DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 068 495 IR 000 329

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TITLE Television and the Urban Child.
INSTITUTION York Univ., Downsview (Ontario).
PUB DATE 20 Mar 74
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Association for Educational Communications and Technology Annual Convention (Atlantic City, N.J., March 17 through 21, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50
DESCRIPTORS Cable Television; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Educational Technology; *Educational Television; Elementary Grades; Low Achievers; Lower Class Students; Media Technology; Program Descriptions; *Programing (Broadcast); Self Concept; *Student Centered Curriculum; Student Interests; Television Research; *Urban Youth; Video Equipment
IDENTIFIERS *Childrens Video Theatre; Student Created Television

ABSTRACT

An experimental project, The Children's Video Theatre, explored ways in which the elementary school curriculum could be enriched by student-created television. The advent of simple, portable video equipment has made it possible for schools to create programing which is age-specific (for seven to 12 year-olds) and directed at the usually neglected urban, non-middle class child. Elementary classes produced eight programs in a year, each of which was broadcast on local cable television. Analysis of the project's results indicated that the creation and cablecast of television programs by children successfully addressed several educational problems since these experiences: 1) transformed a one-way medium into an interactive one; 2) gave individual children an opportunity to pursue interests and voice their opinions; 3) helped children with histories of failure and poor self-esteem to contribute meaningfully to group activities; and 4) allowed children to learn in alternative ways. In addition, the equipment's simplicity permitted hands-on technical experience and allowed children to take it into the community for on-site contact with the non-school world. (PB)

TELEVISION AND THE URBAN CHILD

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Division of Telecommunications

March 20, 1974

Television and the Urban Child

It is known that children from poor families generally watch more television than their middle-class peers (1). Commercially-supported television programming in America, however, tends to reflect the aspirations and lifestyles of the more affluent classes (2); this is no less true for children's programming than for any other type of fare. Even "Sesame Street", a publically-supported program, which was originally created to reach poor urban children, portrays a lifestyle that poorly reflects the realities of daily events in the American urban core. Children whose homes or communities are scenes of drugs, hostility, violence, alcoholism and crime may find it difficult to identify with the achievement salespeople of "Sesame Street", as suggested by the fact that middle-class children are more frequent viewers of this program than their peers (3). They would find it even harder to identify with characters in the vast majority of commercial children's programming; programming created as though an inner-urban culture did not even exist. Even though the forgotten urban child watches a great quantity of television created for his middle-class peers, it can be nothing but destructive to his self-esteem.

The problem is compounded for children between the ages of seven and twelve by the paucity of age-specific programming for that group (4). In the United States, "The Electric Company" is the only nationally telecast exception to this situation. Compared with a representative sample of western European nations, Canada and Japan, the U.S. rates at the bottom of the scale in age-specific programming for any group (5).

The problem surrounding the relationship between poor, urban, elementary school children and television, we believe, centres on technological control. The control of the American television industry is such that specific minority groups of people, be they racial, ethnic, geographical, or age groups, cannot possibly be properly served (6). Furthermore, the input of these groups in determining the content of the messages prepared for them is virtually non-existent.

It is fair to say that public television broadcasting has demonstrated greater sensitivity to the needs of specific groups of citizens than has its commercial counterpart. Nevertheless, both systems are essentially providing a one-way communication service whereby "messages" are prepared at corporate headquarters for ingestion by designated audiences. Considering that television is the most used medium of mass communication by this nation's children (7), the argument about whether it is controlled by public or commercial corporations has only limited meaning; it is controlled from outside its constituency.

This question of control is not entirely one of politics and economics; it is also a technological question. Until the advent of inexpensive easy-to-use portable video equipment and the burgeoning of local cable television systems in the late sixties and early seventies, television production remained inaccessible to everyone but the well-financed local and national television enterprises and the professionals who worked for them. Televised information could only be delivered by these large

enterprises. This is no longer true. Half-inch video equipment can be used to gather, organize and record information which can be broadcast over local cable television systems. It is cheap enough to be owned by very small institutions and even some individuals. Almost anyone can learn the rudiments of equipment operation in less than a day, and children are particularily quick to learn. It is no longer technologically necessary for the television communication process to be controlled by centralized groups of professionals and executives whose experiences and interests are quite remote from the audiences for whom their messages are created. The implications of this for poor, urban children and their schools are significant.

