

3. Implementing Mandates in Media Education: The Ontario Experience

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ABSTRACT

This analysis presents a report on media literacy education in Ontario. It provides an overview of the curriculum for media literacy that is mandated by the provincial government. Specifically, it describes various approaches for teaching about the media as well as the theory that underpins curriculum documents and classroom practices. The analysis also describes the work of key organizations and partnerships that helped prioritize media literacy education, and offers suggestions for the successful development and implementation of media literacy programs. The conclusion discusses the challenges and future directions for media literacy beyond the Ontario case, focusing on nine key tenets for success in implementation worldwide.

KEY WORDS

Media literacy, key concepts, cultural studies, critical pedagogy, implementation, interpretive communities, civil society, globalization.

1. Introduction: Media Education in Ontario

Many educators today believe that in this information age, it is just as important to be literate about screen-based and electronic media as it is to be literate about print. In Ontario, new curriculum documents at the elementary and secondary levels identify the necessity of an expanded definition of literacy. Not surprisingly, the introduction to the documents includes this quote from UNESCO (2003): «Literacy is about more than reading or writing –it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. Those who use literacy take it for granted –but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today’s world. Indeed, it is the excluded who can best appreciate the notion of literacy as freedom».

In 2006 and 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education released revised curriculum documents that mandate media literacy from grades 1 to 12. Specifically, media literacy is now a distinct strand in the Language programme at the elementary level (grades 1-8) and in the English programme at the secondary level (grades 9-12). The curriculum documents identify media literacy as one of four program strands that also include oral communication, reading and writing (Ministry of Education, 2006: 13).

These curriculum documents represent a significant milestone in the history of media education in Ontario. After more than 2 decades of existing on the margins, media literacy has moved to centre stage.

In Ontario, media literacy is defined as «an informed and critical understanding of the nature of the mass media, the techniques used by them and the impact of these techniques». Media literacy also gives students the knowledge and skills «to use the media in an active, critical way» (Ministry of Education, 2006: 156).

The inclusion of media literacy in the curriculum means that the topics and texts being studied in the classroom have changed. Today, elementary students analyze or «read» such texts as storybooks (the old paradigm), DVD covers, cereal boxes, and t-shirt logos. Secondary students explore news reporting on global conflicts, the marketing of feature films and even the social network You Tube. Thematic units in the curriculum often embrace an interdisciplinary approach and address a wide range of topics, including: advertising and public relations; representations of gender, violence and race in the media; the role of the media in global citizenship; and new converging technologies.

Media analysis and production in the curriculum focus on three key areas: how a text is produced (including questions of ownership and control); the ideology and values being conveyed through the media; and the ways audiences are targeted by, and respond to, media texts. Classroom work offers the students the opportunity to analyze and produce a variety of print and electronic stories and develop a critical understanding of the roles that media and technology play in their lives.

Two recent studies examined the use of the media by young people across the country. The Canadian Teachers’ Federation (2003) found that 48% of students ages 8-15 have their own television, and watching television is a daily pastime for

75% of students in grades 3-10. Media Awareness Network (2005) found that 37% of students in grades 4-11 have their own computer, 23% have their own cell phone, and 22% have a webcam for personal use. Thirty percent of secondary students have personal websites.

Aware of his students' media use, one English and Media teacher recently stated, «There are few curricular expectations more crucial than media literacy. The ability to navigate a complex and challenging cultural world helps students define themselves within an increasingly anachronistic school system».

There are four overall expectations for students at both the elementary and secondary level in media literacy. Students are expected to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of a variety of media texts.
- Identify a variety of media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques associated with them are used to create meaning.
- Create a variety of media texts for different purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions and techniques.
- Reflect on and identify their strengths as media interpreters and creators, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in understanding and creating media texts (Ministry of Education, 2006: 147).

