Media Literacy in the Risk Society: Toward a Risk Reduction Strategy

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The idea of media literacy prompts an increasingly divisive debate between educators who wish to protect children from the commercialization of global markets and those who challenge critical media studies as misguided, outdated, and ineffective. We have provided a historical overview of changing conceptions of media literacy as preparation and protection in market society, arguing that contemporary concerns about children's fast food marketing and sedentary lifestyles call for new approaches to the education of citizen-consumers in a risk society. Our case study demonstrates that a media education programme can provide scaffolding for children's critical thinking about their sedentary lifestyles and media consumption.

Key words: sedentary lifestyles, advertising literacy, media consumption, displacement effects.

La notion d'initiation aux médias suscite un débat de plus en plus animé entre, d'une part, les intervenants éducatifs qui désirent protéger les enfants contre la mondialisation de la culture commerciale et, d'autre part, ceux pour qui les études critiques des médias sont peu judicieuses, périmées et inefficaces. Les auteurs présentent un survol historique de l'évolution des façons de voir l'initiation aux médias comme outil de préparation et de protection dans une société marchande et soutiennent que les inquiétudes actuelles au sujet du marketing des repas-minute auprès des enfants et des modes de vie sédentaire requièrent de nouvelles approches de l'éducation des consommateurs-citoyens dans une société à risque. L'étude de cas présentée ici démontre qu'un programme d'initiation aux médias peut permettre de charpenter l'esprit critique des enfants au sujet de leur mode de vie sédentaire et de leur consommation des médias.

Mots clés : mode de vie sédentaire, littératie en matière de publicité, consommation des médias, effets de déplacement.

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Since mass literacy was first established as one of the cornerstones of democratic society, reading and writing have been the undisputed core competences taught in primary classes, where the book is the privileged medium of mass education. Yet during the twentieth century, the invention of mass media such as films and comics has provoked widening debate about the role of electronic media in mass education as researchers documented that children spent as much time watching TV at home as they did in classrooms of formal learning. Because in a commercial media system, most programming was produced with the size of the audience rather than children's education in mind, television was the source of anxious discourses about mesmerized children entranced by mindless cartoons, punctuated by messages from paying sponsors (Kline, 1993). However visually attractive and engaging, teachers instilled with the ideals of progressive education found it ever more difficult to see the banal cartoons and crime dramas as scaffolding children's intellectual development. Researchers discovered that new media had a paradoxical impact on children's socialization: television could both support learning and school achievement among brighter middle-class students who were intellectually prepared, but also distract poorer students from reading and homework, leading to a downward spiral of academic achievement. Critics began to fear that mass media were having a greater detrimental impact outside the classroom.

During the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan provoked a broad debate about the new forms of literacy forged in electronically mediated cultures. Cook (2000) has documented the public debate about this first television generation as "electronic media together with the flow and forces of capital" began "fomenting a post-modern childhood inseparable from media use" (p. 82). TV became the contested cultural zone, as North American educators realized that the vast wasteland of mass broadcasting might be cultivating a spoiled generation of aggressive couch potatoes. On one side, the progressives were optimistic about this technological modernization of mass education because TV made knowledge accessible and engaging. On the other, the defenders of traditional literate sensibilities wanted to inoculate children by teaching them to critique the crass and reductive tendencies of a commercialized mass culture. Over the years, the terms used in this debate have

changed, but the central problem has remained the same: media are associated with both positive and negative aspects of socialization.

Recognizing the limitations of commercial TV, American progressives rallied public support in the USA, helping to launch the Public Broadcast System as a counterweight to mass ignorance. Sesame Street, the PBS's flagship programme, specifically set out to give ghetto kids a head start in acquiring literacy and numeracy skills by adapting the techniques of commercial media—popular music, animation, dynamic formats of advertising, and clever puppetry—to deliver mass literacy into the home. The commercial formats proved enormously attractive to children all around the world, confirming that commercial TV can be educational. Yet assessments of this pedagogical innovation indicated the limits of TV as a mass educator. Families who already supported their children's education confirmed that pre-school TV programmes could provide a boost to literacy skills (Anderson, Huston, Wright, & Collins, 1998). But without parental support and encouragement, children received few positive benefits from watching Sesame Street, particularly among the most deprived families (Lesser, 1974). The findings suggested that those who watched commercial TV most did poorly at school. Researchers found no easy technological fixes for the problems of mass education.

