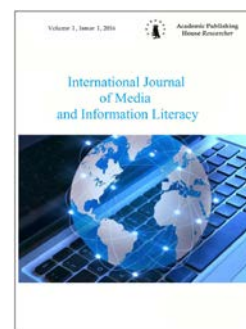


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Necessity for Media Education in Early Childhood Programmes in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Hong Kong, like any other cities of the 21st century, is characterised by various sources of media for education, advertisement, relaxation and entertainment. Young children are immersed in the rich mass media environment whether at home, at school, or on the streets. The messages contained in these media sources are delivered in various forms and are meant to achieve specific goals for specific groups of people. While media education has been introduced in some primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2015), less has been said and done about the same in early childhood programmes (Cheung, 2012). This article builds a case for an urgent need for the introduction and implementation of media education in early childhood programmes in Hong Kong.

Keywords: media education, early childhood programmes, Hong Kong, learning, media literacy.

1. Introduction

Mass media exert influences across all sections of humankind from infancy to adulthood. Such influences have increased in intensity and variety following the advance in information technology so common worldwide. Mass media not only reflect peoples' values, attitudes and norms but also shape the same (Wayne, 2001). For this reason, mass media have being described as one of the "four educators" others being teachers, parents and the physical environment (see Edwards, et al., 1998; Elkind, 1991). It could be argued that the younger the age the more the mass media effects and persistence of such effects due to children's critical stage of development. Experiences children receive before primary education have been found to determine later life (Heckman, 2004; 2006; Young, 2002). Hence, the types and ways the messages in media are presented to young children matter. The types and modes of presentation need to be developmentally and culturally appropriate (Wayne, 2001) to avoid children's vulnerability to "unacceptable" media messages. For this to be realised, parents and teachers need to work in partnership in the process of making young children media literate.

Media education or media literacy is an important curricular intervention for preparing young children for effective participation in their respective societies and the world in general. Media education has been found to be useful in the development of critical minds in young children (Wayne, 2001) as one aspect of multiple literacies (see Bonanno, 2002; Harste, 2003; Kellner, 1998). While media education has been introduced in some primary and secondary

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schools in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2005; 2015), less has been said and done about the same in early childhood programmes. The relevance for the media education in Hong Kong schools has been stressed (Cheung, 2004). This article builds a case for an urgent need for the introduction and implementation of media education in early childhood programmes in Hong Kong. It progresses through discussions about early childhood as a critical stage for learning, the concept of developmental and cultural appropriateness as applied to media literacy as well as media education and parental involvement. It then discusses media education pedagogy for early childhood education programmes. Finally, the article advocates for the introduction and implementation of media education in early childhood programmes in Hong Kong.

2. Materials and methods

This is a position paper. The author uses relevant and updated materials such as book chapters, articles, and reports to support the arguments. These materials are in the areas of media education, early childhood education, child development, neuroscience, learning, and pedagogy.

3. Discussion

Early childhood as a critical stage for learning

Studies from neuroscience and child development have consistently confirmed that early years in life are critical for the child's learning and the rest of his or her life. There are several child development and learning theories that stress the role of early childhood for leaning and future performance at school and in society. They include for example, those by Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner, Erikson, Bronfenbrenner and Montessori. In this section, I discuss the sensitivity of early childhood using Montessori's theory and the various studies on neuroscience as well as the empirical evidence in the field of early childhood education. Montessori's theory is used in this article due to what I consider as its explicitness and use of terms that signify sensitivity of early childhood. Although this theory, like others, was developed in a different socio-cultural context from that of Hong Kong, it provides an overview of the early years' sensitivity.

Montessori (1870–1952) divided development of a human being into 3 stages: absorbent mind (conception to 6 years), childhood (6 to 12 years) and adolescence (12 to 18 years) (Isaacs, 2007). The absorbent mind is viewed as consisting of 2 phases: unconscious absorbent mind (birth to 3) and conscious absorbent mind (3 to 6). She characterised the absorbent mind into 3 embryonic stages: physical embryo (embryo formation), spiritual embryo (post-natal emergence of child's uniqueness) and social embryo (internalisation of socio-cultural conventions). Basically, the absorbent mind as the term suggests, is the developmental period characterised by massive "absorption" of information from the environment as a result of the child's innate curiosity (which Montessori termed "horme") to make sense of the world around him or her. The unconscious absorbent mind involves children "absorbing indiscriminately from the environment that surrounds them" while the conscious absorbent mind reflects the "child's ability to organise and classify information, experiences and concepts" (Isaacs, 2007: 11). Montessori saw that this stage had critical periods associated with movement, language acquisition, routines, small details awareness, sense refinement and internalisation of cultural norms, values and beliefs.

