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What values do primary children attribute to everyday objects within their experience?

Yvonne Allison  
School of Teaching and Education Studies, Leeds Metropolitan University

Abstract  
Design and Technology in the National Curriculum requires children to evaluate the work of others. Through the criteria that the children use to evaluate everyday products the question of values and valuing arises. Young children are avid consumers and users and are allowed to make many choices related to what they use, eat and wear. These choices reflect their likes, dislikes and the values that they hold. This paper attempts to ascertain the values primary children attach to a particular everyday product within their experience, in this instance carrier bags.

The objectives for this research were to find out:  
i. what values nine and ten year olds attribute to carrier bags from three different retail outlets  
ii. where these values came from  
iii. what these values are based on.

Introduction  
What do we mean by values? We all have them even though sometimes we might not always be aware of them. Basically values relate to the attitudes and convictions we hold as individuals and attitude to all aspects of our lives. They are all pervasive and indicate what we hold dear and might aspire to.

Eldridge\(^1\) says that,  

Attitude formation... is closely related to the development of cultural norms and desirable symbols. Sometimes referred to as values these are general concepts of what a society or its subgroups deem desirable.

Each culture creates its own forms, both necessary and desirable. They permeate our lives and when we begin to make choices about products we use, eat and wear we often unwittingly display the values and attitudes that shape us. Is it function we value, novelty, environmental concerns, the latest technology, or something else? What do the products we choose say about us as individuals, for say something they do. In my view we communicate something to others through the things we own and use. But where are the values in products? They are embedded in every product but are not clearly visible. As Layton\(^2\) says,

... the simple observation of an artefact does not allow us to discern the inherent values directly. Values - technical, social, political, economic, aesthetic, environmental or ethical - do not stand out on the surface of, say, a telephone handpiece, a hairdryer or a torch.

Given that as adults we display certain values when selecting products, what type of values do young children display and where might these values come from?

As a result of a casual remark made to me by a teacher, that the children in her class ‘wouldn’t be seen dead with a Netto bag’ - I decided to pilot some product related questions in a local school with eight to nine year olds to try and find out whether other children held similar values. Working with small groups of five children and using carrier bags from three different retail outlets - Marks and Spencer’s, Morrisons and Netto, together we evaluated the bags. In general the bag that was liked least was the Morrisons bag.  

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The value the children brought to bear here was based on the function of the bag - the handles easily broke as it was made from thin tissue plastic. The bag that
was liked the most was the Marks and Spencer’s as this was deemed to always ‘have something nice in it’. The question that prompted children into revealing the social values they attached to these products was, ‘What kind of person do you think might use this bag? The responses were immediate. The M&S shopper was ‘rich, posh and selfish’; the Morrisons shopper was the sort of person who goes to ‘a usual type of shopping place’, but the Netto shopper was ‘thick’. When questioned further about what they meant by thick, they said ‘stupid’. People who used Netto were also deemed to be ‘tramps’ and people who had to walk to the shops. By classing others these children were simultaneously classing themselves. Clear stereotypes had emerged and it seemed that Chaney was right when he said that, 

... consumer habits are being increasingly experienced by individuals as the basis of their social identity

The following research was conducted with twenty-five nine to ten year olds in focus groups of five, in a school in the suburbs of Leeds.

i. What values did nine and ten year olds attribute to carrier bags from three different retail outlets

Working with groups of five children we evaluated three different types of carrier bag - M&S, Morrisons and Netto. The carrier bags were laid out on the table and immediately there were what I can only describe as stifled laughs. This in itself was an indicator of what their values might be. Together we established what the products were and what people used them for before considering their similarities and differences. They were said to be the same in that they were all carrier bags, the same shape, all made of plastic and all had handles. The differences were in the type of plastic, colour, lettering and size. All the children had shopped at M&S and Morrisons and at least one in each group, sometimes two, had shopped at Netto. Two girls in one group would not admit to shopping at Netto, but later disclosed that they had. We discussed the types of products that might be found in the bags. Those who had shopped at Netto described what they had bought there, ice-cream, cleaning materials and beans.

When asked which bag they liked best, twenty-one of the twenty-five said M&S, because of the colour, three said Morrisons and one said the Netto bag because it was strong. The bag liked least was unquestionably Netto. Nineteen out of twenty-five did not like this bag, because, ‘It wasn’t a good shop and some did not like the colour of writing, it was boring. Six children liked Morrison’s bag least as this bag would break easily. It was made from thin tissue plastic.

When it came to identifying the sort of person who might use M&S, they all agreed amongst themselves that it was rich and posh people, so I asked them if we were all rich and posh - after all we had agreed that we used M&S. The children were adamant that they themselves were not rich and posh. M&S shoppers were also old - between forty and fifty. The Morrisons shopper was a ‘normal person’, and in their opinion like ourselves. The Netto shopper was someone who lived in a council house, back-to-back or even lived rough on the street. They were also said to be old age pensioners, that is, older than the M&S shopper. Clear stereotypes and social values emerged as they had done earlier. These are also evidenced in the children’s drawings and comments. (figures 1 and 2)

ii. Where do these values come from

The children were asked where they got their ideas from concerning the type of people who used these carrier bags and all indicated that they did not come from adults but from each other. Having said this, some children whose parents had shopped at Netto, voiced the comments of their parents, for example - ‘It’s cheap and crummy’, so I think it is likely that this attitude does originally stem from a few parents and then is rapidly endorsed by peer group pressure. The values of the few then become the values of the many, but the values held by all children may not always relate to those held by their own parents. The children were asked whether they would say anything to a friend who brought something to school in a Netto bag and all said that they would either ‘take the mick’ or say something behind that person’s back.

