
MEDIA LITERACY AND PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

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Abstract: The need for the development of media literacy among preschool children is justified based on statistics that clearly show that they start accessing the Internet earlier and earlier, as well as that their presence on social media increases continuously. The statistics show that 63.8% of the world's population were social media users till October 2024, and Europe has the highest percentage (98%) of internet users aged 15-24, among regions worldwide. This article takes into consideration media literacy using its classical definition, adding to its much more recent understanding, due to the rapid technological development. It also argues that media literacy development should find its proper place in preschool education as its formation could directly address the challenges faced by children in the contemporary media environment and digital culture. The article also tries to trace the dynamics of the relationship between media literacy and media pedagogy. This field has undergone considerable development in the last two decades due to the accelerated implementation of information and communication technologies and their widespread usage by all age groups and in all spheres of life, including in the field of preschool education. Last but not least the article sheds light and offers examples of how media literacy can be integrated into preschool education given on the one hand the directives prescribed by the state regulation in Bulgaria, and on the other, the concrete ways this literacy can be imbedded in the various preschool educational fields.

Keywords: Media literacy, media, communication, preschool education, educational areas, pre-school age

1. INTRODUCTION

Media literacy initiatives officially date back to the 1982 UNESCO declaration, known as the Grunwald Declaration on Media Education. Since then, international organizations, universities, and media regulators have called for raising the level of media literacy by increasing people's capacity to access, understand and critically evaluate media, both through formal educational programs and in informal contexts. Media literacy is defined as the skills to access, analyze, critically evaluate, create, and disseminate media content (Livingstone 2005, Danov 2020). Precisely because of this, it is important to pay significant attention to media literacy as an educational approach based on critical thinking and application of the means of digital culture, aimed at achieving personal and professional development; as well as an awareness of the need for active civic participation (Danov 2020).

Modern technologies have a great impact on the development of media education. It is important to note here that media literacy alone cannot protect children from unwanted and inappropriate media content, media not only influences modern culture, but the media are also "rooted" in the modern cultural environment (Jolls & Thoman 2008).

Mediated communication, which takes place at all levels and in all spheres of the modern world through the media, creates the need for profound knowledge and understanding of these media. From a semiotic point of view, "media" (Sg. medium) originates from the Latin word "medium", which translates as "means." It also means "in the middle," a kind of center in the dynamics of the relations between power, media, society, and the market". A position requiring the media, as an information and communication tool, to be equally distant from the other elements of the environment, which in turn adds to this context a series of complex and ever-changing relationships. In this sense, we can accept the media as a means of communication, which presents a selective picture of reality, and a certain point of view. All types of media (new or traditional) use specific means of expression to visualize a certain (their own) mediatized version of the world. In this sense, understanding the essence of media literacy is the first step in the process of its subsequent development and life-long application, which, properly speaking, should begin in early childhood. In practice, this process has been happening for a long time - statistics show that, on the one hand, the time spent using the media is constantly growing, and, on the other hand, the age of first access to the global Internet network is decreasing.

2. PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AND MEDIA LITERACY (STATISTICAL ANALYSIS)

Statistics show that the average daily time spent using the Internet by online users (16-64 years old) worldwide from 2015 to 2023 is between six and seven hours, and the number of Internet users worldwide from 2005 to 2023 has increased by about 5 to 6 times (from 1 billion to 5.4 billion) (Statista 2024). This means, that media education should be given special attention, along with the development of critical thinking (Danov 2020, Stoyanova 2023).

Some of the most popular online activities among Bulgarian children are watching video clips, playing online games, and visiting social sites (Figure 1)

Figure 1: What are children (in Bulgaria) doing online? Percentage of children aged 9-17 reporting involvement in online activities, 2016–2017 (Statista, 2024)

Percentage of children in selected countries reporting online activities 2016-2017		
Percentage of children in selected countries reporting their involvement in online activities between 2016 to 2017		
	Bulgaria	
Watched video clips	89	in %
Played online games	73	in %
Visited a social networking site	73	in %
Learned by searching online	68	in %
Posted photos or comments online	55	in %
Talked to family or friends who live farther away	52	in %
Used the internet for schoolwork	50	in %
Participated in a site where people share their interests or hobbies	29	in %
Looked for information about work or study opportunities	29	in %
Looked for news online	28	in %
Used the internet to talk to people from different places or backgrounds	21	in %
Looked for health information	11	in %
Created and uploaded their own video or music	14	in %
Looked for resources or events in their neighborhood	13	in %
Created a blog or story or website online	7	in %
Discussed political or social problems with others	6	in %
Got involved online in a campaign or protest	4	in %

Source: UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World* (p. 67), ISBN 978-92-806-4930-7

The competencies laid down in the requirements for preschool education suggest that children should receive basic training in the beneficial and safe handling of media products that enables them to recognize basic concepts related to their constituent elements, distinguish the media means of expression they use, and influence the audience accordingly. In other words, it is necessary to introduce early media literacy (Danov, 2020, Tsankova et al., 2022, Stoyanova 2023).