Montessori described the childhood stage as characterised by children's keenness, eagerness and desire for belonging (Isaacs, 2007). It is the stage where the child acquires the cultural aspects of life. In adolescence, Montessori theorised that people's behaviour becomes turbulent, unpredictable and volatile (Isaacs, 2007). She further sub-divided this stage into puberty (12 to 13 years) and adolescence (15 to 18 years). As early childhood programmes in Hong Kong cater for children from birth to six, only the absorbent mind applies in this article.

Useful knowledge has been generated from studies in neuroscience, child development and animals all of which indicate that the first few years of life are critical. McCain and Mustard (McCain and Mustard, 1999: 21) summarise the main findings pertinent to the early years as follows:

(1) *Early brain development is interactive, rapid and dramatic;* (2) *During critical periods, particular parts of the brain need positive stimulation to develop properly;* (3) *The quality of early sensory stimulation influences the brain's ability to think and regulate bodily functions;* (4) *Negative experiences in the early years have long-lasting effects that can be difficult to overcome later;* (5) *Good nutrition and nurturing support optimal early brain and physical*

development and later learning and behaviour; (6) There are initiatives that can improve early child development.

There is sufficient empirical evidence that children's encounters in their early lives stay for a life time (Young, 2002). Insufficient or improper stimulation and experiences have been found to have negative effects that persist despite remedial actions and vice versa (Heckman, 2004; 2006; Loeb et al., 2004). These findings suggest that whatever young children are exposed to leave behind permanent or hard to die behaviours. Mass media as "another teacher" could be viewed as a tool for enculturation (Minkkinen & Liorca, 1978). Because young children learn differently from older ones, it is essential to discuss the concept of developmental and cultural appropriateness. This discussion would inform teachers and parents of the need for media modes and messages to be developmentally and culturally appropriate if children are to acquire the desired norms, values and world views.

Developmental and cultural appropriateness

Various sources of media exert immense influences and in a complex way to children's thinking, behaviour, world views and personality. These influences largely depend on the specific types of the media (and their envisaged messages) to which children are exposed, duration of the child's exposure to the media, age of the child and most importantly, the extent to which young children are media literate. It is almost impossible to detach children from encounters with the media (Cheung, 2016). This section illuminates the nature of the media and their influences on young children.

Media sources and their associated messages impact powerfully on young children's lives. There is an abundance of media sources available for young children in Hong Kong and the world in general. They include: the TV, the Internet, radio, media-print, computer games, film, toys and so on. Goldstein et al., (Goldstein et al., 2004) argue that children get and use information from these sources in a complex way. Information gained from one source is used to facilitate information acquisition from other sources which in turn influences children's participation in socio-cultural activities. Children's lives are surrounded by these various sources of media whether at school or home. The main question here is whether the messages contained in these media facilitate children's development and learning and maximise their participation in the social and cultural life.

One critical problem with media is that their messages are not necessarily direct and they need great care to understand and use. As L. Masterman (Masterman, 1994: 33) argues, "the media do not present reality, they represent it". This signifies the necessity for media education to be discussed shortly. Wayne (Wayne, 2001) critically writes about media culture and media violence for the purposes of making the TV work for young children. Violence, sex and sexuality (e.g. gender roles) are some of the media messages that could impact negatively on children's lives. Contrary to the earlier Aggression Catharsis Hypothesis where children's exposure to violent scenarios in media was believed to reduce violence in children, it has recently been proved the opposite of it. For example, Wegener-Spöhring (Wegener-Spöhring, 2004) conducted a study with fourth graders (ages 9 to 12) in 1985 and then in 2002 about the effects of violent messages in media upon children's lives. She hypothesised that children could demonstrate "balanced aggressiveness" (Wegener-Spöhring, 2004: 19) that is; children could limit their aggressive elements to the level of pretence rather than actual violence. Seventeen years later after children's exposure to violent messages, she found that children demonstrated both internalised aggression and externalised aggression. Statements such as "I've a Barbie, but I once tore off her leg" (Wegener-Spöhring, 2004: 30) and "When we make war too brutally, and my friend leaves for home crying ..." (Wegener-Spöhring, 2004: 29) were common. The main problem with young children is that they have difficulty differentiating between fantasy and reality. Too much exposure to TV that use violence as solution to problems, make children use violence as solution to problems in life instead of negotiations (Wayne, 2001). Further, it has been learnt that "Aggressive skills are acquired earlier and more easily than mental and social skills" (Wayne, 2001: 4).

