TEACHING CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY IN EARLY EDUCATION

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Abstract: In today's media–saturated environment, children encounter complex and often persuasive messages from an early age, shaping their perceptions, values, and behaviors. Early education thus emerges as a crucial context for cultivating critical media literacy as an evolving competence. This article explores theoretical and practical approaches to teaching critical media literacy in early education, introducing the author's Model for Developing Critical Media Literacy as a central contribution. The model is designed to serve both educational practice and assessment, offering a flexible framework adaptable to diverse learning settings. It integrates three interrelated sub–models: *inquiring into a media text* (identifying, decoding, and reflecting on media messages); *deepening understanding of a media text* (developing interpretive skills and awareness of narrative media structures); and *asking questions and investigating* (stimulating inquiry, dialogue, and critical reflection). The model emphasizes process rather than fixed outcomes, aligning activities with the progression of Bloom's taxonomy to foster higher–order thinking, creativity, and reflective engagement. Empirical validation was carried out through an experiment with children aged 5–7, demonstrating that gains in critical thinking correspond with higher levels of media literacy. Additional classroom observations with 7–9-year-olds confirmed the model's adaptability, assessed through the *Criteria for Evaluating Pedagogical Interaction Aimed at Developing Critical Media Literacy*. To capture educators' perspectives, a structured teacher survey (five-point Likert scale) was conducted, focusing on five dimensions: clarity of goals, children's participation, the teacher's role as facilitator, appropriateness of media tools, and overall adaptability. Results indicated consistently high agreement across participants, highlighting the model's pedagogical soundness, clear structure, and creative flexibility. Teachers particularly valued the freedom to select and present stories in multiple media forms and formats, which enhanced learner motivation and engagement. Taken together, these findings confirm the model's value as both a pedagogical and diagnostic tool, contributing to the development of reflective, critical, and ethically aware media practices from early childhood onward.
Keywords: Critical media literacy, media literacy, critical thinking, media, communication, early education, Bloom's taxonomy

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies, media platforms, and artificial intelligence has transformed the communicative environment in which children grow and learn. From an early age, young learners are immersed in diverse media forms – print, audiovisual, and interactive – that shape their perceptions of reality and their relationships with others. This reality underscores the importance of early education as a setting for cultivating critical media literacy, understood as a dynamic competence that integrates knowledge, skills, and dispositions for engaging with media critically, reflectively, and responsibly. The author defines it as "the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable individuals to interpret media critically, engage competently in diverse environments, show moderate skepticism toward information, ask relevant questions, explore possible answers, and develop an interest in understanding otherness in its various forms" (Stoyanova, 2025).

Although the importance of media literacy has been widely acknowledged in research and educational policy, structured frameworks tailored to young learners remain limited. Many existing approaches prioritize technical proficiency or isolated cognitive skills, often overlooking the broader developmental, ethical, and participatory dimensions of the media environment. To address this gap, this article introduces the Model for Developing Critical Media Literacy (Stoyanova, 2025). Designed to be adaptable across age groups and curricula, the model was empirically validated in an experiment with children aged 5–7, which demonstrated that increasing levels of critical thinking directly contribute to higher media literacy. Further classroom observations with 7–9–year–olds, assessed using the *Criteria for Evaluating Pedagogical Interaction Aimed at Developing Critical Media Literacy*, confirmed the adaptability of the model in real educational contexts.

Teachers today are expected to demonstrate 21st–century skills and to continually adapt within a rapidly changing educational landscape (Myshbayeva et al., 2022). Effective teaching for young learners integrates cognitive, emotional, and social development, creating environments where children feel both engaged and supported (Nenov, 2025). By situating critical media literacy within the framework of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956), the model enables learners to progress from recognizing basic features of media texts, through analysis and comparison, to forming independent judgments and creative outputs. In doing so, it provides a developmental framework for fostering critical thinking, ethical awareness, and participatory engagement from the earliest stages of education.

This article outlines the conceptual foundations of the model, situates critical media literacy as a pedagogical objective, demonstrates its application among young learners, reports on teacher evaluations through a structured survey, and concludes with implications for early childhood pedagogy.

2. CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY AS A PEDAGOGICAL OBJECTIVE

Media literacy today extends far beyond basic reading and writing, encompassing the ability to interpret, analyze, and critically engage with diverse media texts – language, images, sounds, and digital interactions. Scholars link it to broader literacies– digital, information, audiovisual – positioning it as a comprehensive framework for understanding and participation in contemporary society. Its roots stretch from the age of Gutenberg's press to the current digital culture, where critical awareness is as essential as technical skill.

Buckingham (2007) identifies production, language, representation, and audience as guiding concepts for media literacy, framing it as both pedagogy and reflective practice. Hobbs (2021) further conceptualizes it as a dynamic and evolving constellation of knowledge, skills, and practices that enable meaningful participation in today's media–saturated society. Preschool age is a crucial developmental window, during which children are already capable of analytical engagement, evaluating sources, and recognizing bias. Grounded in Bloom's taxonomy, critical thinking at this stage supports knowledge and comprehension, as well as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation– laying the foundations for responsible digital citizenship.

In this context, media literacy functions as an integrative framework that unites diverse forms of literacy related to technologies, communication modes, and interactional skills. At the same time, literacy itself is contextual and dynamic, shaped by technological innovations and evolving media practices. As Simons et al. (2017, p. 100) observe, "media literacy includes a critical understanding of media (Cortoni, LoPresti, & Cervelli), the capacity for pleasurable media experiences (Katherine Fry), and active social and civic participation (Baran, Potter, Silverblatt et al.)," making it a comparatively complex category that far exceeds the traditional definition of literacy limited to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Similarly, Danov and Danova (2021) conceptualize media literacy as both a methodological framework for comprehending, applying, and navigating media information and a roadmap that supports teaching and learning, serving as a tool for personal and professional growth.

