The Development of Media Literacy among Grade Five Teachers and Students - A Case Study

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Abstract

This is the first of two articles about a study of the implementation of a media literacy curriculum project in three inner city school Grade 5's in Montreal. The authors describe what the teachers and students learned about two key Media Literacy concepts: the media construct reality and audiences negotiate the meanings of media texts. The teaching featured the use of Internet and computer technology. Their findings suggest that it is possible to teach elementary students to read media critically and raises some issues that merit further investigation: the ideology of positivism that permeates the use of technology in education; the training of media education teachers; and the factors that characterize effective media education pedagogy.

Résumé

Il s'agit du premier de deux articles concernant une étude sur la mise en œuvre d'un projet de programme d'études d'initiation aux médias dans les classes de cinquième année de trois écoles du centre-ville de Montréal. Les auteurs expliquent ce que les enseignants et les étudiants ont appris à propos de deux concepts clés de l'initiation aux médias : les médias construisent la réalité et les différents publics négocient le sens des textes des médias. L'utilisation de l'Internet et de l'informatique faisait partie intégrante de ces cours. Les conclusions des auteurs suggèrent qu'il est possible d'enseigner, à des étudiants de classes élémentaires, à lire les médias de façon éclairée et posent certaines questions méritant une recherche plus approfondie : l'idéologie positiviste qui imprègne toute utilisation de la technologie en pédagogie, la formation des enseignants en

initiation aux médias et les facteurs qui caractérisent une pédagogie effective dans ce domaine précis.

Introduction and Review of Literature

In this article we describe and discuss what happened during the implementation of a Media Literacy project initiated by the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) at the elementary school level. The eight-week pilot project was conducted in three Grade 5 classrooms in three of the Board's inner city elementary schools. The teachers used SMARTboard interfaces, a list-serv and Web resources to teach principles of Media Literacy.

A Multiliteracies Perspective

Our perspective in this discussion is one of "multiliteracies" (New London Group, 1996). Given the multiplicity of communication channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity, it is no longer useful to conceive of literacy as the ability to read and write print texts. A multiliteracies perspective emphasizes that negotiating these multiple linguistic and cultural differences in our society is central to being able to work, to be good citizens and to develop personally in this post-modern era.

Our focus is on the understandings and abilities the teachers and pupils developed through using computer technology to learn about the media and to communicate. Media Literacy - one of the multiliteracies - is concerned with developing awareness of the impact of media on the individual and society. It includes: the ability to analyze media messages; to produce media messages; and to be critical in both positive and negative ways of the media texts encountered in everyday life (Rother, 2000). An important principle of Media Literacy is that since all mediated messages are constructed, readers should actively deconstruct them so that they can assess whether the messages are to be believed (Masterman, 1985). Such a stance treats the organization of message delivery systems and the content and sources of the messages themselves as objects of scrutiny. Schools ought to teach processes which learners can follow to critically read all forms of messages including those routinely delivered via textbooks, filmstrips and slides, audio and videotapes; computer programs, CD ROMs and the Internet.

The integration of Media Literacy curricula in Canadian schools has taken place primarily at the secondary level. Media educators also acknowledge the need for media education in the elementary school. As media consultant Rick Shepherd writes:

> … there is a growing realization on the part of media educators that secondary school, or even the transition years (7, 8, 9), is far too late to be beginning the study of something which is so central to our culture, so much a part of the lives and development of our children, as the media" (Shepherd, 1993, p. 35).

Since Shepherd's call to implement media education programs in elementary school settings, a number of school systems in Canada and abroad have begun to develop curriculum and materials at the elementary level. Rother (2000) has reviewed the kinds of curricular initiatives made worldwide and Piette (1995) has evaluated the effectiveness of

the curricula to generate critical thinking from a theoretical standpoint.

However, despite the importance accorded to the need for media education, there is a dearth of classroom studies documenting the implementation of these curricula. A search in ERIC found no systematic studies at the elementary level in Canada or the rest of North America. There has been some important related work in Britain by Buckingham et al. (Buckingham 1990; Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 1994; Buckingham, Grahame and Sefton-Green, 1995). We have used their overall approach to classroom research as the basis for the research component of this project. Unlike the Buckingham team, we are following teachers who have had little in the way of formal training in Media Literacy education and our selection of three classrooms as data sites offers a more generalized description and different focus from their studies.

Overview of the Project

The project was an attempt to implement Media Literacy curriculum in three inner city grade five classrooms in Montreal. It ran for eight weeks from April to June 1999. The curriculum consultant for the EMSB, Maureen Baron, enlisted the collaboration of three teachers, two technical consultants with the Board, a webmaster, and Winston and Rachel to develop units of instruction to teach two major concepts of Media Literacy education and to document the planning and teaching of the units. The two concepts were: the media construct reality and audiences negotiate the meanings of media texts. (Ministry of Education, 1989)

The Media Construct Reality

The students were to come away with the understanding that media messages are constructed for specific purposes and aimed at certain audiences. The realities represented in mass media messages, even those which are considered to be of live, or real, events, have been subject to considerable constraint, control and organization, not only by the producers of the messages, but also by the contexts in which these messages are generated and distributed. We wished to teach pupils about some of the ways messages are constructed and constrained so that they could better understand the represented realities. Advertising was one of the topics all three teachers decided to use to explore this concept. The teachers felt that most of their students would have considerable experience of the codes and conventions of advertisements and the teachers decided to use that foundation to explore ideas of ownership, celebrity endorsement, marketing techniques, target audience, etc.

Audiences Negotiate Meaning

The underlying premise of the second concept - audiences negotiate the meanings of media texts _ is that audiences are not "passive receivers of meaning" but active meaning makers. As Emery (1996) writes, "…audiences re-construct media texts, investing them with meaning and integrat[e] them into their own understandings of the world" (p. 137). "Their own understandings" are highly influenced by such factors as culture (including class and race), gender, previous experience with texts and /or messages of the same or similar

type, their frame of mind at the time of "reading" the message, and the kind of use they make of the text or message (Dick, 1990). One of the goals in teaching this concept was to nurture the students' alternative visions of reality, and, thus to encourage some critical autonomy in interpreting the meaning of the messages.

Teacher Training and Resources

In order to prepare the teachers, the technology consultant at the EMSB, Maureen Baron, with Rachel and Winston, conducted three day-long workshops in Media Literacy and in the operation of the SMARTboard interface and internet connection. The teachers involved in this project had a minimum of experience with Media Literacy as a discipline. One had taken one university level course on the subject, but the professional preparation of the other two regarding media education began at the School Board workshops in March. The project team reviewed the more important concepts with the three teachers and a list of suggested teaching ideas and video resources was developed cooperatively. Reading Media, a web site (http://media.emsb.qc.ca), designed by project team members at the E.M.S.B., was also provided as a resource for the teachers. The web site is a public Media Literacy resource and, therefore, was accessible to the teachers, both in and out of school. A central list-serv was created so that teachers and students in the three participating classes could communicate with each other.

