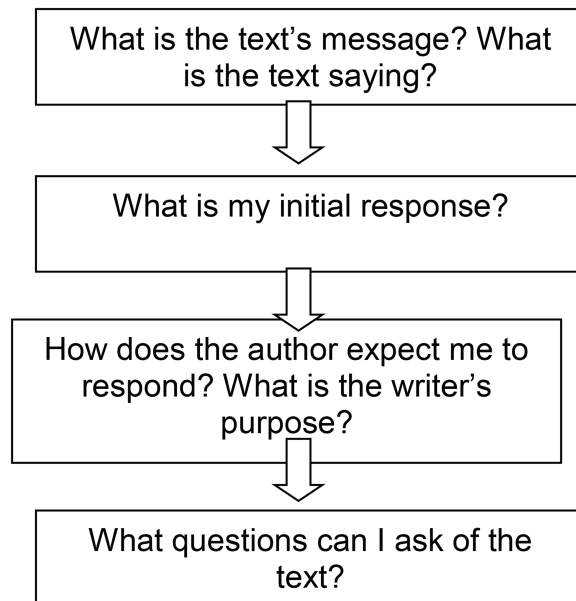


# WEBSITE RESOURCE W18. 3

## Reading magazines with a critical eye

In her book *Reading Magazines with a Critical Eye in the Primary School* (2009) Carolyn Swain offers a range of suggestions for helping children to take a more critical/analytical view of their magazine reading. However, she emphasises that classroom discussion should be dialogic (see Chapter 2) and open and that it is important to make it clear to children that they are equal partners in the debate. Encouraging children to read critically does not mean that the teacher casts a negative eye on the children's preferred popular cultural reading, so a starting point might be to bear in mind: *Whose culture are we discussing?*

Swain uses this flowchart to support the process of developing a critical eye:



(Swain, 2009: 16)

She suggests that a starting point for critical readership might be to consider the appeal of magazines for young readers and how they are made attractive to encourage people to buy them:

Most children enjoy magazines and so understand that they are available because members of society want to read them. However, whilst supply and demand is a key feature of the industry, many children do not recognize magazines as a commercial product. They do not realize, for example, that there are profits to be made and that magazines are usually financed by advertising, as well as the purchase price and that these factors may influence content. Developing these concepts, particularly with young children, is challenging and discussion is essential.

For children in the early primary stage, in attempting to encourage thinking about 'What do I know about this magazine?' and 'How does that's influence what is written?' it might be best to concentrate on the concept of sale and purchase, perhaps by setting up a role play area as a newsagent. After a period of time and a trip to the local shops, you might then be able to have a discussion about how the money you pay for a magazine is related to the content.

You might also draw the children's attention to the front cover, and ask:  
*Can you see how much the magazine costs? What do you think happens to the money you pay for the magazine?*

Older children might be alerted to the economics underpinning the industry though looking at the content of magazines and considering the questions:  
*What percentage would you say is devoted to advertising? Why might this be the case?*

(Swain, 2009: 17)

She goes on to consider authorship, pointing out that the authorship for magazines is not as clearly identifiable as it for books and, like the internet, is often unknown. In the early primary stage, one of the reading skills teachers demonstrate is identifying the title and author on the front cover of books and she suggest that this is a good place to start in terms of considering magazine authorship:

After discussing/listing familiar authors the practitioner can draw attention to the title of a magazine and then hunt for the author's name, demonstrating that it can't be found! The front covers of magazines are very busy with text, so this would involve reading each heading and asking the children if this is a person's name. If children are given an opportunity to explore the content of these magazines then they will also see that the magazine is made from many small articles, some of which are fiction while others are non-fiction. The practitioner can then explain how different people might write these different articles, resulting in a shared authorship, so there isn't one name to put on the front. It can also be shown that this is different from books on the classroom shelves, where stories and information books usually have one author. The idea of joint authorship could be reinforced through creating a class magazine where each child writes/draws/contributes a piece.

Many children in later primary years might benefit from some of the above discussion but can then be encouraged to develop a more explicitly critical approach by exploring major magazine publishers and the range of texts they produce by answering these questions:

- Who wrote this magazine? Can you find the names of any of the authors? How could we find out? Who are these people? What do we know about them?
- What is a publisher and what do they do?
- Who publishes the magazine? Do they publish any others? Research on the internet and build up a picture of key magazine syndicates.

Swain emphasises that it will probably not be easy to identify authors but it is an important process to go through, 'as many other non-fiction highly interactive texts, e.g. the internet, are composed through shared authorship and this will support the transference of critical skills to other text formats' (Swain, 2009: 18).

### Magazine content and issues of identity

Swain points out that the magazines people choose to read indicates something about their identity, so it is important to be respectful while also offering a critical approach. One way to open up discussion would be for the teacher to model an analytical/critical reading of her/his preferred magazine. The content of magazines can be examined through focusing on one magazine then comparing it to a range of others. Either collect a range of current magazines or ask the children to bring in examples of some of their favourites.

Children could be invited to:

- List the types of articles. (The class could generate the categories themselves or these could be given to them, e.g. features, adverts, mailbag, news.)
- Consider whether anyone benefits economically from these kinds of articles.
- Answer questions such as: *Who would enjoy this magazine? Would you buy this and why/why not?*
- Look for any common features in the magazines.
- Explore the difference between magazines which are 'independent' and those attached to a commercial product. How does their content differ?
- Write reviews and recommendations for friends.

To explore lifestyle, gender and individuality, they might be asked:

- What lifestyles are reflected?
- What kinds of people feature? Who is included and excluded? Who isn't there? Why?
- How are boys and girls magazines different? Sort magazines into those which would attract boys/girls and then provide reasons for this.
- What messages does the magazine give about being a boy/girl today? What does it imply boys/girls are interested in?

### Website Resource W18. 3

- Do all girls like the same things? Should they like the same things? What about boys? What sort of activities should boys/girls like? Create list of other topics boys/girls might enjoy that are not included.
- Explore the content of 'edutainment' magazines for pre-school children. Is this what young children want to do or what parents think they should be doing?

To consider images of men and women, the children might be asked:

- Find/cut out images of boys/men or girls/women. Begin to sort these into 'types'.
- What kinds of boys/men or girls/women are represented? Why might this be the case?
- Are all boys/men or girls/women like this?
- What impact might these images of men and women have on readers?

(Swain, 2009: 26)

Any of these activities might be carried out as part of a longer teaching sequence or in guided reading sessions.

(From Swain, C. (2009) *Reading Magazines with a Critical Eye in the Primary School*. Leicester: United Kingdom Literacy Association.)