Davies indicates that teasing is a marker of a non-friend, for it is regarded as inappropriate.
This lady is very rich
lived in a very wealthy bygade

Figure 1

This man is a butcher
he lives in a council flat
and is a bit of a punk

Marks and Spencer

This man
has a smart
suit and a pin
walking cane for fun.
He has the pin and
shiny shoes.

N.H.a

This lady has
a plain walking
stick to help her
walk. Her coat is
worn, so are
her shoes.
Her dog's coat
is dull and tatty.

Figure 2
behaviour amongst friends. This teasing may be product related -

... making out that the others style is inferior or wrong... Teasing can generally be taken to be offensive, and not many children can receive teasing with cool.

All of them said that they would be embarrassed to bring a Netto bag to school. The reason they all gave was that people would think you hadn’t got much money and that it would spread round school. This was of great concern to them and such comments act as negative reinforcers in a process termed 'operant conditioning' by Skinner. I asked them whether they would have said something to me had I walked in with a Netto bag, and all said that because I was an adult they would not, but they would have thought it. Some even said that they would try to talk me out of shopping at Netto! We discussed how a person might feel if fun was made of them for using such a bag and the children were quite aware that people’s feelings would be hurt.

One boy admitted that he would tease someone who came to school with a Netto bag but didn’t know why he would. Another said that the reason for laughing would be,

"Because it’s cheap there’s got to be something wrong with it."

Perhaps this notion of cheapness is also related to the bright yellow and black of the Netto bag. Hine says that,

Clear eye-catching yellow evokes from the Japanese the same adjective - “cheap”- that it does amongst Americans and Europeans. Its sheer luminosity and vibrancy appear to deprive it of character.

The words used to describe Netto over and over again, were ‘cheap’, ‘nasty’ and ‘rubbish’, therefore I think that by association, as a person who shopped there, you acquire these descriptors too.

The anecdote told to me by the 11-year old daughter of a colleague confirms the way in which values such as these can affect behaviour. Her best friend took something to school in a Netto bag. She was scorned by many of her peers for being poor and was greatly distressed. This not only affected the behaviour of the children concerned but altered the shopping pattern of the parents who began to shop at Morrisons instead. As Kline states,

... the consumerist vector in our society sometimes appears disturbing when we see it reflected and expressed in children’s behaviour.

iii. What are these values based on

The products we wear, consume and use help us to construct our own identities and signify our status in society and the lifestyle we have or at least aspire to. Kline states,

It is extremely difficult to disentangle user-related function from the symbolic meanings in even the most practical objects. Even purely functional things serve to socialise a person to a certain habit or way of life and are representative signs of that way of life.

Bruner noted that,

... the consumerist vector in our society sometimes appears disturbing when we see it reflected and expressed in children’s behaviour.

Whiteley states that there are four main lifestyle categories, but that dependent on the particular product we buy we may move between these categories,

- traditionalist’ or ‘mainstreamers’ (those who seek the predictable and reliable...);
- ‘achievers’ (those with wealth and the desire to surround themselves with objects which reflect their status);
- ‘aspirers’ (consumers who are highly status conscious and who seek the latest fashionable products); and ‘reformers’ (consumers with a conscience...)

The social values attributed by the nine and ten year olds to these carrier bags appear to place them within the category of ‘aspirers’. By association with the products of M&S they can aspire to become rich and posh. It appears
that an everyday product as mundane and commonplace as a carrier bag has become a new marker for different social classes. Williams also proposes this-

Fundamental class difference are re-created in terms of manufactured goods.

Conclusion
As a pilot study with a group of children in one school I cannot infer that these values attributed to carrier bags will be commonly held by the majority of children of a similar age in all schools and therefore the scope of the research needs to be extended using schools in different socio-economic settings. Each school is a culture in microcosm and its members may well not subscribe to the values set out here.

I think that the social values which emerged during the course of this pilot study may be regarded as a ‘cultural virus’, transmitted from mind to mind by products. These products acts as vehicles for the transmission of ideas. This idea is proposed by Richard Dawkins. He believes that a new replicator is abroad which brings about evolutionary change far faster than biological genes.

... I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet. It is staring us in the face... it is achieving evolutionary change at a rate which leaves the old gene panting behind.

These new replicators, Dawkins says, are ideas. These he calls ‘memes’ and memes are invisible and carried by ‘meme vehicles’. So for example, pictures, books and products would all be examples of memes. They carry embedded ideas from mind to mind through a process of cultural transmission. This transmission is rapid. Dennett suggests that,

Memes now spread around the world at the speed of light...They leap promiscuously from vehicle to vehicle.

The mundane carrier bag is, I think, one such meme vehicle.

The whole issue of embedded values needs bringing into the open in the classroom as part and parcel of children’s work in design and technology. These values also need to be acknowledged as vital agencies of a child’s social competence and part of childhood culture. Products that children use help them to establish their cultural childhood identities within their peer group.

As Kline rightly says of children,

They care about what the products ‘say’ about who they are as well as what the products will ‘do’ for them.

There are various ways of addressing the many issues that values raise once they have been brought into the open through the process of designing and making, with particular emphasis on product evaluation. The notion of stereotypes in particular, needs to be challenged. This may be through religious education, philosophy for children, role play or raising economic awareness. We may well not change children’s minds about what they think, but we need to make them aware of what they are thinking, why they are thinking it, and the consequences of their thinking, for example the way in which it might affect behaviour. It may also raise our own awareness of the values we hold dear, but may be unaware of and lead us to question our own thinking.

Bruner states that as we belong to a democratic culture,

It demands that we be conscious of how we came to our knowledge and as conscious as we can be about the values that lead us to our perspectives. It asks that we be accountable for how and what we know. But it does not insist that there is only one way of constructing meaning, or one right way.

References


