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MEDIA LITERACY IN SUPPORT OF CRITICAL THINKING

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The increased availability of digital post-production techniques to educational and domestic markets and the proliferation of media broadcasting channels reinforce the need to develop media literate learners who are producers as well as consumers. Such an approach reflects the key concept underlying media literacy education (MLE), which is also referred to in this study as critical media literacy education (CMLE). Thus, the aim of the study presented in this paper was to examine critical thinking (CT) abilities about the media – the level of CML – among elementary school pupils (aged 10-12) in Israel. It was tested through their systematic exposure to a media program based on the critical inquiry approach of the BFI model (Bazalgette, 1989). This model was chosen because it offers a flexible and open learning-instruction environment. It encourages learners to engage in constant investigation of media texts taken from their daily socio-cultural milieu through skeptical questions. In this sense, the model concepts follow the purpose and main notions of CT education: to equip learners with the power to reflect and to probe through skeptical questioning (McPeck, 1981) and to develop thinking skills for deliberating about reason and truth behind events in daily life (Haloren, 1995).

This research study was conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Liverpool (Feuerstein, 2002) and is intended to

illuminate and expand on the findings of a small but growing body of research on the connection between the two subjects area, CT and ML (Buckingham, 1993; Coles, 1994; Quin & McMahon, 1993; Luke, 1997; Neilsen, 1998). Both of them are anchored in the ideas of education for democratic values, the freedom to think and criticize the reality and society in which we live, by virtue of our being autonomous individuals in a democratic society (Yuval, 1985). In this sense, learning facts about the media – a dominant institution in our society – is intertwined with thinking. Learners are given the opportunity to think deeply about problems in a particular area, (the media) from a familiarity with it, and to apply logical patterns in dealing with problems that arise (Salomon & Perkins &, 1989).

Based on the above, this research study provides further support for what was found in previous studies showing that systematic learning of a program that integrates critical thinking in a subject area helps to develop learners' thinking faculties (Weinberger, 1998; Zohar, 1996).

The contribution and originality of this study lie in its clarification and sharpening of the CT perspective in the media context and its attention to a question that has not yet been studied sufficiently (Piette & Giroux, 1997): evaluating the CT skills of children in the higher grades of primary school. It also facilitates understanding of the interrelationship between learners' social contexts and the level of critical discourse, and in this specific case, in the context of television and advertisement texts.

Research methodology

Evaluation in this study entailed the use of a holistic approach to reflect the interrelationship between CT and ML through the CML skills of 273 pupils from six primary schools. The research study combined quantitative and qualitative methods.

Two media tests previously employed by Quin & McMahon (1993) were analyzed statistically to explain the effects of diverse variables (types participating in the program; gender; socioeconomic level, age, origin – born in Israel /Russian immigrants) and their interrelationships with pupils' CT toward popular television series and advertisements from the press. By using

three reflexive qualitative methods – class observation of media lessons, teacher interviews and focus group interviews with pupils – it was possible to elicit participants' thinking and interpretation of the media in different social contexts in class and with their peers (Wolcott, 1973; Buckingham, 1993; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Sabar, 2000). From the data gathered from personal interviews with teachers and from observations of media classes, it was possible to learn about the contribution of the MLE key concepts and its special learning environment characteristics to promoting pupils' thinking abilities.

Results and implications

Broadly speaking, the study found that systematic learning of CML supports pupils' CT about TV series and newspaper advertisements. It also showed that there is a tendency to transfer such learning even some time after the program has ended. Similarly it was found that the program especially advanced the CT abilities of pupils rated as low and medium school achievers and of those coming from a low-medium socio-economic level.

These findings point to the importance and contribution of CMLE to the elementary school curriculum and to the special characteristics of the learning environment of the media program. The combination of the teaching of thinking skills with media knowledge, augmented by active experiences of the learners with communications technology nurtures what Perkins (1992) defines as "thoughtful learning." Such learning connects the school with the social-cultural reality outside of it. Thus, the results of this study also reinforce the need for changes in the elementary school teaching-learning style and for nurturing reciprocal ties between the program and the school curriculum. The implication for education is that schools must serve as a lever for intellectual development, enabling learners to think critically about their environment (including the media) and to know how to respond to it properly.

Promoting students' CT abilities about the media is made even clearer and more palpable on the background of terror in the U.S. on September 11, 2001. The spectacle of the crumbling of the twin towers in New York and the demolition of one wing of the Pentagon in Washington was viewed live around

the world. The horrifying pictures broadcast on TV, printed in the newspapers and described by newscasters on radio and TV demanded that we utilize our thought processes regarding the media and the events themselves. It caused us to understand more deeply how the media and the events they describe reverberate in our lives as free citizens in a democratic country.

A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection, not an invitation to hypnosis." - Umberto Eco

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