2. A Theoretical Framework

Based on the expectations outlined in the curriculum documents, teachers develop programmes and / or units of study that will enable students to demonstrate the expectations stated for each grade level. In developing these programmes, it is important for teachers to have a strong conceptual framework. The following eight key concepts, devised by the Association for Media Literacy (AML), provide a theoretical base for all media literacy in Ontario, and give teachers a common language and framework for discussion. These concepts underpin the curriculum documents and provide a strong organizational framework, as well as a number of useful entry points for studying the media.

- All media are constructions. Media present carefully crafted constructions that reflect many decisions and are the result of many determining factors. Much of our view of reality is based on media messages that have been pre-constructed and have attitudes, interpretations and conclusions already built in. The media, to a great extent, present people with versions of reality.

- Each person interprets messages differently. People who watch the same TV show or visit the same Web site often do not have the same experience or come away with the same impression. Each person interprets or negotiates a message differently based on age, culture, life experiences, values and beliefs. Audiences are capable of accepting certain messages and rejecting others, based on their own personal background.

• The media have commercial interests. Most media are created for profit; advertising is generally the biggest source of revenue. Commercials are the most obvious means of generating revenue, although advertising messages take many forms, including product placement (paying to have a product prominently displaying in programmes or movies), sponsorships, prizes, pop-up ads and surveys on the Internet, celebrity endorsements or naming a stadium or theatre.

• The media contain ideological and value messages. Producers of media messages have their own beliefs, values, opinions and biases. These can influence what gets told and how it is told. Producers must choose what will and will not be included in media texts, so there are no neutral or value-free media messages. As these messages are often viewed by great numbers of viewers, they can have great social and political influence. We need to decode media messages about such issues as the nature of the «good life», the virtue of consumerism, the role of women, the acceptance of authority, and unquestioning patriotism.

• Each medium has its own «language», techniques, codes and conventions. Each medium creates meaning differently using certain vocabulary, techniques and styles, or codes and conventions. In a movie or TV show, when the picture dissolves, it indicates a passage of time. Hot links and navigation buttons indicate you can find what is needed on a Web site. A novelist must use certain words to create setting and characters, while other media use images, text and sound. Over time, people understand what each technique means, become fluent in the «languages» of different media and can appreciate their aesthetic qualities. Developing media literacy skills enables learners not only to decode and understand media texts, but also to enjoy the unique aesthetic form of each. The enjoyment of media is enhanced by an awareness of how pleasing forms or effects are created.

• The media have commercial implications. Media literacy includes an awareness of the economic basis of mass media production. Networks look for audiences to be delivered to sponsors. Knowledge of this allows students to understand how programme content makes them targets for advertisers and organizes viewers into marketable groups. The issue of ownership and control is of vital importance at a time when there are more choices but fewer voices. Ninety percent of the world's newspapers, magazines, television stations, films, and computer software companies are owned by eight corporate conglomerates.

• The media have social and political implications. An important dimension of media literacy is an awareness of the broad range of social and political effects stemming from the media. The changing nature of family life, the use of leisure time and the results of televised political debates are three such examples. The mass media can serve to legitimize societal values and attitudes and reinforce positions of cultural dominance and power. The media also have a major role in mediating global events and issues from civil rights to terrorism.

• Form and content are closely related in the media. Making the form / content connection relates to the thesis of Marshall McLuhan that «the medium is the message».

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That is, each medium has its own special grammar and technological bias and shapes the content in unique ways. Thus, different media might report the same event but convey different impressions and different messages (Association for Media Literacy, 2005).

3. How did We Get Here? The Story of the AML

Ontario was the first educational jurisdiction in North America to make media education a mandatory part of the curriculum. One group is largely responsible for the continuing successful development of media education in Ontario: the Association for Media Literacy (AML). The AML is a voluntary, non-profit organization made up of teachers, librarians, consultants, parents, cultural workers, and media professionals dedicated to promoting media literacy. Founded in 1978, the Association for Media Literacy was the first comprehensive organization for media literacy teachers in Canada.