For about two thousand dollars a school can acquire a portable video system, including camera, record and playback deck, batteries, battery charger, television monitor, tripod, and extension microphone; all the essential tools of small-scale television production. This system can be used in the classroom, in other buildings or outdoors. It can be operated by battery or house current. It is potentially powerful as a learning tool. The reason that student utilization of these tools is still so rare (8), no longer has to do with the unavailability of technology; rather it is because very few educators have given serious thought to developing ways in which the school curriculum can be enriched by the addition of student-created television. Historically, the widespread adoption of instructional media procedures by American teachers has been slow (9). The classroom adoption of video, it appears, is not much different.

Since the autumn of 1972, a pupil-centered television project, The Children's Video Theatre, has operated from its base at the University of Massachusetts School of Education. Teams of graduate and undergraduate student staff members have worked for year-long terms in selected fourth, fifth and sixth grade classrooms in western Massachusetts communities served by local CATV enterprises. The main goals of the project have been to help children regularly prepare programs on a wide variety of subjects for monthly local cablecasting, and to help teachers integrate the use of video and cable television into their on-going curricular activities. Care has been taken to avoid the introduction of video production to children as a separate technical skill unrelated to other modes of learning. On the other hand, the project staff have attempted to prevent the classroom use of video from being entirely determined by the traditional pre-video curriculum. In other words, video and cable television have been introduced not only as a curricular support, but also to extend the curriculum conceptually beyond its traditional concerns and physically beyond the school walls.

The Children's Video Theatre has operated in various school/community environments. One of these was in the urban core of Holyoke, Massachusetts. Many of the problems encountered in introducing pupil-created video to the inner city classroom were quite different from those encountered in the more affluent, middle-class schools. Our experience suggested that procedures and activities had to be adjusted to the radically varying characteristics and needs of different children in different communities.

The behaviours of the Holyoke project children were those characteristically associated with economic poverty, chronic low scholastic achievement, and poor self-esteem. Children's Video Theatre aimed at organizing activities that would make the two most important institutions impinging on the life of the urban child -- school and television -- more responsive to his needs.

The Holyoke project crew quickly discovered the need to organize children's activities that were consistant with their existing abilities and inclinations. The original goal of the project had been to place the tools of television production in their hands, and let them assume full control over the content and procedures of production as rapidly as possible. It soon became evident that this was too grandiose a goal to be rapidly achieved by children whose past scholastic histories had been marked by repeated "failure". Most of the children in the Holyoke project were well below grade level in reading and writing aptitude, and had had little school experience to suggest to them that they were able to do anything well at all. What appeared to be operating was a pygmalion effect imposed not so much by the children's classroom teachers but by the children themselves. No doubt, however, teachers' or parents' expectations of success for these children had, in their pasts, either been poor or non-existent (10). Although we found out that the creation and broadcast of videotape productions possessed no instant magic for these children, we also discovered by the year's end that in its proper

perspective it was not only a useful vehicle for improving self-esteem, but also provided an entirely new means for children to gather, organize, and report information.

At the beginning of the project year, some of us had fallen into the trap of expecting instant success with our grab bag of video activities. The kids did not suddenly "turn on" to video and begin exhibiting initiative, responsibility and collaboration the minute their hands touched the hardware. On the contrary, the group was often on the verge of chaos and it often seemed as though we were spending more time trying to maintain a sufficiently sane environment than actually working with the children on their productions. The behaviour of the project children while they were with us was not much different from their ordinary school behaviour; it was related to their past experiences and the expectations they had of themselves, their schools, and their peers.