PEDAGOGIES OF RESISTANCE

British educators were more wary of the rise of mass mediated culture than those in North America (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Pointing to the enormous popularity of the cinema and comics, Leavis and Thomson (1933) proposed a prophylactic cultural pedagogy that would teach the masses to better discriminate cultural tastes and resist the commercial rhetoric of popular culture. Inspired by Leavis, many British educators believed that cultural literacy was the best defence against the incursions of commercialized culture.

Although commercial television expanded rapidly in the 1950s in the UK, British policy makers established quality standards in the public interest and mandated the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as an educational broadcaster to prevent a cultural wasteland. British educator Richard Hoggart (1959) argued that defending literacy called

for a broader rethinking of public education. He recognized that many highbrow works of poetry and prose on the curriculum served only to marginalize and demean working class students. Because the levelling aspirations of the mass literacy movement required a broader cultural pedagogy to "replace the snobbishness of traditional educators" he argued for a critical cultural pedagogy that strongly opposed the trivialization, the fragmentation and the opinionation encouraged by popular providers" (p. 321).

Hoggart's (1959) advocacy for critical cultural studies provided the impetus for media literacy pedagogy in Britain. The idea of a democratizing potential for critical cultural studies inspired many teachers who practised analyzing popular music, movies, and television with students to teach them to understand differences between the progressive and regressive dimensions of cultural ideology. British media studies advocate Len Masterman consolidated these ideas into a formal critical pedagogy which taught "ideological deconstruction" to protect younger students from commercial manipulation (Masterman, 1985). His critical media education curriculum called for the empowerment of students through a demystification of popular texts, especially news and advertising. His pedagogy used literary, ideological, and semiotic analysis to encourage a reflective questioning stance towards the forms and contents of print and electronic media. Masterman's critical pedagogy has influenced teachers around the world, but especially in Canada where this pedagogy helped launch media education among Ontario and British Columbia teachers (Anderson, Duncan, & Pungente, 2004).

Many teachers found that media studies provided excellent leverage for broadening the scope of the English curriculum beyond the great works. The British Film Institute (BFI) took the lead in a broader view of cultural criticism, promoting film studies through a schools outreach initiative that taught film as parallel cultural text. They developed course materials focused on the appreciation of filmic language to promote visual literacy skills. Recognizing the importance of film and television as building blocks of youth, these initiatives engaged through desire rather than condemn children's taste as vulgar and unsophisticated. Rather than condemning rock videos, advertising, and sitcoms as

debased forms, they used them to engage students with learning the visual grammars of media.

PRAGMATIC PEDAGOGIES AND DIGITAL PANICS

The critical pedagogy of media studies gained acceptance in North America, where the limitations of the PBS as an educational force were becoming apparent. The Parent-Teachers Association, who lobbied for a school-based initiative to countermand the effects of commercial television on children, persuaded the US Office of Education to launch a research and development initiative in 1978. This initiative supported the idea of teaching critical television viewing skills in the schools, enabling students to make judicious use of their viewing time. The US Office of Education recommended a national curriculum to enhance students' understanding of commercials, their ability to distinguish fact from fiction, the recognition of competing points of view in programmes, an understanding of the style and formats in public affairs programming, and the ability to understand the relationship between television and printed materials (Lloyd-Kolkin, Wheeler, & Strand, 1980).

