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# Parental pedagogies: An analysis of British 'edutainment' magazines for young children

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**Abstract** As the UK government places a growing emphasis on the importance of learning in the home, commercial companies are increasingly targeting the educational aspirations of parents. This article offers a critical analysis of a range of 'edutainment' magazines aimed at pre-school children, most of which are based on children's television programmes and characters. It describes the expansion of this market in the context of the broader commercialization of children's media culture and the growth in cross-media merchandising. It then provides an analysis of the educational rhetoric of the magazines, as embodied in their sales pitches and pedagogic advice to parents. Finally, the pedagogic strategies of the magazines are analysed through an account of their mode of address and their positioning of the child reader. The article suggests that many of the magazines are informed by a reductive and disciplinary conception of learning, combined with an apparently contradictory emphasis on entertainment and 'fun' – a combination which, it suggests, may be symptomatic of contemporary changes in the forms and sites of learning.

**Keywords** edutainment; home learning; magazines; media; parenting; pedagogy; television

## Introduction

The British government's evangelistic emphasis on education now extends well beyond its efforts to raise 'standards' in schools. Funding is currently available for a whole range of new initiatives that seek to extend the reach

of schooling into children's leisure time, such as 'summer universities' and homework clubs. Recent proposals (suggested in May 2000) would effectively extend the school day to eight hours – a full two and a half hours longer than that of most other European countries. Meanwhile, the steady extension of national testing has created an atmosphere of growing competition, not only between schools but also among parents and children themselves. Education, it would seem, is the work of childhood, and it cannot be allowed to stop once children walk out of the classroom door.

Commercial companies are involved in these initiatives at many levels. Many out-of-school supplementary classes in the arts or computer literacy are run by private firms; and many other 'family learning' projects involve forms of commercial sponsorship. Meanwhile, parents are increasingly being urged to 'invest' in their children's education by providing additional educational resources at home. This is most transparently the case with the marketing of home computers, which frequently involves claims about how they can 'help your child to get ahead' in the educational race (Nixon, 1998; Buckingham et al., 2001). Likewise, there is currently a small boom in sales of educational materials designed for domestic use, both in the form of revision aids (of the 'Help Your Child With Key Stage 2 SATs' variety) and of more broadly 'educative' material, such as CD-ROMs and illustrated information books.

To some degree, this material needs to target a dual market. It has to satisfy parental expectations about what counts as valid education, and hence as a worthwhile way for their children to spend their time; and yet, if children are to be persuaded to use it in their leisure time, it also has to qualify as pleasurable and entertaining. To some extent, this accounts for the emergence of 'edutainment', a hybrid mix of education and entertainment that relies heavily on visual material, on narrative or game-like formats, and on more informal, less didactic styles of address. At least on the face of it, the pedagogy of this material is much less authoritarian – and much more 'interactive' – than that of formal schooling. The sales pitches for such material rely on an obsessive insistence that learning is inevitably 'fun' (Buckingham et al., 2001).

In this article, we present a case study analysis taken from a more extensive research project investigating these issues.<sup>1</sup> Our focus here is on broadly 'educational' magazines aimed at the pre-school (or under five) market. As we shall indicate, these magazines exemplify both the growing 'curricularization' of learning in the home and the growing commercial influences on the lives of very young children. They address parents as pedagogues, who should be responsible for ensuring that their children acquire the 'skills' they will need for educational success; and yet they also address

Table 1 List of titles analysed, with publishers

*Sesame Street* (Panini UK Ltd), *Learning Land* (De Agostini UK Ltd), *Noddy* (BBC), *Spot* (BBC), *Playdays* (BBC), *Teletubbies* (BBC), *Toybox* (BBC), *Tweenies* (BBC), *Bob the Builder* (BBC), *Tell me Why* (BBC), *Play and Learn: Thomas and Friends* (Egmont Fleetway), *CiTV Telly Tots* (Egmont Fleetway), *3Rs Budgie* (Practical Publications Ltd), *Tots TV* (Redan), *Friends* (Redan), *Bananas in Pajamas* (Redan), *Barney* (Redan), *Fireman Sam* (Redan), *Jellikins* (Burghley Publishing).

*Note:* Some of the magazines are undated on their covers, but all were purchased in early/mid-2000. Comics or other magazines that did not make explicit 'educational' claims were excluded from the analysis.<sup>2</sup>

parents and children as consumers, as active participants in a global multimedia market (Seiter, 1993).

## An outline of the magazines

Such magazines have existed for decades, although the range of titles available has expanded significantly in recent years. Of the 19 different titles we were able to obtain from a range of high-street newsagents, only 2 (the BBC's *Playdays* and *Toybox*) date back to the early 1990s. The others are all much more recent in origin, although several of them recycle old material, in some cases from as far back as the 1980s. (For a list of titles analysed, see Table 1.)