The teachers left the workshops with an overwhelming list of possible lesson topics, from the marketing and merchandising of *Star Wars* to grocery store product placement. The umbrella units agreed upon at the workshops changed significantly in the course of eight weeks as the teachers decided to explore fewer topics in greater depth.

Purpose of the Research - Research Questions

The research component of the project studied the *literate* behavior of the students and the ways in which the teachers nurtured and developed it. It is an examination of the understanding of key Media Literacy concepts by teachers and students, as well as their understanding and use of the technology employed in the project. The study also looks at student involvement and communication skills with respect to media and technology. What do the students learn and how does it seem to happen? What are the teachers' perceptions of the process, including their feelings about their role as facilitators and their insights about student development? Do they act differently in such a setting? How? In this, the first of two articles, we wish to examine the media literate behaviour of the students, i.e., what happened as the students learned about two Media Literacy concepts described above.

Research Design
Overview

The research team wanted to develop a rich and complex description of the students' literacy learning during the eight weeks of the project. We were attempting to understand the classroom processes during the times the students "did" Media Literacy. What patterns emerged as the teachers taught the Media Literacy concepts to the students? What

conditions, strategies, tools and technologies contributed to developing literacy in students? What was the nature of classroom dialogue (both oral and written) and the postings on the list-serv and what did they indicate about the learning going on in each of the three schools? How did the teachers and students perceive what was happening? The research methodology we adopted for this study is qualitative (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Our study reflects the following characteristics of the qualitative paradigm:

- It describes the activities in the three classrooms in some depth, attempting to develop understanding and generate grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and also theory of action (Argyris, 1982).
- The "researchers" - Winston and Rachel - are participants and observers.
- But, the researchers also include the teachers of the three classes, the media consultant and, occasionally, the students as well as Winston and Rachel.
- The study is an *emergent design,* that is, we modified the design as new insights and questions arose during the teaching and collecting data.

Thus, in some ways, this study is a combination of research on teaching and teacher research, as discussed in Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1993). Following is a description of the setting, the teachers and students and the design of the study.

Participants

The participants in this study were the members of three inner city Grade 5 classrooms. The project team felt that inner city students might have the most to benefit from a project of this kind because so few would have access to computer technology and Internet in the home. They felt that the schools involved should be in communities far enough away from one another so that conversations about the project between students (of different schools) would be limited to the list-serv. The team also decided that a senior level of the elementary school would be better able to understand the concepts of the project than a junior level. Grade 5 was chosen over Grade 6, because of the attention paid to end of the year graduation activities in the latter grade. The teachers to be involved were expected to show a willingness to participate in the design and implementation of the project but were not required to have any special expertise in media and technology education.

St. Laurent Elementary. St. Laurent Elementary is an inner-city elementary school located in the district of St. Laurent. The school is situated in a residential area of lower income apartment complexes. Public facilities (parks and other schools) and a large shopping area are also close by. The school has a multicultural population of 470 children, ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 6.

The grade 5 class chosen for the purposes of the project was comprised of 26 students with diverse backgrounds. The class boasted a representation of 11 different mother tongues. There was also a student with a disability in the class. A teacher's aide was present as an extra resource person for this student but as the student was very able, he rarely required her help.

The classroom is situated on the ground floor of the school building. It is a fair size room

with windows running along the length of an entire wall. The teacher's desk was located at the front of the room (relative to the door). The students' desks were grouped in clusters of 3 or 4. The students, when sitting straight, did not all face the teacher. Some clusters were arranged so that the students faced one another. The SMARTboard was placed at the back of the classroom, in a corner, opposite the windows. Two computer stations and a reading area were also set up against the back wall.

Lynn Salter, a teacher with nineteen years of experience has been teaching at St. Laurent Elementary for the last five years. Although Lynn's initial expertise was in Mathematics, she has recently been developing her Language Arts program. While Media Literacy and the Internet are relatively new subject areas for her, Lynn is committed to accessing new resources and implementing new ideas for the purposes of the project.

Plateau School. Plateau School is situated in the Mile End/Plateau Mont-Royal District of Montreal. The surrounding area is both residential and commercial. The housing in the area is primarily duplexes and triplexes. These dwellings are often brightly painted and many boast the famous Montreal spiral staircases. On the main streets adjacent the school, there are also many commercial establishments: cafes, bars, grocery stores, and restaurants. The community, although primarily Portuguese and Italian, is made up of many ethnic groups.

The class participating in the project was a split-grade 5/6 group of 31 students. Although we observed the entire class, notes and observations focused on the grade fives, 16 students. The cultural make-up of the class was representative of the community as most of the students came from Portuguese families.

The grade 5/6 classroom is located on the third floor. It is a large space divided into work areas with colorful partitioning panels. The main work area looked like a traditional classroom as the student desks were ordered in rows facing the teacher. Two of the walls in this area are lined with windows. Student artwork covered the remaining walls and hung from the ceiling. The SMARTboard was placed at the front of this work area adjacent the teacher's desk and facing the students. The three additional workstations were used for small group work and equipped with computers.

Melissa Stuart is a teacher with five years experience at the elementary level. She works in the school with her husband Christopher, who leads computer-related activities with various groups of students and organizes sports activities as well. Melissa is enthusiastic about new technology for the classroom. Although not an expert in media education or technology, Melissa feels very comfortable in a computer friendly environment. She is an enthusiastic and supportive classroom teacher.

Queens Elementary. Queens is situated in the Cote-des-Neiges community of Montreal. The elementary school recently moved to its new location, a former high school. It presently shares the building with an adult education center. The school faces a shopping complex and metro station, and neighbors a sports facility on one side.

The participating class at Queens was made up of 22 students at the grade 5 level. This group was also multi-cultural, the majority of the students being of Afro-Caribbean descent. The group was following a French Immersion program and until this year was given instruction primarily in the French language.

The classroom is located on the main floor just opposite the school office. The room has no outside windows and is relatively small. As this year's curriculum emphasized an integrated science approach, the classroom has a lab station at the back of the room. At the front of the room (relative to the door) sits the teacher's desk. The students were arranged in home groups of 4-5 students. Their desks were butted against each other in a square formation. In this way the students faced one another. The SMARTboard sat almost in the center of the room. The screen was not visible to all the students unless they rearranged their desks.

Laura Turnbull, the regular classroom teacher, has been teaching at Queens for three years. Before her placement at Queen's School, Laura taught at the high school level. She has 25 years of teaching experience altogether. Laura's areas of specialty are Math, Science and Moral and Religious Education. Laura was aided in this project by two student teachers, Kathy Banks and Daniel St. Cyr, who had considerable expertise in computer technology.

Pseudonyms. The students mentioned in this report have been given pseudonyms. The project team decided that it was important to ensure the confidentiality of the information where the students were concerned. The identities of the schools and assisting teachers have also been changed.