In the early 1980s, however, President Reagan's deregulation of communications put a halt to media education efforts in the USA. Ironically, the deregulation of children's TV also intensified anxieties about the widening gulf between the civilizing values fostered in schools and the self-indulgence and aggression promoted by the mass entertainment. Deregulation, therefore, intensified public anxieties about children's vulnerability in an increasingly unregulated commercial world. Declaring that the cultural epistemology created by mass media is "not only inferior to print based epistemology but is dangerous and absurdist," Neil Postman warned "that the uncontrolled growth of technology destroys the vital sources of our humanity. It creates a culture without a moral foundation. It undermines certain mental processes and social relations that make human life worth living" (Postman, 1993, p. xiii). He remained fundamentally opposed to educators making any accommodation with TV or computers, or accepting the implicit cultural values that advocates of popular culture brought into the classroom.

Not everyone drew their lines in the sand around the traditional literacy curriculum. During the 1990s on a state-by-state basis (Scharrer, 2002, p. 354) North American media educators began reviving earlier media literacy precepts by updating their pedagogies beyond deconstruction skills (McCannon, 2002). Media literacy, defined as critical analysis, proved a remarkably "big tent," encompassing different interests including religious groups, left-wing scholars, popular culture educators, computer technology advocates, health promoters, and social marketers and advertisers.

In the early 1980s, the progressives' hopes for media education rallied around children's growing fascination with a new medium: computers. Enthusiasts proclaimed that even while playing computer games, children were solving problems, gaining control over their lives, and feeling good about themselves, while acquiring operational skills for the automated and computerized workplaces of the future. Many teachers welcomed the computerization of the classroom, believing this technology cultivated active engagement in learning. In 1994, Vice-President Gore sketched out the US government's plans to make computer literacy a national goal (Tapscott, 1998). Digital gurus foresaw an enlightenment revival programmed into the computer chips, promising that interactive technology would enhance young people's ability to learn. Cultural studies scholars like Henry Jenkins (2004) became enthusiastic advocates for this pragmatic perspective on the newly wired school, arguing that computers laid the foundation for digital media literacies that fostered skills and competencies needed in the current media environment.

The scope of the debates about multiple critical literacies has broadened (Warnick, 2002). Over the last decade, schools across North America were wired into the commercialized backbone of the networked society. The hope that this new technology would better prepare students for the information age propelled this frenzied upgrading of classroom technologies. Media education came to be associated with competences and skills of media use, rather than the critical awareness of communicated values (Jenkins, 2004).

The digital revolution renewed the progressives' hopes for democratic education by making training in operational competences

and multi-literacies the rite of passage into future labour markets (New London Group, 1996). However, children need more than operational skills to survive in today's unregulated on-line environments where viral marketing, cyber-stalkers, spammers, hackers, and pornographers rub shoulders with children (Media Awareness Network, 2001). Like TV, commercial web sites and video games are not designed as educational, but rather entertainment sources (Kline, 2003). Many teachers sympathized with Postman's hope of buffering students against the more dehumanizing aspects of our culture, driven by technology, mass media, and consumer capitalism, and now believe that media literacy initiatives can provide an intellectual prophylactic against the overwhelming encroachment of commercial values and sensibilities.

Most contemporary media educators have responded to this challenge, committed to the idea that preparation for citizenship in an information society can no longer be "viewed exclusively in terms of keeping children away from certain content, or vice versa, but is also a question of '*strengthening children in their role as critical consumers (and producers) of the multiple media'*" (Carlsson, 2003, p. 8).

A PEDAGOGY DIVIDED

Noting a widening rift between the preparationist progressives and protectionist critics within the media literacy movement, Renee Hobbs (1998) chastises this fractious coalition for being incapable of defining, let alone agreeing to, a unified approach to media pedagogy. Rather than resolving their differences or establishing shared goals, she notes a tendency to circle the wagons and shoot inwards. David Buckingham's (2003) recent book is a prime example, launching a scathing attack on the protectionist ideology and their rhetoric of democratic citizenship upon which applications in the classroom are often based and which many critical media educators espouse. Buckingham dismissed the critical literacies approach as nothing more than a moral panic that wrongly sees media as having an enormously powerful (and almost entirely negative) influence and which therefore censors children's taste and preferences because children are vulnerable to manipulation. He goes on to characterize the work of these critical media educators as a type of ideological manipulation that submits media "to a form of 'critical

analysis' which does little more than command obedience and assent" (p. 171). He concludes by claiming that such a heavy-handed approach must inevitably fail because it condemns what children love. He advocates the cultural studies alternative that stresses readerly competences and creative self-expression as the preferred learning outcomes of the media studies curriculum.