A few of the children in our group had been "high-achievers" according to the standard literary norms of school success. Without exception, these children gravitated more easily and rapidly to the use of video than did their less successful classmates. This was true too of other project children who lived in the more affluent communities. On the other hand, over the long term it appeared that the pupils who had for so long fared poorly in their traditional curricular activities functioned more productively with video than they ordinarily did in school. Despite the continuing behaviour problems, the project children thoroughly enjoyed

doing video work; this was evident from the personal relationships they developed with members of the project staff, from what they said, and from their overwhelmingly positive response on a questionnaire administered at the end of the year. Poorly achieving children were capable of productive video work when their activities capitalized on their capabilities and interests. For their entire school careers, however, these children had been denied a visual curricular alternative. We learned from the Holyoke project that poor self-concept is, by the time the child reaches the fifth or sixth grade, firmly entrenched. A one year project, no matter how successful in tapping the abilities and interests of poorly achieving children is limited in its capacity to contribute positively to their self-esteem. It cannot suddenly and miraculously reverse a trend that has been building for eleven, twelve or thirteen years. The greater expectations we had at the beginning resulted in frustration for us and the children until we lowered our sights to more realistic levels.

Keeping in mind the limited, but significant, contribution that pupil-created television can make to child self-esteem and the elementary school curriculum, it became evident to us that it should be introduced as early in the child's school life as possible. Even kindergarten children are quite capable of doing video work, given the right kind of adult support and supervision (11). The visual curricular alternative should be introduced at that level.

The urban teacher who introduces video to his pupils is presented with a number of problems. How does he structure situations that will, over time, permit children to do work that is associated closely enough with their abilities and interests that they see the possibility of success while at the same time encouraging them to move beyond what they can do to what they should be learning to do? How does he group children so that the chronically poor achievers are not so outshined by their more self-assured peers that they either withdraw from project activities or exhibit the resentful behaviors that inevitably accompany poor self-esteem? What grouping arrangements are required to maintain the interest, learning, and sense of challenge for the more highly achieving children in a way that their abilities can be used for the benefit of the whole group? How does he structure activities so that productions for cablecast are of a quality that will give the producing pupils a sense of pride without excessively concentrating on the product that the innumerable learning opportunities offered by the videotaping process are not forgotten? It would be hard indeed for a teacher to address each of these problems successfully all the time. Reasonable success, however, can be expected if the teacher maintains his sensitivity to the problems at hand, and patience with the children.

The project children and staff in Holyoke, whose ability to deal with these questions grew as the year progressed, created eight simple but most presentable television programs throughout the school year.

Each program was broadcast four times on the local Holyoke cable television system to a potential audience of about 12,000.

Here is an example of their productions. The group produced a ten-minute "How-To-Do-It" program which drew on their various hobbies and crafts for its content. We were delightfully surprised at the quantity and quality of interests and skills which suddenly surfaced at the prospect of contributing to a television program. The children had always tended to keep their abilities well-hidden for fear of exposing themselves to ridicule or the accusation of "showing off". The kids were divided into task groups. One child acted as a general organizer; we had learned by then to avoid burdening her with the label, "Director". A group of six kids with specific hobbies and crafts volunteered to do television demonstrations. They worked closely with a team whose job it was to create a script which would provide a clear verbal description to accompany the visual demonstration for the television audience. Another team constituted the technical crew, which consisted primarily of a camera person and someone to ensure proper placement of the extension microphone. The last group was responsible for the physical arrangement of furnishings and decorations in the "studio", which was simply a small space in the cafeteria, located in the basement of the ancient school building. This group was also responsible for all art and graphic work, which included the titles and credits which appeared at the beginning and the end of the show.