The Researchers. Rachel is a graduate of the Bachelor of Education program at McGill University, now teaching at Trafalgar School in Montreal. Winston teaches media, technology and education in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at the Faculty of Education. As participant observers and as members of the project team, we approach the project with unique perspectives. We both have experience teaching Media Literacy (Rachel as a beginning teacher and Winston in teaching Media Literacy to undergraduate and graduate teachers and conducting workshops for various professional groups). Although our experience and expertise can be regarded as a source of bias, the "insider" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993) knowledge - knowledge and trust gained through spending considerable time with the teachers in planning the units and in their classrooms - and expertise we possess enables us to generate and interpret credible theories of action in the classroom (p.16). As a new Education graduate, Rachel approaches the subject of media and technology in the classroom with an open mind. Both of us view media and technology education positively, but we also carry a certain skepticism regarding the current enthusiasm for computers and Internet technology and their ability to solve educational problems.

Data Collection
Observation

In weekly visits to each of the three schools, Rachel joined the classroom as a participant observer. The classroom context proved to be the most illuminating source of data in terms of discovering what factors effectively bring about changes in the students to improve literacy. It is in the class dynamics that the most salient themes emerged. The visual, verbal and oral *cultural literacies* , described in the introduction, are presented most strikingly in the on-going meaning making of the students during classroom activities. As participant observers, we were able to contribute to the process, occasionally facilitating media literate discussions and conducting informal interviews with the students. In the over 100 hours spent on-site in the three schools, most of the time was used to record descriptive notes about what was happening in class (teaching strategies, student responses and engagement, organization of materials, comfort level with the technology…). These rough notes were later translated into elaborated field notes that included on-going analysis in the form of observer's comments and interpretations.

Journal

During the eight-week period, the data collection process also involved reviewing the journals kept by the students and teachers. These journals were specific to the project and entries were written at least once a week. The project team and researchers recommended the keeping of journals, in which participants could explore their thoughts and feelings about the project in a written form. We hoped that the enthusiasm generated by both the novelty of the technology and the relevance of the subject matter would translate into improved student writing. The journal writing was also a way of obtaining data about the participants' perceptions of the process. Because the nature of journal writing allows for a certain freedom of expression, we hoped that entries would reflect the diversity of meaning(s) the students attached to the project.

The journaling approach varied between students and schools. Some student entries were highly reflective and sophisticated pieces of writing while others seemed careless and were incomplete. The amount of direction and feedback given by the teacher varied. Lynn read and responded to all student entries, Melissa read over the entries towards the end of the project but gave no written feedback and Laura did not read or respond to her group's journals. We did not give any written feedback in the journals but did on occasion refer to the writing in informal conversations with students and teachers.

List-Serv

Rachel accessed the list-serv communication between schools on a daily basis. The L-Soft list management software and mailing system allowed for the classroom postings to be sent to private e-mail addresses and so she was able to read all messages through her personal e-mail. The first list-serv messages began the week of April 26th and the last message was posted on the 17th of June. The postings in the first few weeks were done mostly as class messages. In weeks to follow, messages were composed more and more by small groups and individuals.

This forum of communication was an interesting source of data because the students had a

new audience with which to work. Because this virtual space opened up the possibility of a genuine sharing of ideas between students, the project team hoped that more attention would be paid to effective communication skills.

Interviews

We conducted informal interviews or *discussion and feedback* on a regular basis with the teachers. Notes were taken during the interviews and summaries were subsequently written. The teachers' concerns and successes were discussed intermittently throughout the eight weeks, sometimes with the class as a whole. Rachel also circulated the classroom regularly to talk to the students when the opportunity arose.

As the weekly observations led to new insights and questions not treated explicitly by the participants in their journal writing, we decided to conduct some more directed interviews. In the final weeks of the project, Rachel spoke to certain groups of students with the intention of gaining a greater understanding of their insights into the purpose of the project. The sessions were always conducted in groups of about 4 or 5 so that the students would feel more comfortable conversing among their peers. The sessions ranged in length from 15 to 25 minutes and were tape-recorded.

One-on-one debriefings with the participating teachers took place at the very end of the project as a means of further exploring certain patterns and conclusions. The debriefings ranged in length of time from 40 minutes to 2 hours. As it is important, in any qualitative study, to try and ascertain the participants' perceptions' of the process under study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), these final sessions were integral to the final formulation of descriptive categories and themes.

Data Trustworthiness

The reliability of the data in this report is supported by member checks from the participating teachers and project team professionals. The term, member checks, refers to the procedure of presenting observations to the participants and asking them if they accurately reflect the events as they remember them. In our case, we sat down with the teachers and, occasionally the students, presented them with copies of our summaries and interpretations of classroom events and asked them if what we saw actually occurred as we described it. The teachers had access to the same student-written documents (journals and list-serv) as we did and discussing findings with them reduced the possibilities of misinterpretation. Finally, the first drafts of the report were read over by members of the project team and the results of the feedback were taken into consideration in subsequent drafts.

The validity is supported by triangulation of sources of data. (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Confirming specifics of the data with the participating teachers and having them recount those things we had observed during visits contributed to the credibility of this report. The numerous methods of data collection, from journals and list-serv postings to interviews and observations also support the trustworthiness of the data. The multi-site/ multi-subject design was used so as to conduct the research in such a way that the findings may

be meaningful in a broader context.

Data Organization and Analysis

In conformity with established procedure in qualitative analysis, we developed initial codes for the data. Using the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), besides the situational codes - information regarding the schools, teachers and pupils - we developed three broad categories of codes as they emerged from the data and our weekly interactions with teachers and students: Technological Literacy, Media Literacy, and Traditional Literacy. In the Media Literacy category the following sub-categories emerged: teacher training and resources; abstracts and particulars; guardians of meaning; intuiting and articulating.

Teacher Training and Resources

The teachers involved in this project had minimal experience teaching Media Literacy. Laura had taken one university level course on the subject, and the professional preparation of Melissa and Lynn, regarding media education, began at the School Board workshops in March. All managed finding the resources to complement the chosen topics quite successfully.

Lynn. Lynn is an expert when it comes to organizing and integrating materials. When the project began in April, she was finishing a series of lessons on the artist, Monet. She took her students on a field trip to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts to see the Monet exhibit and decided to compare the information obtained there with information obtained in other media. She took her class on a "virtual visit" to the museum via Internet and watched a film on the life of Monet. She then had the students compare the "information" in the different media texts. This activity segued into the beginning of the Media Literacy project at St. Laurent Elementary. When concluding the project eight weeks later she had begun a biography unit with her students. The students researched historical figures from Alexander the Great to Louis Pasteur and took on their personas in a filmed interview. To integrate the biographies into the advertising unit she was wrapping up, she asked the students to think of a product that their celebrity figure might endorse.

There is an excellent organizational flow in Lynn's class. She does a lot of "in flight planning" with her group, changing the content and direction of activities when it seems appropriate. Because Lynn accommodates her lessons to the mood and rhythm of the class, it was important for her to have a good supply of resources at hand. Lynn said during debriefing that her biggest challenge was resources. She had no experience teaching Media Literacy and so she actively sought out materials and resource people to help her. Lynn was delighted to find a publication called Zillions, a consumer awareness magazine aimed at elementary school children, and its accompanying web site. She often adapted secondary level material to suit her purposes and she also asked Winston to come in and conduct a lesson.