Although Buckingham offers some useful observations about how a Vygotskian approach can guide media educators to scaffold active learning through "creative engagements" in the classroom, his sweeping dismissal of critical pedagogy may seem odd to educators in the Canadian media literacy movement. To narrow the preparationist agenda from informed and responsible choices to operational competences accepts a highly reductive view of the goals of media education. Many teachers will be unhappy with this neo-liberal view of their role in promoting democratic citizenship because job training has triumphed over critical judgement as the core learning objectives. More problematically, Buckingham's dismissal of critical pedagogies as a form of ideological indoctrination totally misrepresents contemporary Canadian practice where many thoughtful teachers provoke self-reflection and foster informed judgments in their students. As Brown (1998) points out, media teachers around the world (except perhaps in the UK) "avoid indoctrinating with their own opinions and conclusions, but rather, train students in the process of selective discrimination, analytical observation and reasoned assessment based on factual data judged according to meaningful criteria" (p. 49).

Perhaps most troubling is Buckingham's insistence that critical media education has been largely motivated by an unwarranted belief in the corrupting influence of media and a correlative desire to police children's taste and morality. Although the public often overstates or misunderstands the media's effects, educators cannot conclude that children's lives remain untouched by the commercialized world. If media were only a matter of taste—and children were already competent users of media (particularly compared with their parents), there would be little justification for educating about media. Teachers could all get on with teaching history as suggested by Postman. What Buckingham refuses to acknowledge is that a growing body of evidence suggests

important lifestyle risks are associated with heavy media consumption: aggressive and anti-social behavior, obesity and eating disorders, depression and low self-esteem, or lower educational achievement (Kline, 2005a). Because of these concerns, Canadian media education efforts have largely re-focused on providing information and skills that help students make healthy and socially responsible lifestyle choices, including media use.

TOWARDS A LIFESTYLE RISK PEDAGOGY

We think Buckingham's sweeping claim must be challenged, his assertion that the "missionary rhetoric of public schooling – its claim to 'emancipate' students from power, and transform them into autonomous social agents by making them into critical viewers has not worked" (Buckingham, 2003, p. 16). Recent evaluative studies of media education researchers addressing the admittedly complex tasks of assessing the learning outcomes of media literacy programmes have found important benefits from media literacy interventions (Emery & McCabe, 2003; Hobbs, 1999; Scharrer, 2002). Moreover an encouraging body of evidence indicates that media literacy initiatives to help students make informed and responsible lifestyle choices about risky products such as cigarettes and alcohol are also highly effective (Bradford, 2001; Pechmann, 1997; Verkaik & Gathercoal, 2001). Half as many Canadian youth smoke as British youth, perhaps prompted by the proactive use of media to educate young people about the health risks of tobacco. Although no definitive solution exists, a growing body of evidence also shows that critical media education can scaffold students to make critical judgements of promotional material and consumption choices and provoke better management of their leisure time. For example in a recent study in Britain, health educators demonstrated that a media education programme could "inoculate" children against the marketing of "fizzy drinks" (James, Thomas, Cavan, & Kerr, 2004).

A considerable body of research in Canada (Andersen, 2000; Tremblay & Willms, 2003) and the USA (Gortmaker et al., 1996; Tucker, 1986; Vanderwater, Shim, & Caplovitz, 2004) shows that heavy media consumption is associated not only with obesity in children, but with lower activity levels and greater intake of energy dense foods.

