

Critical Media Literacy and Children In Turkey: Policies, Initiatives and Suggestions

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Abstract

RTÜK (Radio Television Authority in Turkey) began a media literacy program in cooperation with the Ministry of Education in 2004. This presentation traces the development of media literacy in parallel with the neo-right and conservative values in Turkey since 2004. I argue for the necessity of going beyond the protective mainstream approach of RTÜK and adopt a more critical approach, which is mainly derived from a critical pedagogy perspective. A critical media literacy program should take into account the production dimension with an analysis of media industries; locate the media texts in the daily life of students; and also look at consumption practices.

The approach argued here is important for developing the active participatory citizenry since it aims to develop the self-reflexive consciousness and ethics of citizens as active agents in social, cultural, political and economic spheres. It should lead us to question why we live as we do. In sum, such an approach will not serve to reinforce the already powerful hegemonic values (i.e. sexism, nationalism), but instead inform young people about power relations and encourage them to embrace values such as respecting and being sensitive to others. For this process, an understanding and practice of critical media literacy is vital since it helps to develop the consciousness of young citizens so that they can read media texts critically and be active in the production process.

In the presentation firstly the policy developments will be summarised. Secondly the experience gained through Media and Child Rights Syllabus (CRS) recently located in curriculum will be shared by demonstrating the positive developments and progressive changes in the ways journalism students deal with children rights during the in-class activities. Finally, suggestions for critical media literacy training will be shared.

1. Media Literacy in Turkey

RTÜK (Radio Television Authority in Turkey) and the Ministry of Education in cooperation began the 'Media Literacy' courses in five pilot cities (Ankara, İstanbul, İzmir, Adana and Erzurum) in 2004 following the training of the 30 teachers. This program will be rolled out countrywide in the 2007-2008 education semester as an optional course for the 6th, 7th and 8th grade of 35,000 schools in 81 cities. RTÜK officials mentioned that their intention is to make it an obligatory course (see the newspapers dated 27th June 2007), and also stressed the importance of parental education on different platforms (for example at the International Conference of Media Literacy, 24 November 2006, Ankara). RTÜK's media literacy program can be seen as part of the initiatives, such as TV ombudsmanship and Intelligent Signs, targeting self regulation of the media. RTÜK aims to protect children and the young from harmful content; warn children and the young about the programmes which 'contain violence, horror, sex and behaviours that can build negative examples' by a system of 'intelligent signs'. Intelligent sign system has four symbols (7+, 13+, 18+, general audience) showing the appropriateness of programmes according to age groups and three symbols defining harmful content (violence/ horror, sex, behaviours which can lead to negative examples).

We argue that RTÜK's approach to media literacy is fuelled by this protective mentality. In almost every expression by RTÜK's head and its officers, the basis of media literacy is seen as children' being able to recognize the difference between fact and fiction. In the guide book prepared in

cooperation with the Ministry of Education the protective approach can be traced in the focus of children being seen as the 'most sensitive group' open to media effect, their being in danger, their being 'undefendable receivers', the need to raise their consciousness against the media [1]. In another teacher's handbook published by RTÜK in 2007 [2] media literacy similarly is described as increasing the resistance of individuals against the possible harmful effect of the media texts. As an education program, it gives priority of protecting children and youth against the possible harmful effects of the media.

Therefore, the basic rationale of media literacy education is described as 'reducing the negative effect of the media on them'. The principles listed for teachers in the section on "Media and Ethics", such as 'being incompatible with the society's national and moral values' and 'programmes not being obscene', are not compatible with the 'critical media literacy' as discussed at the beginning of the chapter. It should not be so easy to decide whether and to what extent a media text is compatible with the society's national and moral values. Therefore, instead of protecting these principles which can be interpreted differently by different people, a more radical approach focusing on questioning and on citizenship is needed. Also, the narrow approach that defines harmful content as just violence and pornography should be widened in order to consider that there are still important problems in the representation of gender and cultural identities in the media.

In order to adopt a critical pedagogy perspective in critical media literacy education, it is not sufficient to 'teach' media literacy to teachers; instead they themselves should adopt a critical pedagogy perspective. Moreover they should work in an environment where they can adopt such a perspective, leaving aside the authoritarian, transmissive model and supporting students' active involvement, participation and production. That means a radical transformation of the education system in Turkey. In sum, media literacy in Turkey so far is a non-critical media literacy. Indeed, reactions from children on the website designed by RTÜK [3] to develop media literacy in children confirm our comments. The participation, which is mainly based on children's work on the Media Literacy course, perceives the media mainly as representing 'the general structure of the society', 'Turkish society', 'we', 'Turkish police', 'moral values of Turkish youth', 'internal enemies', 'military', 'customs and conventions', 'our land'...etc. These are some of the remarks of children about the media in Turkey after attending media literacy program:

In fact, this outfit does not have any place in our customs and conventions.

There is no family life, no conception of honour. We should not be misled by these three-days last marriages and pink dreams.