In the late 1960s, the first wave of media education began in Canada under the banner of «screen education» which focused on film and television. In 1969, CASE (Canadian Association for Screen Education) sponsored the first large meeting of media teachers at Toronto’s York University. As a result of budget cuts and a back-to-the-basics philosophy that dominated the 1970s, this first wave of enthusiasm faded. However, due to the dedication and perseverance of small groups of media educators, media education steadily gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1986, the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Ontario Teachers’ Federation invited members of the AML Executive to write the «Media Literacy Resource Guide» for teachers. This landmark publication has been used in many English-speaking countries and has been translated into French, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish. Prior to the release of the «Resource Guide», the Ministry arranged for the AML authors to give a series of in-service training days to teachers across Ontario.

Also in 1986, Ontario’s Ministry of Education released new guidelines that emphasized the importance of teaching media education as part of the regular English curriculum in grades 7-12. The AML responded by planning two successful international media education conferences at the University of Guelph in 1990 and 1992. Each conference attracted over 500 participants from around the world.

In the early 1990s, in the back-to-basics climate of educational reform in Ontario, AML successfully lobbied the Ministry of Education for the inclusion of a media studies component in the elementary language curriculum, as well as a media studies strand in every English course at the secondary level and a stand-alone course in media at the senior secondary level. This was a major achievement which laid the groundwork for the revised curriculum documents that would come later.

In 1998, the AML received international recognition for its work. In presenting an award to the AML, the World Council on Media Education described the AML as «the most influential media education organization in North America». The year

2000 brought another major achievement with Summit 2000: Children, Youth and The Media –the largest international conference ever held in the world. This Toronto conference brought together 1,500 delegates from 55 countries and provided a unique opportunity for those who use and teach about the media to meet and talk with those who produce and distribute it.

More recently, in 2005 and 2006, members of the AML executive were involved in the Ministry of Education writing teams responsible for the revised elementary Language and secondary English documents. For the first time, media literacy was mandated in every grade from 1-12. Also in 2005, AML executive members wrote the «Think Literacy» documents for media literacy, which provide teachers with strategies for teaching media literacy in Language Arts and English classrooms.

Along with the provincial government, the AML works with faculties of education, school boards, media industries, and parent and community groups on a number of media literacy initiatives:

- The AML was involved in planning the first National Media Education Week, along with the Canadian Teachers Federation and Media Awareness Network. Special events and festivals are held across the country to celebrate the work of students and teachers.

- Members of the AML wrote and currently teach Additional Qualifications courses in Media offered through York University and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The courses provide teachers with much-needed professional development. Upon completion of the 3-part programme, teachers receive a «specialist» certification.

- The AML offers a series of events for members and the general public, some available as web casts, to promote media education and offer professional development for teachers. The AML website (www.aml.ca) provides teachers with access to lesson plans, articles and reviews, various postings for news and upcoming events, and links to other significant media sites.

- The AML supported the genesis of sister organizations in most Canadian provinces and their umbrella organization, CAMEO, and originated the concept and purpose of the «Media Awareness Network».

The AML recently celebrated its 30th anniversary. Many people find it hard to believe that it is possible for a voluntary, non-profit organization to have achieved so much. The success of the AML is really due to a small, dedicated group of individuals who are classroom teachers –people passionate about media literacy and who recognize its value in the lives of their students. These teachers understand the importance of creating classrooms and learning opportunities that include students' knowledge and experience, and prepare them for life and work in our information age. These teachers have developed resources, lobbied government officials, networked with international colleagues, planned conferences and events, and lectured widely on the importance of media literacy. Since the early days of the AML, members have presented workshops across Canada, and in Australia, Japan, Europe, Latin

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America and the United States. The success of media literacy in Ontario is due to their efforts. The «payback» for their years of hard work is the legacy that they have created for media literacy in Ontario and across Canada.

4. Implementation

4.1. Theory

Canadian teachers are, like most informed media educators, participating in an eclectic circus. They are enthusiastic pragmatists, selecting from a rich menu of critical, cultural, and educational theories and filtering them for classroom use.