Recognizing the pivotal role that television and video games play in children's lives, Robinson (2000) and Robinson, Wilde, Navracruz, Haydel, and Varady (2001) noted how little health education effort has been directed at reducing the known risks associated with media use compared with drugs, alcohol, and smoking risks. Robinson and colleagues reasoned that if heavy media consumption has been shown to increase the risks of obesity and anti-social behaviour in some children, then interventions that reduced media consumption should lessen those risks. His team developed an in-school intervention for young children in grades 3 and 4, which communicated, over 18 weeks, about various health risks, promoted students' time budgeting and selective viewing, and restricting their total use of technology (films, TV, and video games). The research compared students in experimental and control schools, finding that at the end of this eight-month study, children who received the media education programme had reduced their TV viewing by about one-third (Robinson et al., 2001).

The experimental school experienced a 25 per cent reduction in aggressive behaviours and half as much verbally aggressive behaviour such as teasing, threatening, or taunting peers on the playground when compared with students at the control school. Both boys and girls benefited from the intervention curriculum, and the most aggressive students, according to the study, experienced the greatest drop in combativeness. Students in the treatment school also showed reduced risk of obesity (measured by BMI and skin fold) when compared with those in the control, although no evidence occurred of greater active leisure. The controlled experiment revealed not only that the media education significantly reduced media consumption, but that rates of weight gain were significantly slower when compared to control schools. Robinson and colleagues suggest that lower rates of BMI growth are associated mostly with the lower number of meals eaten in front of the television set in the treatment school. Robinson and colleagues confirmed that reduced television viewing could be an important part of a school-based prevention strategy for counteracting obesity in children. In short, this study demonstrated that targeting media use in the primary classroom provided a viable way of intervening in the cluster of

interrelated developmental media-risk factors associated with a sedentary lifestyle and fast food culture.

MEDIA LITERACY IN THE RISK SOCIETY

Robinson and colleagues suggest that in a commercialized marketplace, media literacy programmes can reduce risks associated with children's media use and bolster healthier lifestyle choices. We strongly disagree with Postman, therefore, that media educators should counter the impacts of commercialized popular culture by barricading the doors of the schools. We also agree with Buckingham that children are dynamic cultural agents. An ideological deconstructionist pedagogy, therefore, will be of little use in counteracting the constant informal learning that takes place outside schools. However, young people's growing engagement with media does not warrant a retreat from critical pedagogy, but rather a reworking of it in the context of a risk society.

Youth are highly engaged in constructing their own identities and asserting their own tastes. They do so, not in contexts of their own making, but rather in a highly commercialized global marketplace that produces systemic environmental and lifestyle risks (Kline, 2005b). As the obesity epidemic has recently made abundantly clear, media use itself is not simply a matter of identity construction and taste, but rather one of promoting unhealthy food choices and consolidating sedentary lifestyles (Kline, 2005b). From the point of view of schools, students are active agents in a process of gaining both power and responsibility for their own well being in a democratic society. The objective of media literacy, therefore, must now include the goal of preparing students for citizenship in a risky consumer society.

In Western culture, children and adolescents clearly enjoy greater scope to actively construct their identities both by choosing their pleasures and experiencing risks. But this does not mean they are uncritical. In response, we developed our risk communication strategy as a kind of *cultural judo* that recognized that children come into classrooms not only immersed in media culture but also exposed to the critical concepts that circulate through media (including advertising is deceptive, play should be fair, junk food is bad for you, and TV can be a waste of time). Because children and youth learn much of this critical

repertoire in the family and peer groups, our risk reduction pedagogy built on the frail scaffolding of their own critical reflections by engaging them in discussions of the role media played in their lives. Rather than condemn matters of personal taste and preference, our critical literacy approach engaged students in discussing their lifestyles, asking them to reflect on their media use habits, helping them create alternative opportunities for leisure, and challenging them to take responsibility for their lifestyle choices.

