

# TELEVIZION

International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)

Special English Issue No. 12/1999/2: "The Teletubbies"

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## **Menace or motivator?**

### **"Teletubbies" and the language and literacy curriculum in the early years**

This article provides a broad outline of a project which was undertaken in order to explore the potential the television programme the Teletubbies has for motivating children to take part in literacy activities in the early years. The Teletubbies programme reflects certain aspects of a postmodern childhood in that children watch television screens within television screens as short documentaries are played on the Teletubbies' tummies. Thus, as Wagg (1992) has pointed out, children in the latter part of the twentieth century are exposed to a media which has become increasingly self-referential. Television programmes, films, videos, video games, children's magazines and comics make reference to each other in a microcosmic media world. This cultural intertextuality which pervades much of children's media isolates some adult audiences and the potential for misunderstanding is high. In addition, the Teletubbies has faced further censure because it has dared to appeal directly to toddlers through the use of simplified sentence structure and the repetition of one and two word phrases. This is a language which they instantly recognise because it mirrors the grammatical structures which feature in children's early spoken discourse (see Garton and Pratt, 1998). The programme has been criticised in the UK for this use of language and its supposed lack of educational focus (Messenger-Davies 1997). Stephen Byers, the schools minister at the time, claimed that the programme typified the 'dumbing down' of children's television. However, as McDonnell (1994) has pointed out, some adults have always resisted children's popular culture, each generation concerned that innocent youth are about to be corrupted by contemporary media:

It may appear to contemporary crusaders that violence in the popular media is a threat of an entirely different order than these quaint artefacts of the past. But in their day the Rovers boys, silent movies and True Crime comics were believed to be every bit as threatening to the existing social order as Ninja Turtles and Terminator movies are today. (Mc Donnell, 1994, p. 112)

This kind of reaction is both an over-estimation of the potential power of the media and an example of the socio-cultural construction of childhood as a state of purity (see Walkerdine, 1999). The furore over the Teletubbies has led to some extreme reactions, including the banning of the programme by some playgroups (Wainwright, 1999) and the suggestion that watching the Teletubbies can delay the linguistic development of young children (Timms, 1999). However, the exclusion of children's popular cultural interests from the nursery and

school curriculum is nothing new.

The absence of many children's cultural interests within the nursery and school curriculum is well documented (Luke, 1993; Lankshear and McClaren, 1993; Lankshear, 1997; Gee, 1996; Street, 1997). This has led to the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) of middle class children forming, almost exclusively, the primary currency of education. Thus the texts which line classroom shelves are located within mainstream literary traditions and not within children's media experiences. Media education syllabuses in secondary schools appear to be the only spaces for work relating to children's media choices, but such courses are marginalised within the system. There is very little evidence of work relating to the media in the early years' curriculum. There are no references to children's media or popular cultural texts in curriculum documents pertaining to the early years in England. Instead, the texts teachers are directed towards are located primarily within the traditional canon of children's literature. A critical reading of the statutory curriculum documents in England supports the assertion that the curriculum has been constructed within class boundaries. The acquisition of literacy model which is utilised is rooted firmly within the middle-class child-rearing practices of industrialised societies. The work of Brice-Heath (1983) demonstrated strongly that this model was not applicable to all classes and that the literacy practices of white and black working class communities are largely ignored in schools. Work on popular culture in schools, including children's media choices, could mean that the cultural capital of working class children gained some acknowledgement within the curriculum. This is not to suggest that working class children hold a monopoly on the consumption of popular culture; however, many middle class children do have other cultural interests which are reflected within the curriculum. Middle-class children also watch *Rugrats* or *Barney the dinosaur*, but their bookshelves are more likely to contain the texts found on school library shelves or government recommended lists.

The early years are a fundamental stage in the development of literacy skills (Hall, 1987; Whitehead, 1999). How much more powerful could this development be if children were encouraged to interact with texts which were highly motivating to them? Guthrie, J.T., Van Meter, P., Dacey Mcanu, A., Wigfield, A., Bennett, L., Poundston, C.C., Rice, M.E., Faibisch, F. M., Hunt, B., and Mitchell, A.M. (1996) suggest that 'long-term increases in motivational and cognitive aspects of literacy are interdependent' (p.323) and it appears that children's interests in the literacy tasks with they engage is central to any meaningful progress in those tasks (Turner 1995; Guthrie et al., 1996). Literacy practices in nurseries and schools should be located within children's socio-cultural worlds if this motivation is to be enhanced (Smogarinsky and O'Donnel-Allen (1998) and there is research which suggests that media and popular texts can indeed be a powerful motivator in the early years' literacy curriculum (Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 1999). Often, topic-based work in nurseries and primary schools fails to engage critically with the lived realities of children. The project which is discussed in this paper was undertaken in order to explore the potential that popular culture has for motivating young children towards language and literacy activities.