As a generalization, there seems to be a wide consensus about contextualizing media education within the frameworks of the British inspired «cultural studies» paradigm, an interdisciplinary approach to the construction of knowledge which problematizes texts and foregrounds representations of gender, race and class. The critical premises behind the 1986 «Media Literacy Resource Guide» (strongly influenced at the time by UK media educator Len Masterman) and the media textbooks –the majority written by the AML Executive– are compatible with comparable material emanating from Australia and the UK. Of paramount importance is the influence of the discourses that are attached to the subjects that teachers are trained in, in most cases English.

Audience study has fore-grounded the importance of the pleasures of the text. It has helped teachers conceive of viewers as social subjects with multiple subjectivities. Similarly, texts are now seen as being polysemic –they convey many meanings and hence elicit many different readings.

Audience study can lead teachers to learn about interpretive communities – blogs on North American television programmes, web sites containing information and gossip on daytime soap operas, feature films, or the latest video game. When teachers examine their students’ cultural practices through knowledge of audience theory, they cannot help but change the dynamics of their classrooms.

The emphasis on finding out what the students already know about media and how they make sense of it should be the starting points for all media teachers. One of the strengths of media literacy education is that it validates the knowledge that students already have about the media, it connects students’ learning to the world beyond the classroom and provides opportunities for authentic learning. It also validates and strengthens the students’ position within the institution, by bringing their «outside» reality into the classroom, and building a space that is both authentic and transformational.

The work of UK media educator David Buckingham and his colleagues has contributed significantly. The recent work of educators such as Julian McDougall and Andrew Burn has increasingly emphasized the pedagogical value of production (as opposed to analysis only) as a means of developing and reinforcing conceptual understandings.

4.2. Classroom Practices

There are several approaches for teaching media literacy. Many teachers make use of more than one approach in the classroom, shaping the curriculum to meet the needs and interests of their students. Whichever is pursued, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of analysis –the deconstruction of a media text or message, and production –learning how media industries operate and developing the skills and knowledge needed for students to produce their own stories.

- A medium-based approach involves the study of a particular medium, such as television or film. The characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of a particular medium are explored, often within a particular historical or social context.

- A thematic approach involves exploring a particular theme across several media. An issue such as gender representation can be identified and examined in terms of how it is communicated in a variety of media texts, how it has been created, and how it affects audiences.

- In many classrooms, a media studies unit is a stand-alone unit within an English course. Teachers select a genre or theme and study it exclusively for two to three weeks.

- Integrating media studies into other areas of the curriculum is a holistic, multi-perspectival approach that can be beneficial for creating authentic learning experiences for students. This approach recognizes that because of the pervasiveness of the media in our society, it is difficult to study the media in isolation. This approach emphasizes the importance of text and context: the analysis of any media text is accompanied by a study of the relevant historical, social, political and economic contexts.

Thematic Approaches: Two examples

- **Global Education.** Thematic units integrating global education and media literacy have become popular in recent years, as a way of addressing and updating citizenship education in schools and responding to increased emphasis on character development. Integrating media literacy and global education emphasizes the importance of active involvement with the media, connecting it to democratic rights, active citizenship, and technological literacy.

Media literacy and global education involve analyzing media texts for the representations of local and global events and issues and the ways in which these representations help to shape the meanings and importance we assign to them. Teachable moments such as the coverage of the Asian tsunami, the events of 9/11 or the death of Princess Diana require in-depth media analysis. Ultimately, the goal of these integrated programmes is to provide students with the opportunity to examine the ways in which the media represent the events and challenges of our global community and develop an understanding of themselves and their place in it. Central to this are issues of media ownership and control and questions of access, choice and range of expression.