Such magazines can be purchased on subscription or in local newsagents, but they are also increasingly appearing in less traditional outlets such as supermarkets. They generally cost between £1 and £1.30 each, although a couple of titles (both produced by smaller independent publishers) are more expensive: *3Rs Budgie* is £1.90, while *Learning Land* (which incorporates a CD-ROM) is £3.99. The magazines are generally published monthly or every two/three weeks. They often incorporate 'free gifts', such as sets of crayons, fridge magnets, badges or stickers.

As is apparent from Table 1, the market is dominated by the BBC, who currently (in mid-2000) publish eight separate titles. According to the BBC's Annual Report and Accounts, their annual turnover in this area is approximately £12m. Their major rival is Redan, whose *Fun To Learn* series relates to independent (commercial) television programmes. Other publishers include Egmont Fleetway, a major international publisher specializing in comics and teen magazines; Panini, who are major players in the lucrative sticker albums market; and a few smaller independent publishers. With the exception of *Learning Land* and the BBC's *Tell Me Why*, all the titles

are related to children's television programmes and characters, or (in a couple of instances) to popular book series.

While there are obviously some differences in the content and format of these magazines, similar activities and features occur throughout. These include: illustrated stories; rhymes and songs; colouring-in and join-the-dots pictures; mazes; counting activities; sorting and matching exercises; 'make-and-do' assignments; exercises involving finding or identifying objects; information-giving features; board games; writing activities; cut-out-and-collect pictures or posters; activities based on the alphabet and letter-recognition; competitions; drawings sent in by readers; and, of course, advertisements. Several of the Redan *Fun To Learn* titles include pull-out 'workbooks'. In addition, most of the magazines provide guidance for parents, in the form of messages on each page and/or separate pages aimed specifically at parents. Most of the magazines are either 24 or 32 pages in length, of which an average of two or three pages are taken by advertising.

## The learning business

On one level, these magazines are symptomatic of what the US critic Marsha Kinder (1991) has called 'trans-media intertextuality'. In recent decades, media aimed at children have increasingly been characterized by integrated marketing. Television programmes are no longer just television programmes: they are also films, records, books, comics and magazines, computer games and toys – not to mention T-shirts, posters, lunchboxes, drinks, sticker albums, food and a myriad of other products. The key children's media successes of the 1980s and 1990s – *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Super Mario Brothers*, *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* and now *Pokémon* – have all been packaged and marketed as multimedia phenomena in this way.

Among younger children, this market is largely driven by licensed characters: Barney, Postman Pat, Fireman Sam, Noddy, Budgie the Helicopter, Thomas the Tank Engine, Bob the Builder, Spot and friends are recognized by children around the world, and are used to brand a whole range of products. This is, without doubt, an increasingly lucrative business. In the USA alone, children under 12 are estimated to spend US\$11bn each year, and to influence the purchase of more than US\$160bn in family goods and services. The market is estimated to be growing at around 20 percent a year (Del Vecchio, 1997: 20). Nearly all the most popular toys are TV-related, as are many of the most popular books bought for this age group (see Hilton, 1996).

However, this development is not confined to the work of exclusively 'commercial' corporations, or indeed to children's 'entertainment'. In the

USA, public service productions such as *Sesame Street* (produced by the not-for-profit organization Children's Television Workshop, and screened on Public Broadcasting channels) have always depended on ancillary merchandise and 'spin-offs' in other media. The same is true of *Barney*, also screened on PBS in the States. Both programmes have associated 'educational' magazines published in the UK by Redan, as well as generating a range of books and 'educational' toys.

In recent years, this integrated marketing approach has also been increasingly adopted by the BBC. BBC executives continue to assert that commercial activities take second place to editorial (and, in this case, educational) concerns; yet the involvement of the BBC's commercial subsidiary, BBC Worldwide (which publishes the magazines considered here), is increasingly seen as a prerequisite, particularly for major new investments in programming (Home, 1995). The success of the BBC's latest pre-school series *Teletubbies* is a revealing case in point (see Buckingham, forthcoming). *Teletubbies* would not have existed without the possibility of overseas sales (it is currently sold in more than 60 countries); and a major merchandising operation was planned by BBC Worldwide from the very beginning. The list of *Teletubbies* products either licensed by the BBC or marketed directly is ever-growing: it includes a magazine, books, audio and video tapes, computer games, posters, toys, clothing, watches, food and confectionery, mugs and crockery, stationery and games – as well as more unexpected artefacts like computer mouse mats. According to the BBC's annual report, £330m was generated overall during the programme's first two years, with £23m going directly to the BBC in 1998 (43 percent of which came from sales of video-tapes, a market dominated by products aimed at pre-schoolers).

