

Reading Magazines with a Critical Eye in the Primary School

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Introduction

Why magazines?

To say you are 'literate' today means something different than it did fifty, thirty or even ten years ago. The modern world is dominated by a vast range of media and communicative practices: texting, the internet, television and magazines, all of which make different demands on a reader and each of which reflect a changing world. And with each evolution of a new kind of text, new knowledge, skills and understanding are required.

Whilst magazines for young people have always been popular, this changing landscape of communicative practice has had a direct influence both on the type of magazines now available and their content. The last ten years has witnessed some growth in the magazine industry and, in particular, the proliferation of texts which seem to be targeted at an increasingly younger audience. Magazines for young people have always represented their interests and preoccupations and today's magazines reflect children's television culture as well as their increasing use of digital or computer-based texts. As a result they have substantial appeal, largely because of this reflection, but also because of their commercial features, free gifts being a huge pull-factor! Set against this popularity are concerns about the nature and influence of popular culture on young people. Magazines, for example, have been criticised for being part of a discourse which encourages readers to be 'passive information recipients' (Carrington, 2005:17). Certainly it could be argued that the content and messages which magazines offer is not, as a matter of course, questioned by younger audiences, something which is explored in this Minibook.

So, what can magazines offer children and why should we introduce what might be considered leisure reading material into the curriculum-based setting of a school? Given their appeal, it could be argued that we have a role to play in both honouring children's interests but also in alerting young people to issues of choice and discrimination so that they respond critically to what magazines offer. This is not because magazines in themselves are

'dangerous' texts but rather because critical reflection is key to becoming a fully-fledged adult reader.

Popular culture - reading that matters

Ideally, the texts that teachers share in the classroom should, at least in part, reflect the interests and cultural practices of the young people in front of them. However, in the past traditional fiction has tended to dominate book corners, although in recent years there has been a move to validate use of popular culture in the classroom (Buckingham, 1998; Marsh and Millard, 2000). This shift in practice has, to a degree, been legitimised in England, where the Primary National Strategy advocates a wide reading repertoire through the Primary Framework (2006) promoting the knowledge that children encounter a broad range of texts both on paper and on screen.

Despite this, magazines remain scarce in many schools. Yet they hold significant worth for young people because they contribute to the development of group identity and often address issues of concern to young people specifically. This is reading that matters but is not necessarily valued in school. This is significant as a number of reports have raised concerns about young people's reading practices and engagement in voluntary reading (Mullis *et al.*, 2003; OFSTED, 2002; Twist *et al.* 2003 and 2007). These reports indicate that many British children do not choose to read for pleasure. So perhaps valuing the texts that are important to young people might broaden perceptions of reading and encourage more children to engage with texts? In addition, if magazines are being devoured in the playground and at home, then surely we should approach these texts as critically as others we debate in the classroom?

However, this presents a challenge for the teacher, who through introducing magazines into the classroom, acknowledges and respects young readers' personal choices but at the same time holds them up for close scrutiny. The tension lies in how to approach these texts critically so that we equip children with the ability to be discriminating readers without destroying the cultural value placed upon them.

Critical response and the Primary Framework

Living in the twenty-first century we are constantly bombarded with information, not all of which is credible and much of which is loaded with specific

intent, for example an advert in a magazine in the guise of an information text. But how aware are young people of the potent relationship between language and power and how text producers might be influencing their cultural, economic or political stance? Critical reading can be defined as an approach that does not accept texts at face value, but instead promotes active questioning of texts (Comber and Simpson, 2001). These are the life skills which a confident, modern reader exhibits, many of which are reflected in the Primary Framework (2006) where critical awareness is a key thread running through Strands 7 *Understanding and interpreting texts*, 8 *Engaging with and responding to texts* and 9 *Creating and shaping texts*.

If young people are to be assured readers of the modern world, then teachers need to make explicit both how to decode the range of texts they encounter and also how to reflect upon them. This includes broadening the reading curriculum to encompass not just the classroom setting but the world and economic context that those texts circulate in. In doing this we empower our young readers to access and enjoy many different 'real-life' texts, from websites to junk mail.

This book provides primary teachers with both a rationale for critical literacy in relation to magazines and a range of practical approaches for exploring these issues in the classroom. It begins by considering how teachers might introduce magazines into the classroom, before moving on to explore the multimodal nature of magazines and the impact this has on how the text is read. There then follows a definition of critical literacy and a number of questions are posed to demonstrate what our 'inner voice' is saying as we make sense of texts. The remainder of the book then uses these key questions to explore the principles of critical literacy in the context of magazines and provides practical examples of strategies that might be used to encourage critical reflection.