FORUM

Assessment of Primary Writing in 2016

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ABSTRACT This article demonstrates the distortions arising from attempts to impose a rigid set of criteria on teacher assessment. The use of surface features of syntax and punctuation to determine grades created a situation where children's writing became artificial and lacking in interest.

Of the fifteen criteria for judgement that a child is 'working at the expected standard', fourteen are pure Basic Skills (grammar, handwriting, spelling and punctuation). It would seem that the writing task was 'hijacked' to provide a further Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling test, rather than a fair measure of a child's creativity, originality, voice and style, and behaviour as a writer. Thus the assessment process became a tick-box exercise, with teachers playing 'spot the full stop and give it a tick'.

A very experienced writing consultant, English expert and former moderator – who has also conducted informal research into the process this year – recently mailed me to say:

> I fear the worst with the present process. I think back fondly to
> Natalie's 'Toad of Toad Hall' piece. That was a child behaving as a
> writer and a child with the confidence and ability to show her skills
> as a writer! Will the standards in the process produce writers like
> Natalie? I don't think so! Shame!

An excerpt from the piece of writing to which she is referring is illustrated below. The child has made a deliberate stylistic choice to print, despite her usual high standard of cursive script because, obviously, toads can't do cursive writing:

> 'I will surely perish in here, while this dark cloud of death hangs
> over me. Never have I realised how much I relished life on the
> riverbank. I miss the lush green fields, I miss the happy gurgle of the
> river, I miss the trips to your boat, I miss YOU, Mole and Badger,

but most of all I miss the open road. I can feel the humming engines echoing past me in the world from above. Poop, poop...'

Does this score the 'Secure' judgement on the Interim Teacher Assessment Framework (ITAF)? No! Is it brilliant writing from a gifted eleven-year-old? Yes! The only criterion that comes anywhere near recognising Natalie's ability is the first:

Bullet 1: Creating atmosphere, and integrating dialogue to convey character and advance action.

And everyone who understands assessment knows that this is not an assessment criterion. It is, in fact, three criteria. And why is there only acknowledgement if the characterisation and action are conveyed through dialogue? Natalie is perfectly capable of doing that, but deemed that this piece was not the forum for direct speech.

I have spent much time this summer in discussion with my colleague at Andrell Education, the senior consultant for the Big Writing initiative, as we have assessed a large quantity of new writing samples. We came to the conclusion that there were three possible motives for the ITAF criteria:

1. The authorities do not care about primary children becoming impassioned and talented writers – they just want them to be 'secondary ready' with perfect technical skills. Content, coherence and creativity are irrelevant.
2. The writing assessment is no longer an assessment of writing, it is a 'back-up' GPS test in case someone jeopardises the formal GPS test by accidentally publishing the answers!
3. The authorities have grown so fearful of the difficulties of assessing writing thoroughly and objectively that they only wish to assess those aspects of writing that work like most maths and science – right or wrong, tick or cross, and that is the Basic Skills.

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