



Value for Money?

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66 [2]

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Other Articles

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Eleanor von Schweinitz on series publishing.

Eleanor von Schweinitz, BfK's non-fiction editor, takes a hard look at an example of series publishing

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In an age of shrinking book budgets it is important that we make sure that the information books we buy are good value for money. Judgement needs to be especially sharp when tempted by attractive books which appear to match the requirements of the National Curriculum.

At first glance the four titles in a recently published series, 'Seasonal Weather', would seem to tie in perfectly with Attainment Target 9 of the science curriculum covering a wide range of topics from levels 2 to 7. Furthermore, the division into **Spring**, **Summer**, **Autumn** and **Winter** seems ready-made for series packaging. It is only on closer examination that the inherent problems start to emerge - problems that largely arise because these books are concerned with more than pure description, attempting to explain underlying processes and phenomena.

This may well prompt the prospective purchaser to ask whether all four books must be bought as a linked package. At £6.50 each the total bill will be a hefty £26. If only one or two titles are acquired will there be difficulties for children using one book in isolation? The same question has clearly occurred to the publishers but they have failed to face up to the inescapable fact that it just isn't possible to produce four such books without the uneconomic repetition of the same basic information and/or the arbitrary allocation of common topics to only one or two titles in the series.

Each of the four titles includes five or six pages which in effect give identical information covering basic background topics: the seasons in different latitudes, the significance of the tilt in the Earth's axis as it travels round the sun, air pressure and the major wind systems, cloud formation and precipitation. This common material is somewhat disguised because diagrams are redrawn and the information is slightly differently expressed or ordered - even glossary definitions of the same term change from volume to volume.

Now this might be justified if the same information was presented in such a different fashion that the child who has difficulty understanding one explanation could turn to another volume and find a quite different approach, but the differences are generally cosmetic as the following examples demonstrate.

'During the year, the Earth moves round the Sun. The Earth also spins on its axis. This axis, which passes through the North and South Poles, is not upright, but leans over at an angle of 23.5°. This tilt causes the seasons.' (**Winter Weather**)

'The Earth travels round the Sun, going round it once every year. The Earth also spins on its axis. This axis is not upright but leans over at an angle of 23.5° It is this tilt which causes the seasons.' (**Summer Weather**)

'As the Earth moves around the Sun, it spins like a top on its axis. This axis is not upright, but leans over at an angle of

23.5°. It is this tilt which causes the seasons.' (**Autumn Weather**)

'Every year the Earth moves round the Sun. The Earth spins on its axis which leans over at an angle of 23.5°. This tilt...' (**Spring Weather**)

Although the differences between these examples are more complex than such brief extracts can illustrate, a close comparison of many such passages leads to the conclusion that the deliberate reshaping of the same information invariably results in an unhelpful dilution and that a telling image or phrase used in one book would be equally illuminating in the books where it does not appear.

The same problems arise in the glossary where, for example, we find Equator variously defined: 'A line that encircles the Earth midway between the North and South Poles' (**Autumn** and **Winter**). 'A line completely encircling the Earth midway between the North and South Poles' (**Summer**). 'An imaginary line encircling the Earth midway between the North and South Poles' (**Spring**). Or Tropics: 'The areas each side of the Equator that are always warm' (**Spring**). 'The very warm areas on the Earth's surface which stretch across the Equator' (**Summer**). 'A band on the Earth's surface stretching between 25° north and 25° south of the Equator' (**Winter**). 'A band on the Earth's surface stretching between about latitudes 25° north and 25° south of the Equator, where the weather is always warm' (**Autumn**).

The repetition of basic material in all four books can only be justified on the assumption that any one might be bought independently. But it is then impossible to justify the apparently random dispersal of common information through the four titles. If you want to learn about the main zones of the atmosphere or how rainbows are formed you must buy **Spring**. **Autumn** will tell you what makes the sky look blue and the sunset red. If measuring temperature is what you need, go for **Winter** - but it's **Spring** for measuring rainfall and **Autumn** for measuring wind. Buy **Summer** if you want advice on how to keep a cloud diary - but you'll need **Winter** for an introduction to the common cloud types. The ozone layer gets full treatment in **Spring**, global warming in **Summer**? and so on.

The result of all this is that the reader could be confused as to just what the links are (if any) between particular seasons and such phenomena as the ice ages, famine, deserts or global warming and there is a danger that children will assume connections that don't exist just because information appears in a particular volume.

All of these problems could have been avoided if the publisher had not been so exclusively geared to the production of books in series. For there is the raw material here for an interesting and substantial single volume. Needless repetition would be saved and more extended explanations could be given; unhelpful fragmentation could be avoided and the relationships between associated concepts developed; and such excellent features as the splendid diagram of the passage of a depression (**Spring**) could be far more effectively integrated.

And we, the purchasers, would have an infinitely better 'information package' for perhaps half the price!

Spring Weather, 185210 941 6

Summer Weather, 1 85210 942 4

Autumn Weather, 1 85210 920 3

Winter Weather, 1 85210 921 1

John Mason, Wayland (Seasonal Weather series), £6.50 each

Page Number:

16

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