While Lynn was enthusiastic about certain Internet resources and most of the video

resources available through the E.M.S.B. Media Centre, she wanted the tangible and more traditionally organized materials as well. Lynn liked having the activity sequences, introductions and glossaries offered in more traditional guides. She felt more secure as her resource file got bigger. Lynn's teaching expertise compensated for her lack of specific training in Media Literacy. She successfully accessed and organized the resources she needed to proceed through the eight-week project.

Melissa. Melissa didn't realize at the outset that Media Literacy was going to be such a large component of the project. When approached by her school's principal in February, she understood that the goal of the project was to test out new technology in the classroom. Media Literacy was a relatively new subject for Melissa and she admitted that throughout the project she was "still in the learning phase" with regards to the two Media Literacy concepts. In terms of preparation, Melissa felt that the workshops at the board were a "good beginning", but she thinks, "you need a whole course", to feel comfortable with the theoretical aspects. In debriefing she mentioned that she would have liked to see a Media Literacy "expert" conduct a lesson to get a sense of what can be done.

Melissa used the Reading Media web site and other Internet resources on a regular basis. She located material on marketing strategies and national rules for advertising to children, she also downloaded educational games that treated issues like stereotyping. Melissa was comfortable using an electronic medium to access teacher resources. She spent many hours of preparation time finding appropriate material on the Web. She felt, however, that this took a lot of work and planning and having access to a compilation of Media Literacy activities such as the Quebec Ministry of Education's Media Files (1995) would have helped.

Laura. Laura seemed to be most comfortable with her Media Literacy expertise. She had taken a course at McGill that allowed her an opportunity to read and write a variety of media texts. She was secure in her understanding of the theoretical concepts but less sure of how to introduce them to her students. Laura's approach, where Media Literacy was concerned, was student centered. She had students work on group projects that explored the "messages" in Comics, Television cartoons, advertisements in basketball magazines, etc. The students chose their own material and resources. Later she developed a project called, The Hood, that allowed the students to produce their own media messages (visual and written) about their neighborhood.

Laura said that The Hood project idea came out of her experience at the workshop in which one of the media consultants suggested reading *environments* with the students. It also helped Laura to have had the academic experience of reading an environment for her course at McGill. Having Dan[1] to brainstorm with was an added advantage for Laura in preparing the construction unit. Besides having technological expertise, Dan had taken university level media studies. Planning the activities with another professional improved Laura's confidence level in terms of teaching Media Literacy concepts.

Laura rarely used the Internet to find teacher resources and was only able to show one of the suggested video resources. As she writes in her journal, "the key ones were out on

loan until the end of May". Most of the materials and activity ideas used by Laura to teach Media Literacy concepts came out of her personal experience and discussions with Dan. Although they didn't choose to use the same materials to teach Media Literacy, the three teachers began with the same guidelines and suggested list of lesson ideas. They were able to locate relevant resources and adjust the material to their classes. The amount of teacher training in Media Literacy studies varied between schools but didn't compromise the teachers' ability to facilitate relevant activities. The different levels of expertise did, however, influence the teachers' approach regarding the theoretical concepts. Finding a balance between the abstracts and particulars became a significant issue.

Abstracts and Particulars

Helping elementary school students understand that media construct reality andaudiences negotiate meaning can be challenging when approached from a theoretical perspective. Laura was particularly concerned about the abstract nature of the concepts. She thought that her students needed "the concrete" and she admitted wondering how she would "pre-digest" the abstractions for her students. Laura emphasized the "messages" in different media texts, the journals kept by students were referred to always as the *Media Literacy*journals. Melissa said she didn't talk about the Media Literacy concepts explicitly with her students. Her students' journals, as a result, were referred to as the *SMARTboard* journals. Lynn, in contrast, was concerned with meeting the ideals of the project team regarding media *and* technology. Her students' journals were called the *McGill* journals. Student perceptions about the purpose of the project varied with the teacher's approach. Some students remained grounded in the particulars of project activities, without a sense of the bigger picture, while others could discuss the themes and patterns with surprising sophistication.

Beginning in the particular at St. Laurent. Lynn usually began critical thinking exercises in the particular. She often started her lessons with concrete examples of media texts (advertisement, web-site, film…) and then launched into an exploration of emerging patterns. The students, after examining the particulars, began to discover the underlying factors that influence media construction, from codes and conventions to financing and ownership. For example, mid-way into the project Lynn had asked her students to cut and paste an advertisement slogan in their journals and write about why they chose it. While some students weren't sure what attracted them to the wording of the slogan and chose to write about the product itself, other students discussed rhythm, length and "being catchy". Lynn decided to go over individual student selections with the entire class, using the particulars to figure out some common strategies involved in slogan construction. Lynn began a column of slogans with what she called "power words": new, fresh, faster, and longer lasting… Students were quickly able to point out examples that used this convention. Words of action and improvement were prominent in most of the students' selections.

As St. Laurent Elementary spent more and more time surfing the Net, they came across particular items that stood out as unusual. They noticed that when they conducted a

search for "Lego", the matches provided by the search engine had corresponding price links. After reading the web site as a media text, this is what one student discovered:

> We went on the Internet to the search engine Dogpile and then we went to Lego. Did you know that every time you click on "Lego", the Lego Company pays Dogpile eight cents? If you were to go to the site and get off and get on and off, Lego would owe Dogpile a big bill and Lego wouldn't be very . Lego is also advertised on the site Yahooligans and Lego pays them ten cents. Whoever pays the most gets their ad at the top of the page, so whoever comes to the site will see their ad first… (Jrnl., Tyrone)

The class began with a particular question about a web-site link and from there they discovered the relationship between the layout of a certain type of media text and the financing behind it ("whoever pays the most gets their ad at the top of the page..."). Lynn was very good at exploiting opportunities for higher order questioning. She often reminded students of their previous discoveries and prompted the students to synthesize and evaluate. The students in turn, were enthusiastic about making the connections at a more theoretical level.

Plateau. The students at Plateau School recalled with enthusiasm the many particulars of the eight-week project (the Scavenger Hunt, marketing strategies, the films, *Buy Me That*, and *The Spaghetti Story*…) but weren't prepared to make cogent links between them. Rachel decided to speak with certain groups of students at Plateau School to get a better sense of what they thought about the project. She noticed that very few students had a holistic understanding of the project. They didn't know what was meant by the term, Media Literacy, although they were capable of discussing such things as advertising techniques and the codes and conventions of the mock documentary, *The Spaghetti Story*. When asked if they could tell what the movies they watched might have had in common, Sandra offered, "They teach you not to believe everything you see". Curiously, this response came from a student described as "below average" in terms of academic achievement.

