's structure and grammatical features. It could thus be argued that pupils are implicitly examining language and textual elements. These may be the buds of development rather than clearly identifiable competencies (Vygotsky, 1978), but there is evidence of a collaborative experiential enactment of poetic technique, as the children practise the kinds of parallelism which are fundamental to poetic uses of language, both in literature and more vernacular uses of language (Carter, 2004). Finally, it could be argued that their new suggestion for the ending of the final line 'waved good night', with its triple closure of the acrobat's act, the evening and the poem, provides a stronger conclusion than Prelutsky's original line 'as he stands on his left hand and waves with his right'. Overall, the children's creative interventions, and their orientation towards musical dimensions of language, appear to constitute a more poetic reading than the response required in their official curriculum activity.

Table 3: official versus unofficial readings of the poem

Official	*Unofficial*
vocabulary comprehension	new words and lines suggested, linking with the original
labelling of rhyming scheme	echoing of original rhyme in suggested new lines
identification of metaphor and simile	Suggested nonsense imagery e.g. 'finding he's made of cheese'
individual written response focussing on information retrieval	collaborative oral language play
monologic explanation	dialogic engagement
	echoing of metre in suggested new lines
	dialogic response to humorous tone with further subversion

Conclusion

In order to examine the living detail of children's on-going reading experience, I have provided details of literacy activities as they occurred on the ground and of children's unofficial, collaborative, interactional construction of meaning around two different kinds of fictional texts. The examples discussed above might seem like the very antithesis of school literacy, being spoken, fragmentary and fleeting rather than written, focussed and sustained. Readings are collaborative rather than individual and appear high on humour and emotion and low on cognitive engagement. Children's activity is off-task rather than curriculum-focussed and their interactions seem more like play than work. Yet, as I have argued, these

unofficial readings can also be seen to address official comprehension criteria in PIRLS and the National Curriculum of retrieval, inference, interpretation and evaluation. This is particularly evident in the children's use of revoicing, as they explicate, embellish and parody the original. Through revoicing, children tune in with the plot, characters and emotional intensity in the EastEnders episode and with the rhyme, rhythm and humorous tone of the poem. This engagement with imaginary characters and consequences in EastEnders and enjoyment of the poet's use of language in 'The man on the flying trapeze' are an important part of children's reading for literary experience (PIRLS). As they learn and practise poetic techniques and explore emotional and moral issues and judgements in relation to fictional scenes and characters, they might be seen to be on the verge of articulating 'personal and critical responses to poems, plays and novels, showing awareness of their thematic, structural and linguistic features', an activity specified for rather older students at Level 7 in the National Curriculum. Incidentally, this analysis challenges the contrast often drawn by literacy scholars between literacy in school (seen as educational and academic) and out of school (seen as informal and vernacular). This contrast breaks down in a close examination of children's diverse literacy activities in school, which reveal more hybrid practices.

Most significantly, these extracts show that comprehension techniques are not an end in themselves, as they sometimes appear to be in official activities, but are used by children in the context of an intense emotional, moral and humorous engagement with texts. This engagement drives their response, which includes a critical sensitivity to language and form, expressed especially through the revoicing. Also, in the unofficial activity children have opportunities to voice their own responses and views, interpretations are unresolved and reading becomes a kind of creative intervention and imaginative rewriting. Imagination, emotional and moral engagement, critique, humour and fun are all important aspects of these children's spontaneous responses to texts. Yet none of these dimensions of reading are easily reduced to testable items within the current assessment regime which dominates classrooms, nor are they captured in PIRLS test or questionnaires. Viewed through the lens of children's unofficial reading, official models of literacy for 10-11 year-olds appear emotionally and morally depleted, and run the risk of promulgating a reductive, impoverished form of reading which fails to match up to pupils' natural propensity and aptitude for collaborative, creative and rewarding readings of many different kinds of texts.

Acknowledgements

Appendix: Transcription conventions

Names have been changed. Some punctuation has been inserted to aid comprehension

= latching

[Overlap

Italics laughter in the voice

<u>so annoying</u> Emphasis

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ba::by   stretched sound

CAPS Louder than surrounding talk

 (.) Pause of under a second, otherwise length indicated in numbers of seconds eg (2)

Comments in italics and parentheses clarify prosodic or paralinguistic features eg *(exasperated), (signature tune)*

he he Laughter, number of tokens indicates extent

(xxxx) unable to transcribe

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