In the same vein, sex and sexuality as well as use of alcohol and drugs messages, unless checked by media literacy, tend to rush children into adulthood too early or lead to development of undesirable behaviours. Such exposures tend to send the message to young children that "everyone

does it” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1996; cited in Wayne, 2001: 5). They lead to disappearance of childhood (Postman, 1984) or death of childhood (Buckingham, 2000).

The impacts of media are not only limited to the types of messages they portray but also depend on the length of time at which children become exposed to the sources of media. Wayne (Wayne, 2001) argues that despite the type of media messages, too much exposure to any one type of message do not yield good results. It could lead to consumerism and passivity as children fail to engage into active play. However, Goldstein et al. state that exposure to media, games and toys actively engage children mentally. In their studies, they found that “children are far from being the passive victims” (Goldstein, 2004: 3). Essentially the effects of any media source and/or message depend on the age of the child and whether such a child is media literate. It is hard to say when the child’s exposure to media is too long. This is also complicated by cultural variations where different expectations could be possible.

Media education and parental involvement

Media literacy or media education is one of the multiple literacies that has become to be critical in the 21st century for preparation of people to function maximally in their societies and the world in general. In early childhood education, media education, like any other intended knowledge, skills, dispositions and feelings expected to be developed in young children require parental involvement for best results. Parents are children’s “first and most continuous teachers” (Elkind, 1991: 77). The fact that children are continually immersed in rich media environment whether at school or at home justifies the need for parental involvement. In addition, the key issues addressed in media literacy as will be discussed subsequently, obligate programmes for young children to work in partnership with parents.

Media education is considered to be one of the school subjects or a cross-cutting issue across the school curriculum at levels of education other than pre-school programmes (see Cheung, 2012). In early childhood education, it could better be viewed as requiring integration with other subjects rather than as a distinct subject. Most early childhood curricula across the world advocate for integrated curricula (see Zhu & Wang, 2005). One of the reasons has been that young children are unable to view knowledge as belonging to specific disciplines or subjects. Indeed, media education itself as a form of literacy requires application to every aspect of life that involves meaning-making process. Kellner and Share (Kellner and Share, 2005: 369) define literacy as follows: “Literacy involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artefacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one’s culture and society”. Children engage in the process of message extraction from the various sources of media discussed in this article. It is these messages that affect children’s behaviour, world views and values. It is therefore important to provide young children with the necessary critical analysis tools suitable to their developmental level to prevent them from becoming victims of the “unsorted media messages”.

Most media educators have attempted to delineate the key issues that need to be addressed in media education. Kellner and Share (Kellner and Share, 2005: 374-377) revisited various literature and found that at least five issues were critical for one to extract messages from media critically. The next part discusses these issues while attempting to relate them to the age of pre-schoolers for developmental appropriateness.

Key issue 1. Principle of non-transparency: All media messages are “constructed”

In this issue it is cautioned that messages contained in media are not straightforward. Any person extracting a message from any media source needs to view media as problematic. This necessitates for the need of media literacy and heralds for the challenges teachers and parents have in making young children media literate. For example, how can parents and teachers work together to make young children capable of differentiating fantasy from reality, able to deduce multiple messages from a single media text and decide which one suits children’s age level and cultural life?

Key issue 2. Codes and conventions: media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules

This point cautions that there is no direct, one-to-one relationship between words, signs and symbols with the intended message (connotation vs. denotation issue). Kellner and Share (Kellner and Share, 2005: 374) argue that “With younger students the terms (connotation and denotation) are simplified into separating what they see or hear from what they think or feel”. In early childhood education, it could involve asking children to represent various concepts such as rich, poor, strong, weak, master, slave, police, prisoner, and so on using different methods of representing messages. These methods of representing messages would include use of pictures and creation of models.

Key issue 3. Audience decoding: Different people experience the same message differently

It has been established that people do not receive and interpret media messages the same way. One media source could lead to different messages for different people. Ang (Ang, 2002: 180) states: “Textual meanings do not reside in the texts themselves: a certain text can come to mean different things depending on the interdiscursive context in which viewers interpret it”. This fact helps to sensitise parents and teachers’ careful selection of the media sources to which they expose children bearing in mind that media texts are interpreted differently. In practice, teachers and parents could expose young children to one media source such as a cartoon, picture or toy and ask them to explain what it is all about. This helps children realise that one media text could mean different things to different people – a skill which is essential in life.