As this implies, very young children are a key market here; and broadly 'educational' magazines are a significant part of this. Such magazines capitalize on children's enthusiasm for the characters and programmes, while simultaneously addressing parental anxieties about education. In the case of the BBC, the magazines are intended to be complementary to the programmes, particularly in the sense that they add an 'educational' dimension to programmes that might otherwise be perceived as merely 'entertaining' (and hence be open to criticism from some parents). According to one executive, they 'use the programme and the characters to introduce children into a learning state of mind'.<sup>3</sup> For the BBC, currently struggling to retain its audience share (and hence the legitimacy of the licence fee through which it is funded), 'education' is a central aspect of its brand identity in an increasingly competitive international market. Attempting to capitalize on its reputation for education and 'quality', while simultaneously avoiding the charge that it is merely 'exploiting' children, inevitably creates significant

tensions – as the continuing controversy surrounding the educational merits (or lack of them) of *Teletubbies* clearly demonstrates.

These magazines are therefore part of an overall integrated marketing enterprise. Some of the merchandise is licensed by the BBC and/or the copyright holders to commercial companies. In the BBC's *Noddy* magazine, for example, there is a full-page advertisement on the back cover for Noddy merchandise sold through the mail order and online company Character Warehouse: this includes Noddy dolls and soft toys, a train set, a toy mobile video phone, a cassette recorder and a scooter. In other instances, the merchandise is sold directly by the production companies themselves: Redan's *Tots TV*, for example, features a full-page advertisement for merchandise based on *Tots TV*, *Rosie and Jim* and *Teletubbies* sold directly by Ragdoll, the production company. Some of these items cost as much as £50 each.

Another, less direct form of merchandising is by means of competitions. Thus, Egmont Fleetway's *Play and Learn: Thomas and Friends* (2000: No. 78, p. 9) uses a competition to publicize Thomas the Tank Engine toys: 'Alexander wins one of these splendid engines from Heart Character Toys. Heart Character Toys stock over 250 Thomas products in their mail order catalogue (pictured). For your free copy, call . . .'. In other instances, it seems that companies are 'generously donating' products in order to generate some cheap advertising: *CiTV Telly Tots* (2000: No. 62, p. 14), for example, announces that 'Thanks to the kind folk at Dorling Kindersley, Telly Tots have 40 fantastic *Mopatop's Shop* book sets to win!' (*Mopatop's Shop* being a programme currently broadcast on Children's ITV).

While there is some 'external' advertising here (for example, for sweets or foodstuffs), most of it takes the form of cross-promotion. In a sense, any magazine based on a television programme is by its very nature an advertisement for that programme – just as the programme is effectively an advertisement for the magazine. However, in the BBC's case, the magazines include several advertisements for other BBC magazines or videotapes, sold via BBC Worldwide and available from the BBC's online shop. *CiTV Telly Tots* – probably the least overtly didactic of these magazines (below-mentioned) – is effectively a pre-schoolers' TV listings magazine: in addition to showing the channel and time of the programmes relating to each item in the magazine, it directs readers to its website, and offers a 'CiTV Favourites' video as a competition prize. In this TV-centric world, children are 'telly tots' and their parents are 'grown-up telly tots'; while competition winners are pictured with speech bubbles identifying their favourite Children's ITV programmes.

In some respects, these phenomena are merely symptomatic of the increasingly competitive, commercial nature of children's media culture

(see Buckingham, 2000). Children and their parents – who are, after all, the most likely purchasers of these magazines – are clearly positioned here as *consumers*. The magazines are commodities themselves; and they both mediate and promise access to other commodities. In this self-promotional world, every text effectively becomes an advertisement for every other text. Nevertheless, this is not to say that readers are, in any simple sense, ‘passive’ consumers. Beyond the advertising itself, the magazines offer children the pleasure of recognising familiar characters and comprehensible narratives; but they also provide the more active engagement of solving puzzles and playing games related to the programmes. They extend the world of television into the realm of everyday life, allowing children to re-live the pleasures and to engage with the characters in potentially different circumstances. This is not yet *interactive*; but it is more than simply a matter of imprinting fixed meanings onto inert minds.

At the same time, however, these magazines are making explicit *educational* claims. They purport to encourage or bring about learning that will be of benefit to the child. These are claims that for more traditional critics are essentially incompatible with the imperatives of consumer culture. According to authors like Stephen Kline (1993), for example, ‘consumerism’ and the maximization of profit are necessarily at odds with positive educational and cultural objectives. From this perspective, ‘education’ and ‘entertainment’ are often seen to be fundamentally incompatible: using the devices of entertainment media for educational ends – or even to put children in ‘a learning state of mind’ – inevitably represents a form of ‘dumbing down’. In our view, however, the relationships between ‘education’ and ‘entertainment’ are both more complex and more paradoxical than this argument would suggest. ‘Education’ in any form is inevitably ‘entertaining’, in the sense that it has to engage and interest us; just as ‘entertainment’ is bound to be ‘educational’, in the sense that we cannot help but learn from it. Children are not merely ‘passive consumers’ of media entertainment – or indeed of education. Yet as we shall indicate, the magazines effectively sell education to *parents* as a kind of commodity – and in doing so, they reflect the wider commodification of learning that is characteristic of current trends in educational policy.