CASE STUDY: A CANADIAN MEDIA RISK REDUCTION STRATEGY

In what follows, we outline research that demonstrates that media literacy intervention can effectively promote children's skills and knowledge to cope with the lifestyle risks associated with media consumption. Our project transposed Robinson et al's (2001) risk reduction logic into a pedagogy we call cultural judo. Whereas Robinson and colleagues relied on a time-limiting technology to reduce children's media consumption, we designed a series of classroom exercises to support voluntary reduction of media use through critical reflection. Where Robinson used a standard health information model, we reinforced the scaffolding that supports and consolidates young people's critical thinking about their own lifestyle choices. Where Robinson's programme focused on classroom lectures, we emphasized a community-based approach that involved families, peers, and teachers as protective factors in the child's lifestyle decisionmaking.

Method

In the spring of 2003, we undertook a formative case study evaluation of our community-based, media, risk-reduction strategy in four North Vancouver primary schools. The Media Analysis Laboratory at Simon Fraser University developed and delivered this media pedagogy focused on improving school safety for elementary students. Our overall objective was to design, conduct, and evaluate a media education programme to make primary school children (and their parents) more aware of the risk factors associated with heavy media consumption and more willing to participate in a media reduction week challenge. We based our evaluation on comparing media use, activity levels, and

attitudes of children before and after the six-week media risk reduction intervention. There were no control groups and all children in the chosen classes participated in the media literacy exercises.

Participants

Participants in this case study consisted of a total of 178 elementary students, 91 male students and 87 female students. We selected the students from eight classes in four different schools in North Vancouver, involving eight classes ranging from grade 2 to grade 6. Although sampling was somewhat random, the participating schools were varied in their socio-economic status. We chose young children for this study for the following reasons: ability of parents to monitor home media, parental involvement in school-based projects tends to be high, and research has shown that early sedentary lifestyle patterns may lead to life-long health problems (Dietz & Gortmaker, 2001).

Because we wanted to support, and not bully, children into making informed lifestyle choices, and to see what happened to their leisure when they voluntarily reduced their dependency on media entertainment, we coached teachers not to blame children for whatever choices they made. We developed and implemented our critical media literacy programme with the classroom teachers to weave the discussion of lifestyle risks into normal class activities. Applying our cultural judo approach, we augmented each classroom lesson with creative activities focused on making the three moments of critical learning more accessible: reflection focusing on students' examination of the risks associated with their own media use and preferences; deconstruction based on exercises to expose the critical concepts that children use in understanding both the benefits and risks of media (junk food, couch potatoes, fair play, addiction); and reconstruction based on creative engagement in strategies for changing lifestyles through designing and articulating alternatives.

The Curriculum

Reflection. Our research showed that many children freely admit that they have developed patterns of dependence on media. We also showed that these activities were not always the most preferred leisure choices

available to children. Rather, we found that complex circumstances in young people's lives make media consumption the easy solution to boredom and loneliness, e.g., reporting that TV and video games are preferred solitary activities, but played only when social activities like friends and play are not readily at hand. Because the children watched TV and played video games when they had time to kill and when they had little supervision, we identified and talked about the development of patterns of media use, including preferred genre and programme preferences.

Deconstruction. Future citizens need to know not only how to read and write in various media, but also to understand the contextual factors that influence how information becomes distorted or biased. Many media educators working with teens, therefore, focus on news and public affairs discourses as the pillars of critical literacy programmes, helping them understand the ways political information gets constructed and used in the contemporary world. But consumer socialization research reveals that, although young children (6-11 years) have acquired financial power, they have rather limited knowledge of the mediated marketplace. Although industry advocates portray them as possessing advertising savvy, many children neither understand the intent of advertising nor the institutions that shape commercialized programming (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000). Although they can say if they like an ad or not, few adolescents fully comprehend the complexly layered irony designed into marketing messages (O'Donahue & Tynan, 1998). Even marketers admit that kids are "clearly influenced, absorbing detail to use in persuading their parents to buy" (Duff, 2004, p. 49) without evaluating the products. With synergistic cross marketing, product placements, web marketing, and programme length commercials, it is hardly surprising that few young children can explain the difference between programming and advertising content (Livingstone, 2003). We see a need, therefore, to develop children's understanding of the commercialized world in ways that would not deny their pleasure in watching cartoons or playing with toys and video games. We created a number of playful learning experiences through which students became acquainted with basic marketing and advertising techniques such as branding, product placements, and celebrity