Some students were very insightful about the values and ideologies involved in particular media constructions:

> Today we were supposed to look at all commercials and find one that we hate. Mine was the commercial of Frenzi chips. This is how it goes: a plane is flying and all of a sudden it stops. The pilots push a red button as if to show that they were going to save the people but then the bags of Frenzi chips go on top of the peoples' chairs and while they are having a party eating chips the pilots leave them to their death. What bugs me is that the commercial is showing people that pilots don't care about the people in the plane. But for real they do, they are the last to leave. It also bugs me because my dad's friend died in a plane and the pilot tried hard to save them. I don't like it because it is wrong and can hurt many people's feelings, mostly pilots. (Jrnl., Rosanna)

Rosanna seems to understand the meaning making involved in reading texts. She reflects upon the commercial's message rather than her attitude about the product itself. It would be ideal if this student's insights could have been applied to Media Literacy in a more general way. Melissa did an excellent job in preparing relevant activities and encouraging student response and participation but, as she said in debriefing, she didn't talk about Media Literacy explicitly. Students learned much about advertising (marketing strategies, TV commercials, product characters and jingles). The developing literacy skills, however, didn't seem to extend beyond topic-specific activities. The students didn't often transfer

their new "reading" skills to other media texts.

Finding an appropriate balance between the abstract and particular is very challenging the first time through. Melissa said she expects it will become a lot easier the second and third time around because, "You realize what areas the students might have difficulties in".

Queens. Laura modified her approach as she went along. At first it was difficult "getting the ideas across" because the Media Literacy concepts were so abstract. Laura had set up group Media Literacy projects in which students were asked to explore the messages in different genres of text, from comic strips to advertisements. The students were engaged in cutting out images and pasting them to a piece of construction paper but they were unsure of the purpose of the activity. Rachel recorded the following notes:

> Mikey, Elijah, Edwina and Mark were eager to explain their project to me (although they didn't get the "Whys") and seemed to remain on task for most of the time. They told me their project was about Comics and that they were cutting out examples. I asked them if they were comparing the main characters (an idea I had heard Laura suggest last week). Mikey lit up and said that that might be a good idea. They were not sure how to go about "deconstructing" their media text.
>
> I discussed the basketball ad. project with Rupa's group for a little bit, asking them why they didn't have any advertisements on their poster. They just pasted up pictures of Michael Jordan. I think they realized that Michael Jordan is used to endorse products but yet they didn't have any pictures of those specific products. I tried to brainstorm with them about the products Jordan endorses (which worked) and then we tried to think of other b-ball players that promote products i.e. Grant Hill and Charles Barkley. They seemed animated. (F.N., 3, 04/05/99)

Laura realized that the students were not catching on. She said that she noticed a shift in their media literate behavior when they began to work on their "construction" unit. Laura attributes the success of The Hood project to an increased handling of the digital camera and equipment. Using the camera to produce images allowed the students to begin with the concrete and work towards the more abstract in later stages.

One of the photos taken during the Hood project opened up an interesting window for exploration. The photo appeared to be a picture of weapons. The image contained a gun and a grenade among other objects on display. When asked where the picture was taken, Neeraj said it was "a store that sold lighters". The objects in the photograph were not weapons but lighters. The media text produced by this student was an excellent launching pad for an exploration of how media construct reality. It is a picture that has obvious connotations of violence and yet could be manipulated to reveal another idea. When Rachel asked one group of students what people would think if their class put that photo in the newspaper, Quincy said, "They would think our neighborhood is a bad place". When Rachel asked if there was a lesson to be learned, Vicki said, "…sometimes things aren't what they look like. People make it like that". The students of Queens seemed better able to understand the theoretical concepts when they began from the perspective of producer (of the media text).

Two threads seem to emerge from the above observations:

1. The students grasped theoretical understandings more fully when the teaching began with particular examples - often examples that the students found or chose themselves - of the

concept at work.
2. The students found it easier to come to terms with the concepts when they acted as producers of media texts or producers of meaning.

The learning seemed to be the most powerful when the students came to discover emerging patterns on their own while the teachers give up their positions as *guardians of meaning.*

Guardians of Meaning

One of the theoretical concepts emphasized in this project was: *audiences negotiate meaning*. Teachers were to help students recognize that meaning making is an interaction rather than a transmission. Media texts do not have fixed meanings that are transmitted to passive audiences. As Patrick Dias (1989) writes, "…[meaning is a] constantly renewed product of the meeting between reader, text, and context" (28). While Dias was writing about meaning making specific to poetry, his ideas about reading and the role of the teacher are relevant to this discussion of Media Literacy.

Dias points out the tendency for teachers to take on the role of guardian of meaning when exploring a poem with students. Because poems are more ambiguous than other traditional genres of text (novel, newspaper article…) the teacher assumes that the students cannot understand the material on their own. This project expanded the idea of literacy to include a greater range of text genres. Because the activity of reading and writing certain genres was new to both students and teachers, it took some time to negotiate the amount of teacher mediation that was needed.

Teachers, according to Dias, should not be the guardians of meaning, but participants in a "joint venture of inquiry". Dias believes that teacher preoccupation with one right meaning is "always at the expense of the reader's developing ownership and autonomy" (1989, p. 49). As this project progressed, we observed varying degrees of teacher-directed reading. Lynn was most concerned with authorized interpretations and "proper vocabulary" while Laura and Dan were more concerned about student ownership and autonomy. Melissa operated from an understanding that all student contributions mattered but didn't devote as much time to reading activities as her two colleagues. The degree to which the teachers took on the role of guardian of meaning influenced developing literacies in very interesting ways.

Lynn. Lynn is an expert questioner. Her ability to mediate and tease out reflective responses from the students is a great strength. When exploring a media text, Lynn prompts the students to brainstorm and offer individual interpretations before she shares her ideas. On Rachel's second visit to St. Laurent Elementary, Lynn was very enthusiastic at the level of student response in a brainstorm session about advertising techniques. The students were capable and confident in describing marketing strategies without teacher direction and/or new terminology. The students mentioned such things as:

- The size of the product (larger on TV)
- Repetition of slogans

- Use of famous people
- Free items and prizes
- Small writing disclaimers ("batteries sold separately")
- Music
- Comparison to other brands… (F.N., 2, 22/04/9

While Lynn is skilled at facilitating student brainstorming she is equally skilled at prodding for the "right answer". Lynn often promotes an "authorized version" of the reading of a text. She is most accepting of student insights when they are in line with what she believes is "correct". On one occasion, the class was reading a cartoon on a web site. Featured in the cartoon frame was a figure on a pedestal. When Lynn asked the class what that meant, one student responded that, "it means that you are more important than others" to which Lynn responded, "No, it means being treated like God". Lynn's "corrections" did not seem to deter student responses. The students seemed eager to "get it right" the next time. Perhaps it is because the students catch her critical spirit, rather than paying attention to the specifics of her criticism. The above correction acknowledges the fundamental interpretation of the difference in status implied by the pedestal.

One result of this type of mediation is that the students at St. Laurent Elementary offer some very sophisticated interpretations, both written and oral. Lynn models critical thinking and the use of advanced vocabulary and the students follow accordingly.