## Selling education

In recent years, the education and care of very young children has gradually been drawn into the government’s broader educational regime. As Anning (1998) observes, pre-school provision in the UK has increasingly moved towards a subject-based curriculum. Formal schooling now

effectively begins at the age of four (two years earlier than in most other industrialized countries); and the early years curriculum is now dominated by the need to prepare children for government-dictated 'strategies' on literacy and numeracy that occupy much of the classroom time in primary schools. Testing also now begins at the point of entry into school, resulting in additional pressure on teachers to 'cover' a tightly prescribed curriculum. Despite research evidence pointing to the value of practical, experiential learning for children of this age (see Anning, 1998), the government emphasizes 'expository', whole-class teaching and the need for drilling children in disembodied 'skills'.

The government's recently published guidance for what is now known as 'The Foundation Stage' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2000) explicitly sets out to raise 'standards of learning and teaching' in this field. Its rhetoric describes a highly regulated world of 'well-planned, purposeful activity', in which 'a carefully structured curriculum' leads inevitably to 'effective learning and development'. 'Practitioners' are seen to be 'implementing curriculum requirements' and 'using assessment to evaluate the quality of provision'. The document's goals for early learning are somewhat cutely described as 'stepping stones', but they are effectively the same kind of prescriptive 'attainment targets' (or behavioural objectives) found in the National Curriculum documents for older children. Despite the assertion that these are not age-related, it is these targets that will be applied in the 'baseline' tests on which children are now assessed on entry to school at age four.

Needless to say, perhaps, there is no recognition whatsoever in this document of the fact that young children already live in a commercially based media culture. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are effectively equated with computers, which are seen as an unproblematic benefit to learning; while television and video are mentioned only briefly, and in the context of children 'finding things out'. Learning is a form of 'work' that seems to proceed in ignorance of much of young children's everyday lives and cultural experiences.

As we have indicated, children's participation in consumer culture is centrally recognized in the magazines; but (perhaps paradoxically) so are the kinds of educational claims represented in government documents. The titles of the magazines themselves, or the series titles, frequently indicate as much: *Fun to Learn*, *Play and Learn*, *Learning Land*. 3Rs Budgie, the most overtly didactic of these titles, leaves little room for doubt with its heading above the main title: 'READING, WRITING & ARITHMETIC'. Many of the magazines also signal their educational intent via slogans on the front cover: 'BBC Children's Magazines . . . make learning fun!' (*Spot* and others); 'Educational



support for the early years' (*Tell MeWhy*); 'Giving our children a head start in life' (3Rs *Budgie*). Finally, many of the titles use the logo and slogan for the National Year of Reading or the National Reading Campaign; while the Redan titles proclaim that they are 'Compatible with the National Curriculum'. For example *TotsTV* (n.d.: No. 88).

Much of the content of the magazines themselves is obviously 'educational', yet this has to be explicitly asserted through messages addressed to parents. According to BBC Worldwide executives, these instructions are included in order to ensure that parents obtain the maximum 'educational value' from the magazines, rather than their children simply 'doing what is said'. Thus, most of the magazines have messages to parents on the inside front cover or on page three, which point out their educational benefits. These are often defined in terms of 'developing skills', and in some cases are directly linked with particular school subjects or key stages of the curriculum. Thus, for example:

Play and Learn Thomas and Friends magazine is full of activities and stories involving children's favourite Thomas characters. It is a valuable companion to Key Stage 1 programmes of study and will introduce children to the skills required in English, Mathematics and Art in an entertaining and fun way. (*Play and Learn: Thomas and Friends*, 2000: 2)

Less frequently, there are claims about the magazines' role in encouraging 'creativity' and personal, social and (in one case) moral development – although symptomatically these too are often defined in terms of 'skills'. Thus, in *Play and Learn* (2000: No. 78, p. 2), 'the simple activities and stories are also designed to teach children basic moral and social skills and are all based on the findings of academic research'.

As if this reassurance were not sufficient in itself, nearly all the magazines provide more detailed information for parents about each activity or section. In the case of the BBC's *Tell MeWhy*, this information occupies most of the inside front cover. Like its sister publication *Learning is Fun* (aimed at children aged 5–7), this magazine claims that it 'covers the curriculum' for children at the appropriate stage. Its 'Notes for Parents' are in six sections, corresponding to the six areas identified in the government's curriculum guidance (cf. QCA, 2000); and in each case, the parent reader is directed to the relevant activities in the magazine itself. Meanwhile, the magazine also includes a separate advice page, full of information about 'early learning goals', authored by Education Editor Ann Smith, whose credentials as a former headteacher and OFSTED inspector are identified. In most other cases, however, these messages to parents are given in small print at the bottom of the relevant page.