- **Popular Culture.** When teachers are encouraged to study a variety of texts and make some surprising cultural insights, it is usually through a unit on popular culture that we are offered such possibilities. Popular culture embodies the dreams, desires and aspirations of society, opening up pleasures as well as controversies like: Will video games ever become respectable? Popular culture includes celebrity culture and horror films, shopping malls and Barbie dolls, rap artists,

and the annual extravaganza known as the Superbowl. Any one of these media texts would constitute an in-depth curriculum in itself.

Using the «key concepts» as an organizing framework, teachers can provide a rewarding, experiential potpourri of diverse, popular culture texts, raising issues and making insights based on emerging socio-economic, political and aesthetic messages.

4.3. Programme Implementation

At the classroom level, the implementation of media literacy curriculum has varied from school to school and district to district. Some school boards have established media education as a priority and have supported it with ongoing in-service and the appointment of curriculum consultants for whom media literacy is a focus. Other school boards have left the implementation to individual departments within schools.

Ontario teachers' federations –Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) and Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF)– have recently become more involved in supporting professional development for teachers in media literacy through organizing conferences and sponsoring teacher attendance. The fact that there have been waiting lists for some of these conferences attests to teacher interest and the demand for professional development.

The dedication of the individual teacher greatly influences the extent and quality of media education in the classroom. Associations such as Ontario's AML continue to be the strongest ongoing supports for teachers pursuing expertise in media education.

4.4. Partnerships and Resources

There are a number of individuals and organizations that have had a significant impact on the growth of media literacy. Partnerships have been key in providing the support that teachers need for professional development, and for accessing and incorporating relevant material in the classroom.

There are a number of excellent media education texts written by Canadians since 1987. The more recent ones include the second edition of «Mass Media and Popular Culture» (Nelson Education, Canada, 1996) by Barry Duncan et al. and «Media Sense» (Nelson Education, Canada, 1998) by David Booth et al, which is in three parts –one for each of grades 4, 5, and 6.

The Media Awareness Network or MNet (www.media-awareness.ca) was formed to become a clearinghouse for educational resources. MNet hosts a large database of sample teaching materials from many sources, both Canadian and international, in English and in French. MNet has also developed some of its own resources for parents, students and teachers, and has developed valuable «Web Awareness» resources for helping students develop critical thinking skills for using the Internet.

For many years, CHUM Limited was an invaluable industry partner in promoting media literacy. In 2007, CTVglobemedia acquired CHUM Limited and is continuing

as the leading media company that offers support to media educators and media education organizations. By providing commercial-free original programming and accompanying study guides written by media educators (www.muchmusic.com/mediaed/index.asp), by funding media education initiatives and institutes throughout Canada, by donating airtime and web space to the issue, by providing funding to media education organizations, and by promoting National Media Education Week, CTVglobemedia encourages a heightened awareness about the nature of the media. The company has also produced a number of Public Service Announcements about media literacy which are broadcast on their many local and specialty television stations across the country.

The media literacy programming developed by CTVglobemedia stations has proven to be very popular with teachers and students. Using recording artists and their music as an entry point, the MuchMusic-produced programming has explored such issues as role of the artist in social and political activism, the sponsorship of musicians and concerts by cigarette and beer companies, and the representations of sexuality in music videos. Bravo!, Canada's arts channel owned by CTVglobemedia, offers «Beyond the Screen», a programme which examines a first-run theatrical feature from a media literacy perspective and provides a study guide on its website www.beyondthescreen.com.

Concerned Children's Advertisers has developed PSAs and curriculum resources on media literacy for elementary students. The resource kit «TV and Me» encourages children to think critically about the images and information they receive through television.

As a country whose population of 30 million stretches for some 4,000 miles across a continent, we are aware of the challenges to professional development on both the provincial and national levels. Produced by Face to Face Media and the Jesuit Communication Project (JCP), «Inside Plato's Cave» is a 13 module, online course in media literacy for teachers which will be available in 2009. Face to Face Media and the JCP were also responsible for developing «Scanning Television», a collection of short videos copyright cleared for classroom use.