endorsements. Additionally, we used role-play scenarios and blue screen special effects to engage them in critical thinking about media creation. This supported classroom discussion of heroes and heroines and bully-victim scenarios with a comparison of on-screen and off-screen conflict and the resolutions most often employed.

Reconstruction. Because media are an important focal point in children's culture, we decided not to deny their pleasure in watching TV, computer messaging, or playing computer games, or to condemn media without reason. Children's decisions to alter lifestyles must be voluntary. Based on experience with smoking reduction, we also suspected that if adults condemn children's pleasures out of hand, children would perceive them as prohibiting something that is fun. To change peer interactions, therefore, we needed not only to make the risks known but also to make the alternatives, if not cool, then at least acceptable choices within peer relations. To change peer interactions, we set out to explore why and when children are dissatisfied with media, encouraging them to imagine alternatives collectively that are equally enjoyable and satisfying. The project also set out to challenge children to take more control of their free time by asking the question, "What would you do if you turned off TV, video games, and PCs for a whole week?" We followed these sessions with a week-long preparation for the "Tune Out the Screen Challenge" in which students worked on ways of encouraging other students to take part in the Tune Out Challenge, without asking them to give up those activities that they truly valued or chose not to change. Their creative productions included posters, video commercials, skits, songs, and stories. Most importantly, the students were given a choice as to the level of participation in Tune Out Challenge: cold turkey (no media use for one week), controlled use (decrease media time), or not participating.

Study Procedures and Measures

The research project began and ended with the in-class measurement of students' media use, leisure habits, and preferences. After the initial data gathering, the project team[1] delivered the media risk education lessons over a six-week period in one to two hour sessions that teachers followed with subsequent lessons. Each week's data were collected, recorded, then

returned to the students. Following the sixth lesson, we distributed media and leisure surveys and students signed the Tune Out the Screen contract where they explained why they opted for a cold turkey, controlled use, or no change approach. We conducted follow-up parent-child interviews in the families' homes, asking about successes and failures during tune out week. Using a statistical program, SPSS, we entered and analyzed time spent before and during tune out week. Because of the extent of the project, we provide only a summary of results in the following section.[2]

RESULTS

Access and Parental Concerns

From prior research, it was clear that children developed their media consumption habits within a family power dynamic, in which parents model and negotiate limits to media consumption as part of the family solution to a busy life. For example, parents often resolve conflicts over what to watch by giving children access to their own TV in their bedrooms. This study showed that 25 per cent of the students had their own TV or computer. Many parents did not know what or how long their children were watching and playing, and children revealed they had already developed strategies for avoiding and deceiving parents about their media use; 48 per cent of the boys and 25 per cent of the girls admitted that they sometimes cheat and watch television when they are not permitted to do so—a practice, which for the boys, increases with age.

Although the majority of parents had concerns about their children's excessive media use, fewer than 40 per cent of children said their parents established rules concerning the time they could watch or play video games. They also reported fewer rules and regulations for video game playing with 93 per cent of boys and 88 per cent of girls reporting they did not have rules relating to the content of their video game play.