This information serves two main purposes: first it defines the educational aims or rationale for the materials, and secondly it gives suggestions about how the magazines should be used. In providing an educational rationale, these messages use a quasi-scientific pedagogic discourse, with its own specialized vocabulary. Children 'extend activities', 'develop understanding', 'grasp concepts', 'compare and contrast', undertake experiments and 'creative activities' and practise 'skills'. Familiar everyday activities, described in the directions to the children as 'colouring in', 'drawing' or 'playing', are re-contextualized in this discourse as a matter of 'developing skills' in problem-solving, observation, manipulation and so on. Thus, parents are informed that 'colouring in helps children to develop colour and design skills and to practise pencil control'; while drawing a picture of a pet 'will help develop observational and imaginative skills' (*Fun to Learn: Friends*, 2000: No. 2, pp. 14, 19). Even apparently 'fun' activities will develop skills that can be used in more obviously educational activities at a later stage. Thus, in finding their way through a maze in *Toybox* (1999: No. 85, p. 8), 'young children have a chance to practice [sic] manipulative control for developing their hand-writing'; and in playing hide-and-seek in *Tell Me Why* (n.d.: No. 4, pp. 10–11) children are developing 'awareness of space' in line with the government's recommendations on 'physical development'.

In the case of the BBC magazines and *Learning Land*, these notes extend to providing suggestions to parents about ways of helping their children with the activity, or continuing to practise the same 'skills' at other times. Thus, in *Playdays* (2000: No. 331, p. 2) parents are urged to 'encourage [children] to be inquisitive, noticing things and asking questions'; and to use 'mathematical vocabulary' in 'everyday situations' in order that children can hear and understand it. Children are to be urged to spot and identify insects in the garden or park, and make a book with pictures of insects, giving details of where and when they were found. In the case of *Learning Land*, these suggestions are particularly extensive, occupying a separate panel headed 'Dear Parent' at the side of each page. They are typically written in imperative mode:

Dear Parent, This activity encourages your child to think about how plants grow and to explain a simple life-cycle. Share a practical activity with your child. Sprinkle some cress seeds on damp cotton wool. Talk about what happens each day as tiny sprouts, and then green leaves appear. Explain that plants need different things in order to grow, similar to human beings. Most plants need soil, sunlight and water. Talk to your child about how useful plants are . . . (*Learning Land*, n.d.: No. 3, p. 30)

These instructions effectively provide parents with a lesson plan, and a script for interacting with their child, which will explain the fundamental principles of plant biology.

Like a great deal of parenting advice, instructions of this kind seem almost designed to induce feelings of inadequacy and guilt (cf. Urwin, 1985). The adoption of a potentially intimidating specialist vocabulary, combined with suggestions that require significant additional investments of time and resources, may lead many parents to feel that they are simply 'failed teachers'. As in some current initiatives in relation to 'family literacy', there is a sense in which parents are implicitly defined as deficient in pedagogic skills.

In one or two instances, potential anxieties that parents might feel about the inadequacies of their own knowledge are forestalled:

The scientific reasons why this ('FREE') magnifying glass makes things look bigger are probably quite difficult to explain to young children. However, at this stage it is enough that they use it, appreciate that it does change the size of things and are interested enough to ask why. (*Playdays*, 2000: No. 331, p. 2)

Ultimately, however, it is not enough for parents simply to allow their children to make their own way through the magazine. Parents must be on hand to help, answer questions, correct mistakes, explain and reinforce the major learning points – and in the case of the more elaborate 'make and do' activities, to actually perform the tasks themselves while their children look on. One of the words most frequently used to describe parental activity (particularly in the BBC magazines) is 'encourage': thus, for example, parents are frequently told to 'encourage' children to 'practise their maths skills' (*Noddy*, n.d.: No. 137, p. 13) or to 'develop their speaking skills and increase their vocabulary' (*Toybox*, 1999: No. 85, p. 28). Quite how parents might deal with children who do not respond appropriately to such 'encouragement' is not addressed.

The magazines thus clearly position the parent as a pedagogue or teacher – albeit one of a relatively traditional kind. This is nowhere more explicit than in *Tell Me Why*, which comes complete with a ('FREE') set of reward stickers:

If you buy BBC *Tell Me Why* magazine for a year it will help your child work their way through the early learning goals for the nursery and reception curriculum. Reward your child with a smiley face sticker when they finish each activity. (n.d.: No. 4, p. 2)

In other instances, such as the National Curriculum compatible 'work-books' accompanying the *Redan Fun to Learn* titles, children are invited to

become self-regulating learners, ticking the activities they have completed on a checklist and cutting out their own 'certificate of fun' (and then collecting the set). In some instances, parents or children are enabled to mark the work using the answers provided. Despite the fun and the smiley faces, learning is clearly defined here as a matter of *work* – indeed, of children 'working their way through the early learning goals for the curriculum'.

As Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) argue, such an approach serves to regulate the activities, not just of children but also of parents. 'Good' parents are those who use everyday activities – playing in the park, cooking or shopping – as opportunities for pedagogy. The 'skills' (such as those of numeracy or literacy) that are entailed in such activities are no longer incidental, but instead become the main focus and rationale of the task. In the process, everyday activities are 'curricularized': that is, they are re-contextualized in terms of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 1996), and broken down into component 'skills' that can be identified and assessed (whether formally or informally). In Walkerdine and Lucey's (1989) study, this pedagogic mode was particularly characteristic of middle-class mothers. Middle-class mothers are more likely to be constructed by researchers and educational professionals as 'sensitive' parents, while working-class mothers, more pre-occupied with the demands of work, are judged to be wanting. In this way, they argue, mothers are made to bear the entire responsibility for their children's later educational success: the regulation of children thus becomes simultaneously the regulation of mothers.