In Ontario, one of the long term strategies of the AML is to work with educational institutions such as York University and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto to develop opportunities for those preparing to enter the teaching profession to learn about media literacy. Collaboration with the Centre for Media and Culture in Education (CMCE) and the Media Education Working Group (MEWG) at OISE, as well as the National Film Board (NFB) has resulted in the development of a number of events and resources for teachers.

5. Factors For Success: Beyond the Ontario Case

5.1. Nine Key Tenets for Media Literacy Development

The Ontario experience reveals nine factors which are crucial to the successful development of media education.

- Media literacy, like other innovative programmes, must be a grassroots movement, led by teachers who know what programs are important for their students' life and work today. Teachers need to take a major role in lobbying for media literacy.
- Educational authorities must give clear support to such programmes by mandating the teaching of media education within the curriculum, establishing guidelines and resources, and by ensuring curricula are developed and materials are available.
 - Faculties of Education must hire staff capable of training future teachers in this area. There should also be academic support from tertiary institutions in the writing of curricula, in sustained consultation and in research.
 - In-service training at the school district level must be an integral part of programme implementation.
 - School districts need consultants who have expertise in media literacy and who will establish communication networks.
 - Suitable textbooks and audio-visual materials which are relevant to the country/area must be available.
 - A teacher support organization must be established for the purposes of workshops, conferences, dissemination of newsletters and the development of curriculum units. Such a professional organization must cut across school boards and districts to involve a cross section of people interested in media literacy.
 - There must be authentic evaluation instruments for media programmes and student achievement.
 - Because media education involves such a diversity of skills and expertise, there must be collaboration between teachers, parents, researchers and media professionals (Pungente, 2002).

5.2. The Future of Media Literacy

While media literacy education has made remarkable progress in Ontario, there are significant challenges still to be addressed. Though the curriculum documents have been developed for media education in Ontario schools, support for professional development and teacher resources at the institutional level –i.e. government or faculties of education– has been scarce.

Media Awareness Network's (2000) research into the status of media education found that «officials from provincial Ministries of Education repeatedly stated that although media was strongly integrated into the English Language Arts programme as another kind of «text», there was little professional development activity attached to this new discipline, and no money for new resources».

Media Awareness Network (2000) also found that there are other areas of concern. «Teacher apathy, overwhelming curriculum changes, high demands for accountability and reporting, a lack of resources, and pressures to integrate new technology into classroom learning, have all contributed to a general unwillingness on the part of teachers to 'go the extra mile' for additional professional development».

The greatest obstacle to providing professional development opportunities for teachers seems to be funding and accessibility. While the provincial curriculum documents are in place now and media literacy is a mandatory part of that curriculum, few programmes in teacher training have followed. Teachers continue to look to their school boards, federations and the Association for Media Literacy for professional development opportunities.

It is hoped that programmes offered by Canada's 35 faculties of education will begin to include teacher training in media literacy in order to prepare new teachers to implement the new curriculum. Currently, some faculties are beginning to introduce media literacy into their pre-service programmes, but so far instruction in this area for teacher candidates has been extremely limited. Every year, hundreds of new teachers enter the profession with little or no media literacy training.

Whatever the future holds for teacher education, there are several topics and issues that will continue to be important in programmes for both teachers and students. Four examples are listed below.

- **Media and Globalization.** The increasing trend towards globalization of culture has been fuelled, in part, by trans-national media corporations and recent mergers. This trend suggests some important theoretical and practical challenges to issues of cultural sovereignty, democracy and national identity. Also worth considering is the impact of the media on the notion of global citizenship and what we are told unites us as a global community (Is it our humanity or our consumer goods?). The impact of the media on local and national cultures will continue to be a topic for the classroom, as will concerns about access to, and control of, media technologies.