Preschool education envisions specific goals that should and can relate to media literacy formation. In the educational field of *Bulgarian language and literature*, this means meeting the need to work on a child's speech activity, "which evokes positive emotions and becomes an incentive for building communication skills: readiness for direct and appropriate expression of the speech situation" (Regulation 2016, p. 15). In the field of *Environmental, Earth & World Studies*, the emphasis is placed on stimulating children to associate a given situation with events from their lives, to form empathy using the experiences of others; to work on the manifestation of empathy and tolerance, i.e. "realize the child's skills to look at oneself, to concentrate, to choose grounds for discussion, to try assumptions that lead to the ability to reconcile one's point of view with that of others" (Regulation 2016, p. 28). The assessment of the child's achievement is measured according to the ability to casually perceive the instructions given by the teacher, which are again in the form of a game activity appropriate to this age range. The teacher is expected to organize the play activity in such a way as to arouse the children's curiosity and stimulate the desire to get involved (Stoyanova 2023).

The development of creativity is the emphasis placed on the educational field of *Fine Arts*. Children develop general and specific perceptions and skills to express and share their experiences and ideas through the language of art. In the educational field of *Music*, children "accumulate musical-auditory ideas about the diversity of music and its functioning in society; their auditory experience is enriched with music different in appearance, intonation, style and genre", meaning that all tasks, complicated or elementary, when presented intriguingly by the teacher, become quite successful and exciting for them (Regulation 2016, p. 34) (Stoyanova 2023).

In the *Construction and Technologies* educational field, children get opportunities for the "initial development of initiative and entrepreneurship, and digital competences, forming skills for teamwork, planning, presenting and implementing ideas and small projects. Children are directed to more active participation in the process of small researches, planning, and selection of materials" (Regulation 2016, p. 38). The *Preschool and School Education Act* (Regulation 2016) recommends the use of multimedia whenever and wherever possible to introduce different

products and manufacturing technologies. This is needed to encourage children's pursuit of success and self-assertion, as well as the development of their assessment and self-evaluation skills (Stoyanova 2023).

3. CHILDREN AND MEDIA LITERACY (INTERACTIONS)

Research on the habits of children in their media practices is crucial for developing media literacy. Placing too many restrictions on the use of media or imposing imperative prohibitions that children try to break at the first opportunity suppresses their creativity, and often creates incorrect attitudes about their application in the learning process. In general, *critical thinking* could be understood as a complex of a wide range of cognitive skills and intellectual attitudes necessary to effectively recognize, analyze, and evaluate arguments and truth claims, detect and overcome one's prejudices and biases, as well as formulate and presenting persuasive arguments to support the conclusions drawn. Therefore, we could implement Klooster's definition (2001) of critical thinking as a type of independent but also social thinking, where finding information is the starting point, not the endpoint, of a question-based, problem-solving process. In this sense, critical thinking should certainly be among the main goals set for children from an early age.

Creating habits of applying media literacy is essential to guide children in using media not only for entertainment purposes but also in terms of their future development as media-savvy individuals, able to consume and handle the flow of information. The development of media literacy skills can be accomplished by being aware of and finding answers to the following key questions:

- What needs can the media satisfy?
- What addictions does the media create in children?
- What techniques do the media use to create these addictions?
- What are the ways to protect children against these addictions?
- What is the media behavior of children?
- Do the media satisfy the respective needs of children and to what extent?

4. CONCLUSIONS

The main issues concerning children and their media-related behavior depend on the development of media awareness. Its formation helps the development of media skills from early childhood and requires the inclusion of activities and games in educational programs, which, in addition to affecting the applied-technical essence of the means of the media, also impacts directly the creation of aesthetic relations and attitudes, connecting them to the moral and ethical categories of education. It teaches children how to create adequate media effects and products.

Mastering technical skills is much easier to achieve for children than developing skills for making ethical decisions, or for expressing an adequate and reasoned position. Therefore, delegating freedom in children's application of digital media should be based much more on their emotional intelligence and proper understanding of the consequences of their actions when they are on the Internet, rather than on the formation of technical skills to quickly and skillfully handle new technologies (Stoyanova, 2023). The formation of media literacy creates critical media users and individuals who do not succumb to the manipulation of media effects and impact, nor do they desire to manipulate anyone through the media content they generate (Danov 2020).

These trends in the interaction between children and the media require favorable conditions for creating healthy habits in children during their initial contact with different and diverse media products. Media education (in Bulgaria often used as a synonym for media literacy formation) is a prerequisite for the safe and beneficial use of the media, including for dealing with specific problems such as addiction, cyberbullying, disinformation and fake news, the manipulation and fraud in the online space, which can negatively affect the physical and mental health of children. In this sense, media literacy should be considered much more broadly than simply the availability of technical skills for handling digital technologies.

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