These programmes which do not obey ethical and moral values affect young girls with the clothes worn.

This programme is not compatible with the general structure of our society and undermines the private life of family, which is the core of society.

This serial downgrades the structure of Turkish family, Turkish way of life and Turkish police institution.

These kind of programmes cause the degeneration of Turkish youth and them losing moral values.

It causes young people downgrade Turkish military force. It harms hierarchal relations.

'Oriental belly dancing star' is a competition which is made only for money and fame; disregards our moral values.

In this serial, military is portrayed as a non-serious institution.

The aim of this and alike programmes is earning money easily by insulting the people's customs, conventions and pride and by playing with the religious emotions .

Since these discourses naturalise dominant myths and constructions, both the aim and most possibly the outcome is a media education as conservative media literacy rather than critical.

Our suggestion for a critical media literacy education in Turkey is a program which focuses on developing and supporting consciousness of citizenship and responsibility. In fact, there is already work done in the area of education. These studies question the content of course materials in general

[4]. and make a series of suggestions for citizenship education and present alternative course materials. TÜSİAD (Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen Association), for example, supported the development of alternative course books for geography, history and philosophy in 2002. Tarih Vakfı (The History Foundation) published an alternative course book on the 20th century World and Turkish History. Critical media literacy from a different sphere can make an important contribution to those efforts that focus on citizenship and prioritize democratic culture, human rights and cultural diversity. The media is not only the product, or extension of, the existing social realities; instead it has an important role in transforming power. Designing media literacy with in a critical way with the appropriate tools will be a complementary initiative to the work on democratizing books and curriculum in schools.

In sum, the critical media literacy suggested here conceives of the relation between production, text and consumption practices, and informs and increases the awareness of different media and production relations; the images of the country and the world, life styles, identities, conventions in the mediated texts; the imagination of an audience with multiple and segmented identities; the differing influence of these difference on the consumption and reception; and the role of the media in creating and sustaining a collective popular memory.

2. Conclusion

In this article we tried to analyze the dominant media literacy education and suggested an alternative model. This model, which is fed by critical pedagogy and critical media literacy, should connect critical media literacy and citizenship. The criticism of the protective approach, in fact, has a pedagogical base in the literature. In this approach, education is teacher-centred and students memorize what the teacher says, as if it were the truth. According to Hobbs, there are also discussions on whether this education has a 'political agenda' [5]. However, in any educational process and practice, even when it seems as if there is no political agenda, or when knowledge is claimed to be conceived as 'pedagogical', there is a hidden political agenda. As we have stated, dominant political agenda and certain choices are internalised in the books prepared by the related commissions of RTÜK and the Ministry of Education. As we take into account the fact that the prevailing themes of the children contributing to the RTÜK's media literacy website are nationalism, military, family and other traditional, conservative values, as seen in the examples quoted above, we can conclude that official media literacy is far from being critical.

According to the approach we adopt here, the criticisms of media texts are not only pedagogically based but critical-pedagogically based. Thus, an education based on this approach contains criticism of dominant ideologies such as racism, sexism, which exclude, oppress and eliminate the other(s). The agenda of such education is not limited to how the issues are constructed in the media texts, but also continuously asks the question 'why?' This question leads us to consider the political economic context and historical dynamics in the production processes of media texts. Thus, instead of reinforcing the already powerful and hegemonic values, the aim of critical media literacy should contribute to young people being more informed about the power relations; to be respectful to other(s) and transform the socially excluding values and mechanisms. Critical media literacy is, therefore, closely related to the development of the consciousness of citizens who can read media texts critically and participate production process. The cornerstone of critical media literacy is teachers discussing with students what they learn and, why; adopting an issue-oriented education by moving the daily life experience into the class instead of using the classical transmissive mode. This is how students can realize in the process of analysing and producing media texts that they are also active subjects/agents.

Roger Silverstone [6] argues that a responsible and transparent media culture and representation depends on critical literate citizenship. We, differently, do not claim that critical media literacy is a magic solution for everything. We neither reduce social transformation and participatory citizenship to critical media literacy nor argue that a more democratic media environment is possible only through critical media literacy. Instead, what we argue is that critical media literacy is one of the means. We hope that this issue is not only left to official institutions and their limited understanding, which considers media literacy as a means of control, or reduce it to a skill education; and instead hope that more critical and oppositional initiatives (such as trade unions, non-governmental organizations and

citizenship initiatives) adopt and develop it; thus democratic transformation on official understanding and practices can be realized.

There are good developments in Turkish academia on this subject. The book by Binark and Gencil Bek [7] does not only connect media literacy with critical pedagogy theoretically, but also contains information on the historical development of the media literacy in different countries. The authors carry some practices realized in their courses to the book as examples to the critical media literacy. There are some other positive initiatives: The curriculum developed by Children Rights and Media is being taught in several faculties of communication currently. With this course students, who are candidates for the media professionals of future, gain 'right-based' perspective rather than sustaining protective mentality as being criticised through the paper.

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