- **Web Literacy.** New digital media, including the use of Facebook, Myspace and YouTube have created collaborative, participatory media which have transformed media culture and youth in the last five years. Of paramount importance for a relevant classroom, media education must conceptualize and incorporate these new dimensions into media studies –in other words, media literacy must also include web literacy. Web literacy provides students with the opportunity to evaluate information presented in an on-line environment and assess the benefits and liabilities of social networking. Students also learn to synthesize multiple sources of information; to consider and weigh issues of copyright and privacy; to understand the impact of social networking on politics and global issues; to consider deeper issues of virtual realities and futuristic notions of cyber-existence.

- **Media Literacy Across the Curriculum.** English teachers are usually the ones who are required to implement media studies even though it could be placed comfortably in the social sciences. Analysis of documentary films is needed in history; media and gender studies should be part of sociology. The crucial point here is that all subject areas can benefit from teaching 'about' and not just 'through' the media, otherwise educators neglect the use of important critical tools of media literacy.

- **Public vs. Private Space.** Since the 1990s, teachers have had to respond to major societal changes, including the impact of corporate intervention in the classroom.

Culture critics have alerted teachers, decision makers and opinion leaders to the erosion of public space because of the corporatization of education. Companies such as McDonalds offer teachers free business spreadsheets; Coca-cola offers marketing kits to school libraries; Monsanto offers science resources for teachers. Even more controversial have been the junk food and clothing commercials that are part of Channel One –a 10 minute current affairs broadcast with 2 minutes of commercials that is available to schools in the U.S. That Canada was able to defeat the equivalent network (the Youth News Network) is a triumph, but the school system is still vulnerable to the seductions of sponsored programmes and media technology. If media education is to be relevant, it must address this controversial trend.

5.3. Media Literacy: An Opportunity and An Entitlement

Though educators still face challenges in the area of teacher training in Ontario, and indeed across the country, a number of factors indicate significant growth in the practice of media education.

With the release of the revised curriculum documents in 2006 and 2007 and media literacy officially «on the books», enthusiastic teachers have the opportunity to open up their classrooms to the study of media and popular culture and advocate at the school and district level for resources and professional development.

New teachers entering the profession seem to be willing to embrace the expanded definition of literacy, and less intimidated by new technologies that are available for use in classrooms. These teachers often bring an energy and enthusiasm for media studies and pop culture to the classroom, perhaps because of their own contemporary media interests and involvement. New teachers also seem to be open to new pedagogies and the possibilities offered by interdisciplinary programmes.

Developments in critical pedagogy have also had a positive impact on media literacy. This has included a shift in recent years to student-centred learning, where teachers are involved in less of a banking model of education, and more of a transformational one. Critical pedagogy, with its focus on the construction of knowledge, and on institutions and power, privileges students' experiences and knowledge in the curriculum. It also emphasizes authentic learning by providing students with the opportunity to transfer new knowledge and skills to life and work beyond the classroom and apply this knowledge in practical ways.

Canadian media educators have always recognized the importance of the inquiry process and the acquisition of critical thinking skills. Media literacy students are given the opportunity to examine the stories and information they're receiving today, and explore why these stories are being created and how they're responding to them. Classroom dialogue often involves such questions as: «What can you learn from media stories and images, about our society and culture, and about how you want to live? From whose perspective are these stories being told? Whose voices are missing? What is your story? How can media and technology be used to convey the identity, beliefs and values important to you?» These questions are part of a dialogic approach

that enables students to develop essential skills in critical analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Ultimately, the value of media literacy education lies in helping students develop knowledge and understanding of how the media operate, how they construct meaning, how they can be used, and how to evaluate the information they present. Media education should be seen as an entitlement both for our students and for the community at large. The fact that much of our media use now is for creative and/or for social networking purposes should remind us that media education has become participatory, collaborative, and as one teacher said, «Let's not forget, enjoyable». While some educators insist on denigrating the mass media and popular culture and wish to shield young people from its alleged harmful effects, we should make the case that our endeavour is not about protection but rather about preparation. As the AML (1989) succinctly puts it, today «media literacy is a life skill».

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