

Film Education, Literacy and Learning

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Literacy Reframed

Our aim in writing this Minibook is to provide a research-informed guide to help literacy teachers develop and sustain film education. We focus, in particular, on literacy because of the role film plays in developing children's understandings of story. For many children, film and television programmes are their key early experiences of narrative, helping them develop story schema and an ability to predict plot or construct meaning from images and sounds (Robinson, 1997, Parry, 2013). We have no desire to place film in an educational silo and recognise fully the potential role for film across the curriculum, but we wish to foreground the way in which the moving image, as a storytelling medium is, in the 21st century, key to an approach to literacy which is holistic and values the everyday cultural experiences of children.



Figure 1: From Stories in my Head by Louis Cochrane.

A substantial body of research literature exists which demonstrates the need to connect with children's existing understandings of the world, in learning. In our approach to the role of film in primary education we draw on these sociocultural perspectives of learning. We would also seek, and encourage others, to include a range of popular cultural forms in any primary

literacy curriculum. But we are mindful that film has particular ways of making meaning, through its many modes, which warrant particular pedagogic approaches. Furthermore, children's film, in particular, is a significant cultural form which has often been overlooked by literacy educators and researchers. We therefore argue that it is appropriate and important to specifically consider the role and medium of film whilst always being sensitive to the broader interests of individual children or classes.

We are not positioning this book, or film education in itself, as an initiative which will provide a 'magic bullet' style improvement to children's school-based literacy. In recent years the primary curriculum and literacy strategies in the UK have regularly positioned film as a tool to impact on attainment in writing. It is our belief, that film, as with any other text introduced in the classroom, should not be used just to teach aspects of grammar or paragraphing. In 2007 BFI Education, UKLA and The University of Sheffield formulated a call to 'Reframe Literacy' in relation to film, drawing on emerging new understandings of contemporary literacy. These new approaches to literacy, such as 'multiliteracies' proposed by the New London Group (1996), highlight the need for educators to recognise the plural, dynamic and multimodal nature of literacy. Within this proposition, the case was made to value film as a text in its own right within the curriculum:

Literacy is the repertoire of knowledge, understanding and skills that enables us all to participate in social, cultural and political life. Many now recognise that this repertoire has to include the ability to 'read' and 'write' in media other than print: in moving images and audio, and in the hypertext structures of the digital world. (BFI, 2010:7)

In this guide we align ourselves to this approach and have taken the decision to avoid what we see as arbitrary links to aspects of an ever-changing curriculum which is problematically focused on testing and a standards agenda.

Film education should provide children with opportunities to explore meaning and share emotional, cognitive and aesthetic responses. We would also argue that to ignore children's experiences of film and television risks excluding them from participation in broader literacy learning at school. Where children's understandings of narrative, based on the moving image, are valued in the classroom there is clear evidence of engaged and meaningful progression in relation to literacy (Parry, 2013, 2014; Bulman, 2014). The role of the teacher in this process is critical. Simply valuing children's existing media cultures is not adequate and whilst it might

increase motivation, this approach only scratches the surface of the potential of film education. A key finding of the ESRC ‘Developing Media Literacy’ research led by David Buckingham and Andrew Burn (cited in Parry, 2014) was that the teacher had a critical role to play in encouraging children to interrogate their own responses. In one scheme of work, focused on scary narratives across a range of media, the teacher’s sustained foregrounding of challenging questions had an impact on progression in relation to meaning making:

Far from blandly valuing the children’s ideas on the basis of popular culture, the teacher took an interrogatory role, which pushed the children to consider meaning and intention directly. By asking, “Why? What does it mean? Why has the film-maker chosen this shot or sound?” the children were not simply observing film language but more importantly, drawing on their personal responses to consider the range of possible meanings of a text. (Parry, 2014: 21)

We seek to demonstrate further the impact of rich and integrated approaches to film education which extend children’s ability to understand and create narratives. Drawing on examples from practice and research, we present a practical guide which recognizes the importance of learning progression. We have divided the guide into four main sections. The first looks at some of the challenges of choosing film for children and suggests that this process is given careful attention, similar to that given to choosing books for young readers. The next chapter focuses on approaches to teaching the reading of film and film analysis and highlights the importance of providing children with challenging new cognitive tools to enable them to approach new and unfamiliar texts with increasing confidence. Chapter Four shares ideas for experiments with film production, designed to be the sorts of activity to start with, with young children in the primary phase before moving on to full film productions. In the penultimate chapter we provide a case study of a more traditional example of film production with children which follows an industrial model of film production, distribution and exhibition. Here we also focus on the potential impact of sharing films made by children and the value of organizing special events and screenings, arguing that sharing work with an audience develops children’s ability to be critically reflective. Our concluding reflections focus on recent research in relation to film education and learning progression.

We embark on this journey with a focus on children's films, a term that is the subject of debate. We emphasize the need to seek out films made for children which represent children's perspectives. We agree with Bazalgette and Staples (1995) in their call to take children's films seriously:

Children's films constitute a valid, distinctive, sometimes innovative and challenging form of cinema, which is just as much worth fostering as any other. (Bazalgette and Staples, 1995: 97)

In doing so, we hope colleagues will feel inspired to reflect on their own experiences of this significant form and feel as confident when working with the moving image as with any other medium.

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