Tune Out the Screen Challenge

We found that both parents and children enthusiastically accepted the Tune Out Challenge as a workable alternative within the family. Further evidence gathered from the families revealed that the contract process

was important for the success of the challenge. Analysis showed that the controlled use[3] strategy was far more popular among the younger students, whereas the cold turkey strategy was chosen by 82 per cent of the older students who seemed to take up the challenge more enthusiastically. We noted that those refusing to take the Tune Out Challenge were disproportionately boys (83%) and also were far more likely to be from grade 2 and 3. Of the 121 students who kept a record of tune out week activities, 60 per cent reported getting through the whole week without using screen entertainment[4]. Girls were slightly more enthusiastic (62% vs. 54% for boys), and older boys (grades 4-6) were far more successful than younger boys (63% compared with 41% of younger boys). The opposite was true for younger girls, with 65 per cent (grades 2-3) remaining media free compared with 59 per cent of older girls.

The net effect was that students gained 100 minutes a day of leisure time from reducing their dependency on screen entertainment during tune out week[5] (see Table 1).

Table 1. Minutes spent with media and leisure activities during Tune Out Week

	Cold turkey group	**Controlled use group**	**Opt out Group**
Time spent with media	5 minutes	22 minutes	27 minutes
Time spent in leisure activities	109 minutes	90 minutes	97 minutes

Based on their weeklong activity diaries, the evidence showed that students compensated the 80 per cent reduction in screen use by spending more time reading and engaging in active play rather than passive leisure (see Table 2.).

Table 2. Summaries of Tune Out Week Diaries Activities

Results from 65 Tune out week diaries*	
Sports/outdoor play	34%
Indoor play/hobbies	19%

Eating	15%
Homework	14%
Media	8%
Reading	6%
Resting/vegging out	2%

*Sleeping, travel and self-maintenance time were excluded from this analysis.

CONCLUSION

"The purpose of public education is to give every child in the province such knowledge as will fit him [or her] to become a useful and intelligent citizen." *The School Act of British Columbia of 1872*

We have argued that lifestyle risk education should be part of students' media education if they are "to become a useful and intelligent citizen." To make responsible consumer choices, today's citizens-in-training need to be aware of the benefits and the risks associated with all consumption practices, including the use of media. Currently, neither the commercialized media system nor the schools provides such information. How then can children be expected to act as rational and responsible consumers if they do not have the information or the cognitive skills to make responsible and healthy lifestyle choices? We think that the results of this study are encouraging. Students supported in the development of critical skills and knowledge decided on their own to make healthy and responsible decisions about their media-dependent leisure.

This project suggests that consumer literacy can counteract the promotional context of unhealthy lifestyles where billions of dollars are spent promoting energy-dense foods to children and very little is spent with equal vigour to communicate the risks associated with sedentary lifestyles. This pilot study suggests that a school-based risk communication initiative that focuses on media education can effectively supplement public health policies directed at forestalling the obesity epidemic. Furthermore, it can focus attention on consumer and media education as a vital part of citizenship training by ensuring that all

children grow up knowing the long-term health risks in our risk society: whether it is media use, smoking, drug taking, or dietary choices.

We believe a creative critical media pedagogy can also provide an appropriate and effective way of responding to the widening gulf between home and school micro-cultures. As we have argued in this article, even if children are media savvy, the bias of commercial broadcasting leaves them little informed about the long-term risks associated with their lifestyle choices. The state needs to reconsider its approach to preparing young consumers to be risk literate in the mediated marketplace, not because they are manipulated, but because they are inadequately informed of the risks. Not only should media literacy inform children about the risks associated with their daily leisure choices, but it should also help them become more aware of the role that promotional media play in their lives. Media literacy can be the beginning of talking more productively about the problems of the postmodern child caught between expanding zones of leisure and the impending expectations of responsibility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

[1] Research team included SFU researchers and the classroom teachers.

[2] A full report of the research results is available online at http://www.sfu.ca/media-lab/risk.

[3] Of those who adopted a "controlled use" approach, 56 per cent chose to allot themselves a time limit (average 1 hour) while 44 per cent chose to only watch their favourite programmes.

[4] Screen media is defined as TV/VCR, computers, and computer/video games.

[5] We estimated the "displacement effect" by subtracting the amount of time spent using media in tune out week from that recorded before the programme.

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