## Popular pedagogies

If these magazines are effectively selling a particular version of 'education' to parents – who are, in effect, their primary target market – what do they offer to children themselves? In fact, there is some diversity in the pedagogic strategies adopted by the titles we have surveyed.

At one end of the scale is *3Rs Budgie* (n.d.: No. 8), which (as its title suggests) adopts a no-nonsense approach to teaching what it calls 'the basics of education'. The magazine is aimed at 'Key Stage 1: 3–7 Years' (although in fact Key Stage One is five to seven years); and according to the slogan on the front cover, it is about 'Giving our children a head start in life'. Unlike many of the BBC and Redan magazines, however, *3Rs Budgie* contains virtually no guidance for parents. In a sense, its educational 'pitch' is obvious. The magazine is organized in three sections, labelled 'Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic'. Each section is clearly separated on the contents page; the bottom of each page has a colour-coded strip with the relevant 'R'; and each section also has a distinctive background colour and design (letters on an

orange background for reading, numbers on a blue background for arithmetic). Each of the three Rs is thus clearly defined as a discrete 'skill' or curriculum area; and it seems to be vital for children to be reminded which of them they are practising in any given activity.

The reading section contains four stories. The most substantial of these features the character of Budgie the Little Helicopter (from the books written by Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York, and now the hero of a children's television series). In 'Budgie and the Big Wheel' (3Rs *Budgie*, n.d.: No. 8, pp. 2–3), Budgie and his aeroplane friends Pippa and Chuck ('the big American Helicopter') are assigned by Lionel (the Aircraft in Charge) to help at the national glider championships at Barnsdale Airfield. Once their work is complete, they decide to fly over to look at the funfair, going against Lionel's instructions. There, they discover that the big wheel is stuck and people are trapped. They radio Lionel, who arranges for the fire engines to come, and the people are rescued. On their return to the airfield, Lionel tells them off for going against his instructions; but he is also pleased that they have made it possible for the people to be rescued.

The structure of this story is repeated in two of the other stories in this section: 'The Magician's Apprentice' (3Rs *Budgie*, n.d.: No. 8, pp. 8–9) and 'Ostrich Learns a Lesson' (3Rs *Budgie*, n.d.: No. 8, pp. 14–15) (which is a version of the fable of the Hare and the Tortoise). In all three cases, children (or surrogate children) are shown to be in the wrong: like Budgie, they fail to follow adults' instructions, or they think they are more capable than they are, and so discover the error of their ways. The world of Budgie, like that of *Thomas the Tank Engine*, *Noddy* and others, has an almost feudal hierarchy, as perhaps befits their exclusively rural settings. Lionel (the equivalent of Thomas's Fat Controller) enjoys unquestioned authority, and sports a handlebar moustache to prove it; while Pippa (like the female carriages in *Thomas*) simpers uncertainly, with her blonde hair tied in a pink polka-dot bow. Significantly, the Budgie story is followed by a series of nine comprehension questions, set by Lionel: 'Lionel is the Aircraft in Charge at Harefield Airfield. He likes everything to be well understood. See if you understood the story by answering his questions.'

This highly didactic approach is reflected throughout the 3Rs *Budgie* magazine. Narratives and images are used as a pretext for practising de-contextualized language and arithmetical skills. In the writing section, for example, readers are invited to 'take a coloured pencil and underline all the words in the story beginning with T or t'; while another story is used as the basis for a cloze exercise. There is also a considerable amount of copying of single words: 'Read the words and find them in the picture. Now copy the words onto the dotted lines.' 'Drilling and skilling' of this kind is even

more apparent in the arithmetic section. While there is some minimal attempt to put the activities into an 'everyday' setting – 'Patsy has 22 coloured pencils. If she gives half of them to her sister, how many will each of the girls have?' – many of the questions are simply in the form of abstract sums – ' $\pounds 1.30 + 52p = \dots$ '. This section concludes with two pages of multiplication tables and an answer page. While there are couple of invitations to draw pictures, and a 'pinboard' of readers' pictures, the emphasis throughout the magazine is very much on the mastery of de-contextualized skills.

At the other end of the pedagogic scale is *CiTV Telly Tots*. While this magazine (like *3Rs Budgie*) bears the logo of the National Reading Campaign, its educational intentions are much less overt. There are no references to National Curriculum Key Stages, or to specific areas of the curriculum; nor is there any reference to 'learning' or helping your child 'get ahead'. The contents are identified by title, and there are no sections for different 'skills'. On the inside front cover is 'a note to Grown-up Telly Tots':

We hope that you find plenty in *CiTV Telly Tots Magazine* to entertain and stimulate young minds. Your help and involvement makes all the difference to encourage confidence and an inquisitive nature. At first your child may just enjoy looking at the pictures and talking about them, however, here are a few suggestions to get the most from these pages . . .