Melissa. Melissa was very encouraging of student responses throughout the project. She praised the students repeatedly for their contributions to the collective understanding. When, for example, Melissa asked the students to think up all the places they might see print advertisements, she was delighted at the outpouring of creative responses (matchboxes, napkins, blimps, magnets, stickers...). She writes,

> A real eye-opening activity for myself was when I asked them to brainstorm all the places where advertisements are seen. Well, my blackboard was completely filled with places. The kids kept coming up with new ones and many that I had never even thought of. They were amazing!! (Jrnl., Melissa)

While supportive of the students in their contributions to class discussion, Melissa approached the teaching of Media Literacy most often from the top down. Rather than begin by having the students explore their intuitions or ideas about a text or a certain genre of text, Melissa would start by explaining the construction aspects by way of a handout or a movie. After distributing a list of marketing techniques or reviewing a movie that explains advertising tricks, Melissa would have the students discuss what they learned. This usually resulted in the students recounting the explanations given to them by the "experts". Note the following response to an exam question:

> What did you learn in the two movies, *"Buy Me That!"* and *"Buy Me That Too!"*?
>
> -I learned that commercials use special tricks like sound effects and editing to make things better. (C. Test, Emily)

The Media Literacy activities prepared by Melissa tended to focus on the idea that media construct reality. The lessons centered on advertising and making the students "aware of how some people in the media are trying to take advantage of them". Because the

emphasis was on the media as the active agent, the students spent much of their time learning what techniques advertisers use to manipulate them. The meaning, in the initial stages, was explained to the students rather than negotiated by the students.

One lesson required that the students (in groups) select a marketing strategy from a hat and illustrate that strategy pictorially. The marketing strategies were: bandwagon, scales, testimonial, image advertising, repetition, omission, weasel, family fun, name-calling and acquisition. Each term was accompanied by a definition and it was left to the students to figure out how to illustrate the technique with the help of their group members. To illustrate *testimonial,* for example, one group drew a picture of a famous basketball player holding a soft drink. To show the meaning of *omission,* another group drew a remote control car and a battery package. The battery package had a big X across it. Some techniques seemed more familiar to the students than others.

When it came time to recall and explain one advertising technique on an exam a month later, less than 50% of the grade five students were able to provide an answer that received full credit. We suspect that the students might have been more successful if they had generated their own list of techniques at the outset. As Dias (1989) writes,

> Teachers who consider themselves accountable for teaching vocabulary will find that such terminology is easily taught and registers when students feel the need for it and recognize its relevance. At all costs, it should not mystify or estrange.(p. 28)

Although they didn't get a lot of practice meaning-making for themselves, the students at Plateau School learned a great deal about advertising and other "tricks" used by the media. Melissa believes that the students are much more aware as consumers and have learned "not to believe everything they see on TV and the Internet".

Laura. The mediation approach at Queens seemed to develop as the project progressed. Laura began the project by giving the students a considerable amount of autonomy when it came to reading media texts. She let the students choose a genre of text and asked that they present their understandings in groups. As described previously, the students encountered difficulties and misunderstood the task at hand. When Dan and Laura launched The Hood project two weeks later, they hoped that a greater sense of ownership would result in more positive responses. The students, having taken the digital photographs, were now going to be the producers of the texts they were presenting.

The student presentations of the later project began with much trepidation. The first group to present their photographs was unsure of what to say. Dan, who had been with the students as they took the photos, encouraged the group to talk about whatever they felt was important. The students were reticent. Laura came over to the SMARTboard to stand alongside the students and prompt them. Rachel recorded the following observation:

> It seems worth mentioning that when Laura was prompting she was offering the students examples of what she "saw", i.e., the vertical lines of the fence vs. the horizontal planes of the buildings… Part of Media Literacy is understanding that audiences negotiate meaning. What Laura perceives as the message may not be what Terisha and Murali see as important or even relevant. The interaction was altogether interesting. Dan was asking the students to respond on their own while Laura was trying to model how the students might deconstruct an image. Being insecure

already, the students returned to the position of listener every time Laura spoke. *(O.C., 5, 17/05/99)*

Laura and Dan, while using different mediation approaches, were both trying to inspire student response. As the presentations continued Winston intervened. (He had come as a participant observer that morning and offered a hand as facilitator.) This is what Laura writes about that experience:

> Prof. Emery offered to take over at that point and I must confess that he did an excellent lesson with the kids -I hope I can remember all the techniques that he used. This was aided by Dan who was on hand when the pictures were taken and he also has a good `rap' with the kids.
>
> Prof. Emery started off in verbal places that they were used to, making use of fun stuff that they recalled and reinforcing any of the creativity. That resulted in discussion and he was able to dovetail them into real-time concrete gleanings about seducing/inducing meaning from the kids themselves! Had I known this could actually happen I would have attempted to tape it. (Jrnl., Laura)

Laura's very reflective entry reveals her concern for student ownership and autonomy. She didn't want to tell the students what their pictures meant, she wanted the students to articulate their own understanding. While Winston did guide the students through careful questioning, he also gave the students a lot of time to formulate their thoughts. He treated the students as very able producers that actively created sophisticated media texts. The students, consequently, acted the part.

The overarching goal of most media education programs is to encourage in the students the kind of critical autonomy it takes to become literate members of society. In some instances it will be useful to demonstrate critical thinking skills and teach new terms and concepts directly; at other times it might be better to let the students find their own meanings even if their "reading" seems erroneous. The students in this project were encouraged to develop their literacy skills in numerous ways. The students at St. Laurent Elementary modeled their reading approach after the teacher and revealed very sophisticated critical thinking skills. The students at Plateau School were introduced to important aspects of media construction and in return became more aware consumers. The students at Queens, while not as well versed in the "authorized versions", developed a sense of autonomy and ownership while working through activities related to the project. A difficult stage in all student developmental processes was moving from an intuitive understanding to a more formalized understanding. In the next section we examine what happened when the students tried to articulate what they understood with regards to Media Literacy.

Intuiting and Articulating

Most students have a considerable amount of intuitive knowledge when it comes to media constructions. As they come to have more and more contact with certain genres of text, students usually become quite adept at imitating the codes and conventions used in their productions. Students might have difficulty articulating the techniques they are using but the knowledge of how to use these techniques is usually demonstrated with relative ease. Becoming media literate requires that at some stage, students begin to formalize their intuitive notions about media constructions. The ability to articulate one's understanding in

the process of constructing and deconstructing media messages is a skill that takes guidance and practice. The episodes in the following section reveal the students' development from intuiting to articulating.

St. Laurent. The students at St. Laurent Elementary expressed themselves in a sophisticated fashion. They were very articulate about their understanding of specific genres of media texts and journalled extensively about their ideas. Lynn's strategy of moving from the particular to the abstract seems to coincide pedagogically with students moving from an intuitive notion to a reflective analysis. As described previously, when Lynn noticed that her students were having a hard time articulating what was specifically pleasing about individual ad. slogans she took the time to find and name patterns with the class. An entire month later one student, Djuna, recalled the technique of using similar sounding consonants in a succession of words. She applied her understanding of *alliteration*to a new reading context. Djuna was introduced to a way of describing what she had previously described as "just catchy".

