

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



PROPAGANDA: BRITAIN SINCE 1930

Teachers' notes

My Year 6 class were studying *Britain since 1930*, and I wanted them to understand the power of methods of propaganda used by the Nazis. The lesson is still relevant, as in today's culture of 'spin', an understanding of propaganda is vitally important in the education of politically literate democratic citizens. I also wanted them to understand something of what children during that particular time were exposed to, to be persuaded to follow such beliefs.

In addition, one child had shown elements of being taught racist views. Having been on the receiving end of racial taunts as a boy, from my background as a British forces child born in Germany, I felt I could understand the negative attitudes that many minorities face when they are described as different from the perceived norm. I taught the lessons as a relatively new teacher into the profession, but I felt strongly the need to show the children that following the norm can be dangerous.

So I invented a fictional politician with controversial views, Mr Busterbank. The name was meant to show elements of material wealth (bank) and strength (buster). I introduced him through two invented newspaper articles, then in role as the man himself I visited the class to be interviewed. His views were both nationalist and slightly xenophobic, with emphasis on what children would gain by supporting him, thus downplaying his other aims and opinions.

The lessons played a major part in forming my future style of allowing children to discover for themselves rather than me informing them of my point of view. Indeed, it has made me acutely aware that the slightest misinformation can become our children's future beliefs.

The three lessons encompassed not only history, but also literacy and citizenship. The children's literacy was extended at one level through speaking and listening, and reading and writing in the newspaper genre, but also at a higher level – the literacy of inferring, reading between the lines, and drawing conclusions about meaning and message.

There was throughout a clear citizenship intention in the teaching. I wanted the class to understand the power of propaganda, and of how convincing it could be. The values that underpin democracy were at the heart of the lessons.

Year group/class and teaching time

Year 6, mixed ability. Taught over 3 hours.

Once the children had discovered Mr Busterbank's secret propaganda intentions, I taught them about the persuasive techniques the Nazis had used, making this the basis of many of the citizenship lessons I taught before their transition into KS3.

Learning objectives

For the children to:

- understand the power of propaganda without reference to the legacy of the Nazis
- understand the importance of politics and its potential dangers
- experience propaganda at first hand
- express their understanding in the form of newspaper articles.

Key questions

How are we to judge Mr Busterbank, the new Minister for Culture?

Resources

Two newspaper articles about Mr Busterbank, in a fictional newspaper, *The National Truth*:

Article 1: Minister appointed for new culture position

Article 2: Reformer takes on Brussels

You also need a photo of Josef Goebbels, labelled Mr Busterbank. You can download this photo from, for instance,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Goebbels

The teaching [Lesson 1]

Episode 1

Focus: Reading a newspaper article; identifying key words.

I gave out Article 1 to the children without explanation and asked them to look at it, then to note any particular words they thought were important. These included his name, *Busterbank*, and:

Labour leaders were celebrating ...

British Bulldog ...

almost immediately ...

future of the country ...

It was interesting, and pleasing, that the children picked up on the loaded vocabulary.

Episode 2

Focus: *Reading a picture; recording ideas.*

Next I asked the class to look at Article 2, starting with the photograph of Busterbank. I told them to put down the ideas that sprang to mind as they studied it. The photograph is in fact of Josef Goebbels, Minister for Propaganda under the Nazi regime. However, I did not tell the children this.

I intentionally showed Josef Goebbels looking out to the future, hoping that this positive image would benefit the lessons. I also used him because he was a lesser-known figure, knowing that if I gave the class a photograph of Adolf Hitler their response would be biased by previous knowledge.

Their ideas about Goebbels' photograph included:

He looks like a truthful businessman – he is serious.

Sophisticated.

He seems to be rather young which may suggest he can say things, but not do them.

He's looking onwards.

Full of ideas.

He looks clean, but sly. (The sly description came from a more able child who had a particular talent for thinking differently. I intentionally didn't repeat this sly comment so the children wouldn't respond to it.)

Some of the children had clearly picked up their ideas from the article they had read, while others were interpreting what they saw in his face.

Episode 3

Focus: *Posing questions.*

The final task of the lesson was for the children to formulate questions that newspaper reporters might ask. I told them that Mr Busterbank would be arriving at the school, and would hold a press conference for reporters from several newspapers.