- Go at your child's own pace.
- Offer lots of praise.
- Point to the page numbers and say them out loud.
- Point to the objects in the pictures, this helps to develop observational skills. (*CiTV Telly Tots*, 2000: No. 2, p. 2)

As this implies, the pedagogy here is much less didactic. It is primarily concerned with building young children's confidence and self-esteem. 'Skills' of observation or number recognition are of secondary importance. In fact, the activities in the magazine are similar to those in many of the others: there are stories with comprehension (or 'what can you remember?') questions; pictures with things to point out and name; and matching and colouring-in activities. On the other hand, there are none of the workbook-type activities of *3Rs Budgie*, such as pages of sums or lists of words to copy. While the 'note' above clearly implies a pedagogic role for parents, there are many fewer pedagogic instructions addressed directly to children, of the kind that appear in many of the other magazines.

Significantly, *CiTV Telly Tots* also has a much more personal address. On the inside front cover, four children's TV presenters introduce themselves and welcome the reader to the magazine; and they recur on several other pages.

(Only two magazines in our sample feature pictures of their editors, the BBC's *Toybox* and *Tell Me Why*; and in both these cases, their address is more directed towards parents.) This is also one of the very few magazines in our sample to feature photographs of its child readers, on a 'Tots Topics' write-in page; and here again, children are invited to write to two of the presenters, rather than to a faceless editor.

This informality also extends to the visual design. The layout of the cover and the first inside pages of *CiTV Telly Tots* is much less segmented and orderly than most of the other magazines. Images of the characters break out of their frames, and there is heavy use of circles and ovals rather than squares and rectangles. Throughout the magazine, coloured balls and stars float across the page, and much of the text is set on wavy lines rather than straight horizontals. The uneven 'bubble-writing' typeface used for the magazine title and for many of the stories is also less formal than those used in many of the other magazines.

Finally, the stories themselves avoid the moralizing tone identified in *3Rs Budgie*. Indeed, few of the stories feature adult figures at all; and where they do appear, their authority is frequently undermined. Thus, in 'Dog and Duck' (*CiTV Telly Tots*, 2000: No. 2, pp. 16–17), a group of toys come to life and play games when their owners' backs are turned; and in 'Sooty Heights' (*CiTV Telly Tots*, 2000: No. 2, pp. 20–22), the puppets get up to their familiar anarchic tricks as the expense both of the hotel's owners and of Albert Bottomley, the pompous hotel critic from the local newspaper.

In all these respects, therefore, the approach of *CiTV Telly Tots* is much less formal and didactic than that of *3Rs Budgie*. The learner constructed by this magazine is more autonomously 'active' than the passive recipient of the *3Rs* tests. Yet the irony, of course, is that this apparent pedagogic progressivism arises in the context of a much more overtly commercial product. As noted above, *CiTV Telly Tots* is effectively a collection of trailers for ITV children's programmes. The world that is referenced here is not, by and large, the real world of children's lives, or even the notional reality of school textbooks (Patsy and her 22 coloured pencils). On the contrary, it is the imaginary world of Sooty Heights and Mopatop's Shop. *CiTV Telly Tots* positions the children and parents who read it not primarily as students and teachers, but as fellow consumers of media culture. There is a form of 'active learning' here, but it is one which is carried out almost wholly within the fictional universe of the television characters.

The BBC's magazines could be situated around the middle of a continuum between these two approaches. In comparison with *3Rs Budgie*, the style of illustration is more contemporary (and more studiously multicultural) and the stories are less moralistic. These magazines generally take

a broader view of the pre-school curriculum, and the rhetoric of the advice to parents (like that of *CiTV Telly Tots*) is relatively liberal. The emphasis here is very much on proceeding at the 'child's own pace', and on 'fun' as well as 'developing skills'. Nevertheless, parents are clearly intended (as it says in *Bob the Builder* magazine) to 'work through' the magazine with their children in order to capitalize on the 'good educational opportunities' it provides. Thus, standard primary school classroom activities like comprehension, sequencing, counting and handwriting exercises are regular features. Similarly, the magazines present information in a declarative way that is characteristic of school textbooks: they use short, active sentences in the present tense in order to establish the unambiguously factual nature of what they describe (MacLure and Elliott, 1992). This factuality is supported by high quality colour photographs, which serve as incontestable evidence of 'the world around'. Questions to the reader are mostly on the level of information retrieval ('can you spot the stick insect in this picture?'): there are few open invitations to speculate here, and no sense in which knowledge might be seen as controversial or open to debate.