One child showed how to make puppets with old socks, strands of wool, pieces of paper, buttons and scotch tape. Another demonstrated some magic tricks, and a third gave a very detailed demonstration of soap carving. Making paper airplanes has never been an activity beloved by teachers, and one of the project pupils was a master of the art. For the first time in his life, he was given the opportunity to make paper airplanes in a positive school context by demonstrating on videotape a skill he had thoroughly mastered. He was rightfully proud of his demonstration. It was clear, and, to the consternation of some of the cable viewers, left little doubt in the minds of other would-be paper aviators about how to increase their proficiency. The last two groups of children showed their audience how to make puppets from old milk cartons, construction paper, used shopping bags, glue, and tempera paint.

A single-camera portable video portapak was used in all the children's productions; the pupils always operated the equipment. Public recognition of their work was achieved through the local community cablecasting of their programs. The need to work with poorly achieving children in accordance with their abilities, interests, and prior experiences cannot be too strongly emphasized. For example, we found that the Holyoke project children were simply not ready for the theatre games and humanistic exercises for which video has been so successful in other locations (12) (13). While we would have enjoyed spending more time on this sort of activity, we found that we did not have enough time with these children to make it work.

Any teacher introducing video to his pupils should avoid the expectation that their productions will look like professionally-produced television programs. When we talk about a "good" production, we are referring to program content and the learning derived from the production process. We are not talking about clean edits, dazzling special effects, Cronkitesque newscasting, or other professional-looking results that are not possible with half-inch video. American broadcast television has refined the techniques of production to a very high degree. Commercials are perhaps the best examples of technical sophistication. Unfortunately, the quality of television programming in America is often defined in terms of technique rather than content, probably because content has been so consistently meaningless. Children are no exception to these prevailing values. They are often disappointed with the results they get from a portapak. If the teacher is similarly disappointed and unable to persuade himself and his pupils that the quality and freshness of the content is more important than technique, then the desire to continue working with video will quickly wane. The inexperienced but potentially enthusiastic teacher should play around with a portapak on his own for a few weeks before introducing it to his pupils so that he knows just what to expect.

It is important for any child to have a positive identification with his work, whether it is his own product, or a group product to which he has significantly contributed. It is even more important for the poorly achieving child. A child's sense of pride in himself is enhanced by public recognition of his work. It is here that video and cable

television make a unique contribution; it gives children an electronic podium for communicating to large audiences without the threat of a live presentation. Children with high expectations of failure often find it impossible to give live presentations even to small audiences of peers. The reasons are obvious. If the child fails, there is no second chance; he stands to be humiliated not only by his errors but also by a multitude of potentially derisive live faces before whom the error has been made. This is one reason why self-assured children always seem to reappear from season to season in school plays; only a certain type of child can stand this sort of pressure. The children who get the most public recognition are not necessarily those who most need it. If a child makes a mistake on videotape, whether as talent or member of the production crew, he has two options: he can re-do his work until he is satisfied with it, or he can simply opt not to put the unsatisfactory portion of it up for public display. Video and cable television always offer another chance.

The creation and cablecast of children's television programming by the children themselves appears to successfully address a number of the problems surrounding television and the schools. It gives children a television voice; the medium becomes interactive. Because this voice is the children's own, it can reflect their concerns, interests, and the realities of their own community lives; the medium becomes individualized. We feel that it has a positive effect on self-esteem through non-threatening public display. It is known that good self-concept is

positively related to scholastic achievement (14). Its portability allows children to investigate events in their communities and to encourage community people to participate in their activities. It provides an alternative tool for learning and reporting what is learned. Finally, it gives children a greater understanding of the techniques and processes which shape the network telecasts they watch every day. The pupils, parents and teachers with whom we worked almost unanimously responded on a questionnaire that the project children had gained significantly in their understanding of commercial television production. One might assume that with this better understanding went a more sophisticated level of discrimination and criticism.

But pupil-created television is no miracle. It does not cause overnight changes in the attitudes and behaviour of previously unsuccessful children. The teacher seeking to use it with his pupils must be patient, able to accept and learn from failure, and willing to build on what the children are able to do. We are not suggesting that failure should be expected, but that the expectations be realistic. If they are, video and cable television will be found to be very useful learning tools for urban children.

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