I set them to jot down questions to ask Mr Busterbank, in preparation for his visit. The reporters spent the last 10 minutes of the lesson devising questions for the Minister.

Previously I had taught the children about how a story can have different versions and why newspapers might report things differently. I had also asked them to inform me of their parents' newspapers.

From the list of newspapers I asked them to imagine they were asking questions relevant to this readership. So hopefully a tabloid sensationalist newspaper would respond about the strengthening of the armed forces, and the subsequent 'improvement' of their position. This last part was for differentiation, as I had a small group who were very perceptive.

The teaching [Lesson 2]

Episode 1

Focus: Role play: interviewing Mr Busterbank.

The next day I appeared in class in role as Mr Busterbank, wearing a smart suit, and with my hair parted and combed in a style similar to Hitler's. I held a press conference. It should be noted that my plan was to speak the truth, but a version of the truth that echoed Nazi propaganda: very nationalistic, promising action that would improve on their current state, but not mentioning anything to do with the Holocaust.

The children as reporters asked their questions. I answered at length, declaring that:

- *Britain would become great again and should not give in to other countries, because then they would be safe in their homes – conveying the need to be aggressive.*
- *Britain would win another war if one came, as our forces would have better arms and training so it would be a walk-over.*
- *There were too many foreigners in Britain – Britain should be for the British, and we should be proud of Britain. The exact nature of the 'foreigners' I left vague for the moment.*
- *Our society was in trouble, and I would tackle drugs, crime, teenage pregnancy, vandalism and theft.*
- *I would give more money to our defence, and to education and the NHS. I would build a network of roads that would mean no more traffic jams and we would be the envy of the world.*
- *I would build youth clubs so that young people would not turn to crime (many of my children had a small minority of teenagers hanging around the streets in their local area) and club members would have a nice uniform like a football strip that they would wear so people could spot them. (Later, after two more lessons, I showed them the Hitler Youth with their uniforms, and what happened.)*
- *I would stop pollution and nuclear waste dumping by other nations in Britain. (This was meant to be a smokescreen obscuring the real agenda of Mr Busterbank.)*

I could see that I had swayed many of the children, though others picked up quickly on the inherent racism of my remarks. Indeed, they questioned Busterbank's belief in Britishness, but I used their desire for a better future to divert them from the racism.

Episode 2

Focus: Writing in the newspaper genre, making judgements.

Finally, the 'reporters' wrote their articles for their various newspapers. These ranged from tabloid to broadsheet articles. Many of the children's headlines revealed a good sense of the nature of the newspaper for which they were writing, for example:

Britain will become great

Busterbank's plans are on the way

We don't want Frogs here

The last example was written by the child who had shown racist tendencies. I allowed this language in the initial lessons, but during my citizenship sessions over the coming term, I taught them about the awareness and sensitivity that becoming an adult demands.

Some children, unprompted, made the connection between Mr Busterbank's and Hitler's views and methods (e.g. the headline: *New Minister Busterbank Becoming Like Hitler?*).

(During my initial three propaganda sessions, I played down this point. However, after the 'de-briefing', I rewarded this child's perception with complete backing for his unorthodox opinions.)

In the third lesson Mr Busterbank continued with his insidious propaganda.

Learning outcomes and reflection

Through the teaching, the children experienced propaganda at first hand and were, understandably, susceptible to Busterbank's promises to tackle drugs, vandalism and other social ills. They also responded positively to his promises to make Britain great. I was pleased to see that about a third of the children regarded Mr Busterbank with some scepticism, and disapproved of his racism. However, I played down their views, as the Nazi party did, with promises of future 'glory'.

The majority of the children showed some understanding of the power of propaganda and were able to critique it, at least partially.

A few spotted the similarity in the ideas of Mr Busterbank and Hitler, which is exactly what I had hoped. Others accepted uncritically what Busterbank had said, or appeared actively to approve of it (see, for example, the tabloid article in the children's work).

I believe that all children should be taught about the importance of political propaganda and its potential dangers, and these three lessons confirmed my belief.

I followed up the Busterbank role play by discussing how Hitler and Goebbels used similar methods to win support and spread racism.

Nuffield Primary History project

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