On the face of it, however, the learner constructed by these magazines is distinctly 'active'. While character-based magazines like *Noddy* and *Spot* tend to carry more stories, most of the BBC magazines contain several time-consuming 'make-and-do' activities, many of which would require extensive parental involvement. Thus, in addition to colouring-in, matching and writing activities, for example, our edition of *Tweenies* encourages children to make a family tree with photographs, and to cut out and stick in a series of pictures of 'modern inventions' in the playroom. As befits its theme, *Bob the Builder* contains even more elaborate activities, although parents are advised to warn their children about the dangers of playing near building sites or copying 'anything that they read about'. In some cases, these activities receive curriculum justification: thus, according to the BBC's *Toybox*, making Christmas cards 'involves DESIGN and TECHNOLOGY' (sic) – although, as they admit, 'younger children will need some help to make the card'. It is in these activities in particular, perhaps, that the domestic regulation of children's learning is simultaneously the regulation of parenting (Walkerline and Lucey, 1989).

Of course, some of these differences between these magazines might be explained in terms of the target age group. While *3Rs Budgie* claims to be directed at children between three and seven, it is perhaps implicitly targeting the older end of this age group. *CiTV Telly Tots* makes fewer assumptions, for example, about its readers' ability to read or write (let alone subtract or multiply). In general, the magazines in our sample aimed at younger children tend to be less overtly didactic. The BBC's *Teletubbies* magazine, for



example, is clearly aimed at younger children: according to its advice for parents, its emphasis is on play, imagination and creativity, providing a 'foundation for future learning' rather than explicitly teaching curriculum-related skills. By contrast, its *Bob the Builder* magazine is explicitly directed towards developing skills in literacy and numeracy, in addition to touching on curriculum areas such as science and history. Nevertheless, there seems to be considerable latitude in terms of how the publishers define their target audience – not least for economic reasons. Young children are, by definition, a small market; and the more publishers seek to cater for distinctions within that market, the smaller it becomes. To acknowledge the considerable differences between two-year-olds and five-year-olds would, in these terms, be a very costly move. Judging by the readers' letters pages, all these magazines seem to be read by (or at least purchased for) a broad age range between three and seven.

Questions about how these magazines might be used and interpreted are ultimately beyond the scope of this article. To be sure, such texts could be seen as powerful sources of identity formation: they effectively 'position' parents and children as subjects of a particular form of educational discourse. By exploiting anxieties (among parents) and capitalizing on the pleasures of popular television (for children), they offer a potent combination of 'education' and 'entertainment' that helps to reinforce particular definitions of what counts as legitimate knowledge. The pedagogies they embody can thus be described as forms of 'regulation' – both for parents and for children (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989).

However, this is not to say that they are necessarily effective in what they set out to achieve. Parents' and children's readings of this kind of material are likely to be diverse; and they will not necessarily correspond to the intentions of their producers. Parents may buy the magazines out of a sense of educational responsibility, or simply of guilt – or just to keep their children quiet as they wheel them around the supermarket. Parents and children may 'work through' them studiously from cover to cover – or they may just glance at them in an odd moment, pausing only to look at the pictures. The 'educational' elements may be a convenient alibi for parents, who need to be reassured that they are adequately performing their role; while for children, the 'entertainment' aspects may provide the necessary sugar for the pill of learning. Children (and indeed parents) may actively resist the pedagogic positions they are encouraged to occupy: they may read 'critically', against the grain of the magazines' educational intentions, or merely with a degree of casual indifference. In the end, how 'education' and 'entertainment' are defined will depend, not just on the texts themselves, but on the everyday negotiations of family life and on the everyday practices of readers.

## Conclusion

So how do we understand this recent proliferation of 'edutainment' magazines aimed at pre-school children? On the one hand, we can see it as a consequence of the increasing commercialization of children's media culture, and the need to exploit successful copyrights across a range of media. On the other, we can also see it as a consequence of the growing competitiveness generated by government policy on education, and the increasing levels of anxiety and guilt this produces among parents. The point here is that – far from being opposed – these two aspects of the phenomenon are intimately related, since both are a matter of *selling* – selling entertainment to children, and selling education to parents. Far from entailing a form of passive consumption, both also involve a form of activity – activity that is *simultaneously* 'educational' and 'entertaining'. We believe that the issues at stake here have a relevance well beyond this case study – for example, in understanding the role of information and communication technologies in education, the growing involvement of private corporations in schooling, and the changing relationships between parents, children and the state. As the commercial media play an ever-greater role in education, the forms and sites of learning may be changing in contradictory but nevertheless far-reaching ways.

## Notes

1. This material is drawn from an ongoing ESRC-funded project 'Changing sites of education: educational media and the domestic market' (grant number: R000238218), based at the Institute of Education, London University.
2. These titles represent the full range that we were able to obtain from a series of visits to high-street newsagents in January and April 2000. They may not constitute a complete and comprehensive sample, although they almost certainly include the market leaders.
3. Quotations here are from an interview with Gillian Laskia and Ann Smith of BBC Worldwide, conducted by Hannah Davies and Peter Kelley in November 1996. This was part of an earlier ESRC-funded project on 'Children's media culture', 1996–8 (grant number: L126251026).

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