### **The study**

The study was undertaken in three primary schools and two nurseries. The nurseries and schools were situated in inner-city areas of a northern English city. They served diverse communities which included African-Caribbean, Pakistani, Bengali, Chinese, Yemeni, Somali and white British and Irish families. The majority of the families were working-class. The five-month long project contained a number of elements which involved introducing a range of literacy activities into the curriculum. Some of these activities were related to the *Teletubbies*. This programme was chosen because of its enormous appeal to young children. The activities

introduced into the nurseries and classrooms included: reading Tubby custard recipes; writing Tubby recipes for a range of food; reading Teletubby comics; making Teletubby comics; writing letters to the Teletubbies; writing Teletubby stories; designing adverts to place in the Teletubby comics. Altogether, 63 nursery-aged children and 68 primary-aged children were involved in the project, although they did not all take part in the same activities. Qualitative data were collected using field notes, photographs, children's work and interviews with staff. Work undertaken in the nurseries has been reported elsewhere (Marsh, forthcoming). Here, the effect of the introduction of Teletubby comics into one of the nurseries and one of the primary classes is used to illustrate the potential the programme has for enlivening the early years' language and literacy curriculum.

### **Teletubbies in the literacy hour**

Since the advent of the National Literacy Strategy in England in 1997, the use of big books for shared whole class reading has been a key feature of many classrooms. It was decided to use Teletubby comics in an enlarged text format during the shared reading sessions. This led to much excitement from the children, as this extract from the project diary indicates:

"As soon as Jane placed the comic on the big-book stand, there was a wave of excitement from the class and whispers of, 'Teletubbies' comic!'. Jane discussed the layout of the front of the comic with the children and the interchange demonstrated that they were very confident with the genre. The shared reading of the story contained within the comic was obviously enjoyed by all and children maintained interest throughout, demonstrating familiarity with the characters and able to predict key sequences. This was especially noticeable with children who were in the early stages of acquiring English, children who were not usually able to sustain concentration throughout a shared reading session."

Because of the pervasiveness of American popular culture which uses the medium of English, related texts have great potential for developing children's confidence and expertise in English when it is an additional language for them (Orrellana, 1994; Marsh, 1999). This is not to suggest that popular culture which is rooted in children's first language experiences is to be ignored in an unquestioning acceptance of this imperialistic saturation of the market. Nevertheless, in this study, the use of the Teletubbies programme did encourage young bilingual children to engage in talk in English. Some of the children talked about their home life, in terms of consumption of the Teletubbies programme and related merchandise, for the first time since attending nursery (Marsh, forthcoming). As the head of one of the nurseries, Catherine, noted:

"The children all watch television, don't they...and they all watch the Teletubbies, no matter what their first language. So it means that they can all share understandings when they come to nursery, they all know it. It's something they can respond to straight away."

The incorporation of work on the Teletubbies into the early literacy curriculum not only encouraged oracy, it also provided motivation for reading and writing activities. Some children sustained more interest in the writing activities based on the Teletubbies than writing activities based on other topics. For example, Yassar, a 5-year-old child, asked to take part in almost every writing activity based on the Teletubby comics. He was not usually, according to class teacher, so vociferous in his requests to write and this extract from the project diary does indicate that it was his love of the Teletubbies which was the key to his motivation.

Yassar came up to me again and pleaded, "Can I do that?" "Again?" I asked. "Yes", he nodded vigorously, "I want to do Teletubbies". Each time I set up a writing activity based on

the Teletubbies, he rushes over to join in. Our initial surprise at this has worn off! Today he settled down to write yet another Teletubby story (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Extract from Yassar's Teletubby story

There were many examples of this kind of reaction throughout the study. Children who had been described as usually reluctant to take part in reading and writing activities were highly motivated to undertake them during this project. This is not to suggest that the work on the Teletubbies had a direct effect on children's attainment in reading and writing; the aims of the project did not lie in this direction and the methodology could not support such a claim. However, the study did demonstrate that work on the Teletubbies provided a strong attraction to language and literacy activities within these schools and nurseries and without such engagement the drive to read and write can flounder.

This article has focused on the use of popular cultural texts as a means of stimulating literacy and oracy in the early years of education. However, the debate has wider implications concerning the nature of texts with which children are currently engaging. Many nurseries and primary schools need to recognise that children are reading a wide range of texts outside of school, much of it consisting of televisual print as they encounter computer screens, teletext and video games at home and in the community. Many of the same skills are used when reading paper-based and televisual texts (Robinson, 1997) and the links between this rich plethora of texts should be exploited to the full if children are to make progress in a wide range of reading skills. Thus watching the Teletubbies on screen could be linked to a range of reading activities using related print-based and televisual texts in the nursery and primary classroom. Like many other television programmes, the Teletubbies has spawned a vast industry which markets related products such as dolls, games, household ware and clothing. Robinson (1998) suggests these are 'secondary texts' (p. 34) and argues that they:

"...may have a particular mediating role in terms of heightening awareness of intertextuality and thus need to be seen as part of the community within which children learn to read television" (Robinson, 1998, p. 34-35).

It may be the case that these products also provide a strong context for learning to read and write print-based text. Environmental print is now recognised as a strong factor in early reading development (Hallet, 1999). How much more familiar is this print when it appears on children's mugs or t-shirts and is related to their favourite television programmes? Educators in the early years need to recognise the transformative nature of technology and its impact on literacy practices as we approach the third millenium. We need to familiarise ourselves with the media-saturated environment surrounding the children we teach and utilise it in order to provide a powerful tool for learning. Some may question this rather opportunistic appropriation of children's culture, but it important to steer clear of a simplistic response to what is a complex web of media consumption, pleasure and critical engagement. Ultimately, if we fail to grasp the significance of these powerful media texts for children and do not exploit the potential they have, we may be in danger of locating schooled language and literacy practices within a remote cultural wilderness which becomes increasingly irrelevant to children's everyday lives.

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