Cognitive flexibility characterised by children’s awareness of perceptual differences about the same phenomenon is critical in multicultural societies. As Hong Kong is steadily becoming a multicultural megalopolitan city, the necessity for this cognitive attribute can not be overemphasised. Kellner and Share’s (Kellner and Share, 2005: 375) statement about this attribute is illuminating: “The ability for students to see how diverse people can interpret the same message differently is important for multicultural education, since understanding differences means more than merely tolerating one and other”.

Key issue 4. Content and message: Media have embedded values and points of view

This point seeks to draw the attention of those interacting with media to be critical about the media contents so as to discern biases, objectivity or subjectivity caused by certain world views and values. The messages contained in media contents are hardly neutral; that is, they are always tied to particular socio-cultural positions. This is basically the essence of postmodernism. In programmes for young children, parents and teachers could use the various media sources discussed in this article to inculcate specific values and world views in children. It is also necessary to help children develop the awareness that media contents hold specific world views and are value-laden. This could be done by relating media contents to specific contexts or media producers. For example, adults could give children a certain statement and ask them to tell who might have stated or could state it and why.

Key issue 5. Motivation: Media are organized to gain profit and/or power

Here the main issue is to help young children gain an understanding that media are produced for various purposes including profit and/or power. It is the issue closely related to the issue number four above but here the main task is to facilitate children’s awareness of the media producers’ agendas. As Wayne (Wayne, 2001: 1) argues, “thinking and talking” together with children helps to address many problems and challenges posed by media.

4. Results

Media education pedagogy for early childhood programmes

Just as young children learn differently from older children so does the pedagogy for young children from older ones. Young children learn best through active engagement in hands-on activities and discussions based on daily life experiences (Katz, 1995). Shared learning between adults and children using materials available in the environment lies at the heart of pedagogy in early childhood programmes (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). This is the essence of scaffolding as used in the socio-cultural framework (Vygotsky, 1978) and “the child as an active agent of the environment

and the teacher as the facilitator of the child's development" in the Montessori theory (Isaacs, 2007). This section outlines the role of adults vis-à-vis the role of young children in the process of making young children media literate.

The five key issues outlined in the foregoing section serve as benchmark in the media education pedagogy. These issues constitute higher mental functions whose development in children requires children's active engagement in the learning process. Higher mental functions are mental processes such as perception, attention, memory and thinking which become internalised, mediated and used deliberately by children in problem situations (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Children need to develop specific strategies that they can use to critically engage with the media for the purpose of making sound judgements based on media messages. All the sources of media discussed in this article and others not discussed here should be used as avenues for shared learning between children and adults and among children themselves.

It has been argued in this article that young children in Hong Kong are continually immersed in a rich media environment. Within this environment children perpetually engage in "spontaneous learning" (Isaacs, 2007). Restricting children from contacts with media could not only be a formidable task but also deprivation of the rights of the child. To prevent "unacceptable" media messages from reaching children, other countries have enacted laws to deter media producers from the delivery of media such as advertisements that negatively affect children (see Wayne, 2001). While this strategy could work in some way, this article views pedagogical strategy as the most powerful alternative leading to development of critical minds that last for a lifetime.

The media-rich environment in Hong Kong needs a media education pedagogical intervention early in children's life for best results. The sooner the better and the later we attempt to introduce media education the less the results. Isaacs' (Isaacs, 2007: 13) characterisation of the environment and the role of adults and children in it is worthy quoting:

As the child responds to the stimuli within a given environment, be it at home, school or nursery, the adults present should observe and interpret behaviours according to the developmental stage of the child. With this in mind, they should ensure that the activities, materials, objects and occupations in the environment are brought to the attention of the child to facilitate, scaffold and extend developmental opportunities for the child. Adults, as well as child's peers, act to some extent as a catalyst in the maturation process, while the materials, objects and occupations within the environment scaffold the child's learning.

5. Conclusions

The influences of media on children's lives are immense. In Hong Kong, the media-rich environment would be expected to exert tremendous influences on young children's lives. Probably, the younger the child, the stronger the effects. As experiences in children's early lives have been found to have effects that last a lifetime, a curricular intervention on media education early in children's lives is a prudent strategy. Such a strategy needs to be developmentally and culturally appropriate. It also needs to involve parents for best results because children are exposed to media sources whether at home or at early childhood centres. The parental involvement strategies should be expected to differ from one context to another and from programme to programme due to socio-cultural differences. Due to children's age, it is suggested that media education be integrated with other curriculum experiences and activities. The goal should be to develop higher mental functions in children that will enable them to reflect critically on media messages so as to make sound judgements. In addition, media education in early childhood programmes in Hong Kong has the potential for making children ready to live in a multicultural society.

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