The students at St. Laurent Elementary not only named and defined construction techniques, they were proficient in describing how the techniques work. When explaining the use of music in commercials, Michael says the following, "…you end up learning the song off by heart so when you go to the store you'll repeat it to yourself and when you see the product you'll say `hey, that's from the commercial'". Another student, Tarek, writes the following about the tendency of commercials to `only show the good things':

> Today I saw a commercial of a man with a broken up car and then he gets these tools from Canadian Tire and fixes the car up in 5 seconds… And then his car is so perfect all it needs is a nut, so he just shoots a nut in and without turning it or even going near it, the nut is perfectly on. They only show you the good parts. They don't show him going all the way to Canadian Tire, they don't show him paying the bill for the stuff he bought, they don't show him sweating or tired and not smiling or getting dirty or anything bad that could possibly happen. They only show good things like the good weather and the Canadian Tire customer smiling. (Jrnl., Tarek)

When describing the codes and conventions mocked in the BBC film, *The Spaghetti Story*, Gabriel writes the following:

> The Spaghetti Story tricked us in believing that spaghetti actually grows on trees. It tricked us because it all seemed very realistic. They used a black and white camera to make us believe the film was made a long time ago. To add to the realism everybody was dressed in clothes typical to the 1950's. Also they use the voice of an older man to make us believe it was a true documentary. It all seemed true. Even the image was kind of grainy and unclear like the older movies. The sound was also exactly like in the other documentaries I saw which were made 40 years ago. (Jrnl., Gabriel)

The students at St. Laurent Elementary did struggle in articulating some concepts. When they were introduced to the idea of *culture jamming* towards the end of the project, many had a hard time defining the term in their journals. The students often confused culture jamming with racism in advertising. Most students however, spoke very intelligently about how they, themselves, would spoof ads. They seemed to know how to "jam" intuitively. Those students who were more reflective about the "whys" of culture jamming described the concept as follows:

> Culture jamming, to me, means when a paper (sort of an ad.), tries to jam, `stop' people from buying some products

because the companies that sell those products do something bad. (Jrnl., Sarah)

When a company says the truth of what is really going on in the background of another company (Jrnl., Julianna)

To me culture jamming is a way to inform people about how advertisers lie to us and how they tell us some of the truth but not all of the truth. (Jrnl., Kendoll)

The students at St. Laurent Elementary articulated their understanding both orally and in writing. The higher order questioning and directed journal tradition in Lynn's class seems to have given the students extensive practice at putting their ideas into words. If and when the students were not clear in their first attempt(s) at explaining themselves in writing, Lynn strongly urged them to revise and redo.

Plateau. Although Melissa also expressed a concern about her students' ability to "verbalize their ideas", she said that she was more committed to the idea that her students "make it their own". Melissa said that she didn't want the various writing activities to seem like "work". She wanted the students to express what they felt was important. Melissa wanted the discourse to be genuine. This emphasis might account for the different degree to which the students at Plateau School articulated their understanding. Most of their insights about media texts were expressed at a more intuitive and personal level.

When the students were asked to construct an advertisement for spring water for example, many of their texts used familiar marketing strategies. The students incorporated such phrases as: "while supplies last", "on sale now" and "buy 3 get 1 free". One student used the slogan promise of "everlasting life in one easy drink". When the students at Plateau School created advertisements for food products, they described the products as "nutritious", "fat free" and rich in an array of specific vitamins. The students weren't prepared to discuss the codes and conventions they used explicitly but they were able to mimic the techniques they understood in the production exercises.

The students at Plateau School seemed to understand at some level what worked (or didn't work) in advertisements. When asked to write a critique of a television commercial however, most students fell short of words to explain why they didn't like their selection. The following are examples:

I hate the commercial when the parents say we'll be back at midnight, no parties but the kids do have a party so the door is starting to open and all her friends are acting like pieces of furniture and he says something is different -there is Monterey Jack on the pizza. (Jrnl., Debra)

The commercial that bugs me is the commercial for Herbal Essences [sic]. It is a shampoo. I hate it because the woman is screaming when she washes her hair and it has a dumb song at the end. And then the old lady says try or [sic] conditioner. (Jrnl., Ryan)

One commercial that really bugs me is the one when Elvis Stoiko skates around the ice trying to sell McCain juice because I just hate it and it's boring. (Jrnl., Oren)

The commercials I don't like are the Corn Pops one and the YTV Keep It Weird commercials because they act like total idiots. Those commercials are the kinds that are stupid and make you wish commercials didn't exist they stink. (Jrnl., Emily)

These students were able to think of a commercial that irritated them with no problem. Articulating exactly what it was about the commercial that was "idiotic" or "boring" seemed to present a greater challenge.

In class, the students at Plateau School seemed to relay their understanding at a personal level. They were usually very enthusiastic about contributing to class discussions. The students seemed confident expressing their opinions and personal anecdotes and eager to listen to their peers. Their development from intuiting to articulating seemed to be nurtured by group interaction. They were very successful at bridging their personal experience to the material at hand. The students at Plateau School seemed to articulate their understanding by personalizing the formal rather than formalizing the personal. They worked through the theoretical by making personal connections rather than deriving formal concepts from personal experiences like the students at St. Laurent Elementary. Perhaps this is because at Plateau School, the lessons moved from the abstract to the particular.

Queens. Laura often worried that the media literate discoveries made by her students in class wouldn't be formalized in their writing. After one particularly productive lesson involving the Hood project, Laura writes:

> I knew this would never get written down by the kids but I was hoping that the interface was so gripping that they'd recall it all (+ gestalt `more') when Wednesday came for their write ups. (Jrnl., Laura)

When watching the film, *Zea,* the students at Queens made many contributions to class discussion but again Laura was doubtful that their understanding would translate into writing:

> The first responses were slow in coming, but quickly getting thick and fast as the kids realized they'd been had to some degree. They all wanted to see the film again and this time they recognized features that made them come to certain conclusions. Again, all this would never come out on paper but I consider this was time well spent for community thinking and hypothesizing. Some students responding in these settings are not used to having good responses in regular class settings. (Jrnl., Laura)

The students were articulating themselves orally, and some, as Laura mentioned, were students who didn't usually contribute to class discussions. The student journal entries about the film were, contrary to Laura's concern, usually one of the students' better pieces of writing (in terms of quantity and quality). The following entries describe the students' experience watching the film:

> …when it first started it looked like a planet, like the planet Mars then it started to develop into an egg. I thought it was an egg because it had a yellow yolk but there was bubbles that were on it, it looked like a fish in a sort of way. After awhile everybody was thinking it was an egg. I really liked some of the parts because of the fish and one of my answers was that it was a slug underwater… (Jrnl., Quincy)

> We watched this movie first it looked like a planet in outer space then it wasn't a planet it formed like an egg and all the molecules were joining the bubble and the bubble got bigger. It was shiny and students were making comments about it -it's an egg, planet, fish, slime and a yolk. It was white and it popped out then I thought it was a squid. Then Fanny told us it is a popcorn. Guess what -it was a popcorn. The music was fantastic. It was classical music. (Jrnl., Suresh)

The students recalled in detail their personal process of negotiating meaning. While viewing the film for the second time, they animatedly pointed out what aspects of the

footage lead them to their original assumptions. Although the majority of student journal entries didn't explore the construction aspects (lighting, camera angles…), the following student offers these insights about the production "thing":

> This production thing was created by a mini cam that can fit in your mouth. So they put it in a pot and filmed it with music and sound. So that's how I think they made the movie. (Jrnl., Mark)

The students at Queens struggled to articulate their understanding of how media construct reality. While working on their contributions to the Hood project however, Dan noticed that the students had excellent intuitive production skills. Dan said that he was impressed by the students' photo-taking strategies. He said that the students seemed to know how to use angles, cropping and framing techniques. When the students were presenting their photographs on the SMARTboard, they were encouraged to describe how the shots were taken.

One group of students told the class that they took some pictures lying down and one while standing on a bench. One of the pictures, taken of a street corner, inspired some insightful discussion. The picture of the street corner was taken on a diagonal and because of this angle it appeared as though the street was on a hill. In reality, the intersection was not on a hill and the students began to articulate the ways in which different techniques could be used to change the perspective.

Another illuminating moment came later in the presentation when a second group was showing the class a photograph taken of a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in the area. With the encouragement of Winston, the students discussed the color contrast between the background blue of the sky and the red and white stripes of the restaurant's peak. In the top left hand corner of the image there was a corner jutting out of what was probably a sign for KFC. Winston tried to get the students to think about what that part of the image does for the picture. There were some incomplete answers and a period of silence but after some time Thomas, the photographer, said, "…it is pointing to the restaurant". The dark corner of the sign guided the eye to a focal point (the KFC logo).

The Queens students weren't introduced to terms like "focal point", "eye line" or "cropping" before they took their photographs. They did seem to know what was pleasing at an intuitive level. Winston praised Thomas for his use of "professional techniques". Whether or not Thomas was aware of the techniques he was using is uncertain. He did, however, have an unarticulated vision of what he wanted to capture in the photograph and it is likely that next time he goes out with a camera, he will think about his construction on a deeper level.

Conclusions

The activities of this project seemed to have helped students understand and articulate their ideas about media texts. There is much evidence in the behaviour of the students and in their writings and productions to show a developing awareness that the media construct reality and that audiences negotiate the meanings of texts. Although there was variability

among the three schools and within each school, the students also demonstrated acquisition of considerable understanding of the means by which messages are constructed and distributed and were pressed to grapple with meanings behind the messages that they might otherwise have taken for granted. What was clear from our study was that media education programs such as this can successfully be implemented at the elementary school and that students can engage in the critical activity inherent in such curricula in order to interpret the media texts they encounter daily outside school.

Implementation is not without its problems, however. Findings in our study reflected several recurring issues in media education. The first concerns distinctions between teaching about media and teaching through the media. For media educators there is considerable concern that while teachers use media in the classroom to teach content, they fail to draw attention to the extent to which the media texts and the delivery systems themselves ought to be scrutinized. The manipulation of the technology seems to occupy centre-stage and the process of critique is relegated to the wings. In some respects, this project succumbed to the same pull. All involved in the project were excited by the use of the SMARTboard and internet technology, and, with one important exception - Lynn's class' examination of the economic structure of the search engine - paid scant attention to the critique of the very systems they were using. To be fair, the teachers were new to the conceptual framework of media education and new to their role of adopting critical stances with their students. And they did have criticisms regarding operational difficulties the technologies engendered. But, the failure to engage in the critique of the media texts and systems they were using under the rubric of the two major concepts being studied points to a deeply embedded ideology of positivism concerning technology in education.

The second issue concerns the training of teachers to teach media education. In this case, the three teachers we followed expressed the need for further grounding in the key concepts of media education and more modeling showing how these concepts might be effectively introduced and exploited in classrooms. They echo in many ways the kinds of pleas made at media education conferences and found in the literature. Our study has given us some insight as to how such teacher preparation might be undertaken. Given the relatively brief preparation time, the teachers in this project learned a considerable amount about Media Literacy and developed some highly effective curriculum. We think that this was due to several factors. First was the predisposition of each teacher to innovation in her classroom; second was the broad repertoire of professionalism each of the three teachers already had at their disposal, acquired through their experiences and their expertise.

Third, and germane to professional education, is the availability of professional resources - text resources and people resources. The teachers had access to the media consultants at the E.M.S.B., in person and via the Net. They had collaborators in their classrooms (Rachel and Winston, who visited them regularly, Mr. Stuart who worked with Melissa in her classroom, Dan and Ms. Banks[2] who worked with Laura). The opportunities for exchange of information, for clarification of conceptual understandings, for developing effective

curricular and pedagogical strategies that these collaborations engendered seemed to contribute enormously to the rapid assimilation of effective media pedagogy into the repertoires of these teachers.

Additionally, there were two key opportunities for the teachers to meet during the time the project was being implemented. These enabled further information sharing and collaborative problem solving. Finally, the regular feedback from the researchers of the project was useful to the teachers. The visits of Rachel and Winston not only served as a means of ascertaining how their teaching was affecting students, but also as a way of keeping track of what their colleagues were doing in the other schools, what resources they were using and with what effect. It seems to us that this kind of team learning generated out of the reality of the classroom experience shows excellent promise as a means of professional development at the pre-service and in-service level. More research needs to be conducted on effective teacher development along these lines.

Finally, our study described a number of instances in which teachers modeled or set their students up to adopt a critical stance. When the teachers did this, the students invariably responded with considerable enthusiasm and sophistication. At other times, however, students seemed to miss the point of activities or merely performed "what was required". We wish to highlight the pedagogical conditions in the classrooms we studied that seemed to best generate the desired behaviours.

Successful media education pedagogy, in this instance, seems to be characterized by the following:

- Establishing a climate in the classroom where teacher and student are both seen as being capable of teaching each other from expertise. The activities that seemed to us to be the most productive for students were those in which they were engaged in constructing meanings or messages out of their own experiences and were assisted to do so by their teachers/fellow students. There was a sharing of power in determining the agenda of the interaction around the media education activity and in leading it. Masterman (1985) refers to this as "non-hierarchical" teaching; Barnes (1992) calls it "interpretation" teaching.
- Formal instruction (critical analysis of media texts) arises out of the particular experiences and perceptions of students. The function of the teacher is: to elicit the particular experiences of the students with media texts; to encourage them to clarify their understandings of them, to note similarities or patterns; and then to organize and name them in the formal language of the discipline.
- The meanings made by the students are the ones that matter. What the teachers did was to model for students the behaviours of being critical of a text. The modeling behaviour seemed to have the greatest impact when the analysis of the text was a collaborative venture and where it was implicitly understood that the popular culture texts chosen or generated by the students were not being judged as "inferior in quality".
- Student productions of media texts exploit their tacit understanding of media languages and techniques, which can be formalized and used to critically evaluate other media texts.
- Regular reflection on the part of students and monitoring and feedback from teachers encouraged growth and development in articulating a critical consciousness.

Each of these premises is tentative and their operation in the classroom is problematic. They certainly need to be the object of considerable scrutiny and assessment, but our experience suggests that an investigation of them constitutes a worthy research agenda.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1. Dan was Laura's student teacher who participated in teaching the students at Queen's school.

2. Ms Banks was a student teacher who worked with Laura in the first two weeks of the project.

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