Potter (2004) outlines a theoretical framework comprising seven cognitive skills – analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction – together with knowledge structures about media effects, media content, media industries, the real world, and the self. This framework highlights the central role of critical thinking in the development of media literacy (Tsankova et al., 2022). Critical media literacy thus integrates knowledge, skills, and attitudes that empower individuals to question media content, evaluate information, and engage ethically and creatively in diverse environments. For teachers, this requires a combination of methodological, technological, and social competencies to guide learners toward reflective and participatory engagement.

3. APPLYING THE CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY MODEL AMONG YOUNG LEARNERS

This study adapts the Model for Developing Critical Media Literacy (Stoyanova, 2025) to early education, examining the relationship between critical thinking and media literacy as the foundation for a pedagogical framework. The central hypothesis is that applying such a model fosters the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for critical media literacy, with sub–hypotheses addressing the role of children's critical thinking, teachers' competencies, educational practices, and family context.

The model integrates three interrelated components:

1. Identifying the basic elements of a media text (author, title, format, channel, purpose, audience, impact).
2. Deepening comprehension through Bloom's taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation).
3. Employing investigative techniques (who, what, where, when, how, why, with what effect, etc.) that encourage questioning and dialogic inquiry.

These components are structured around six core actions – *access, engagement and exploration, comprehension, critical analysis, evaluation,* and *creation* – which serve as both learning objectives and assessment criteria.

Operationalized through a test–training battery based on children's narratives and fairy tales, the model incorporates dialogic and reflective strategies, the use of "thinking language" (O'Reilly et al., 2022), and diverse activities such as brainstorming, sequencing, comparing, problem–solving, and creative production. By combining these approaches, the model functions both diagnostically and pedagogically, enabling systematic development of critical media literacy in early childhood while balancing cognitive growth, ethical reflection, and active participation.

Adaptability was assessed through classroom observation and criteria for pedagogical interaction, focusing on goal clarity, active participation, teacher facilitation, and appropriate use of tools. Findings confirmed that the model supports differentiated learning, encourages higher–order thinking, and sustains engagement, which in turn leads to

higher levels of media literacy by enabling young learners to critically interpret, analyze, and create media with greater independence and depth.

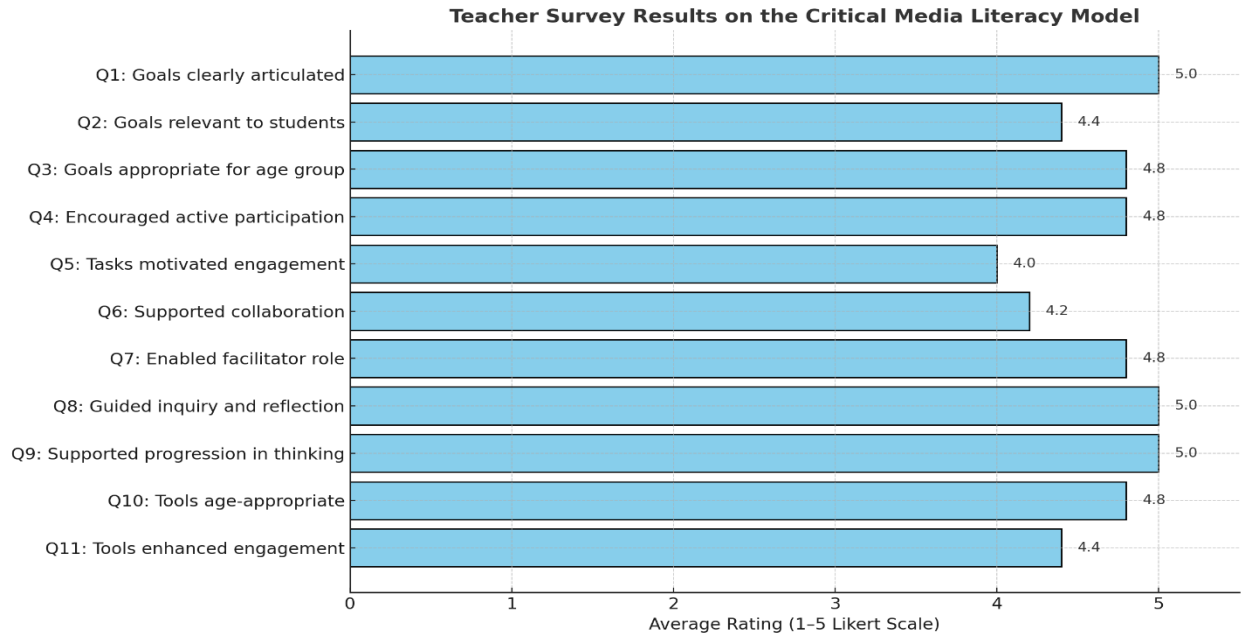
4. TEACHER SURVEY

To evaluate the implementation and adaptability of the Model for Developing Critical Media Literacy, a structured teacher survey was administered. The instrument employed a five–point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and was designed to capture teachers' perceptions of the model across five key dimensions: clarity of goals, children's active participation, the teacher's role as facilitator, the appropriateness of media and technical tools, and the overall adaptability and effectiveness of the approach. This design enabled the systematic collection of quantifiable data, ensuring comparability across respondents while reflecting both pedagogical interactions and observable learning outcomes.

The analysis of responses revealed consistently high levels of agreement regarding the effectiveness and applicability of the model. Teachers confirmed a clear understanding of its goals (Q1–Q3) and affirmed its appropriateness for the targeted age group. Children's active participation (Q4 – Q6) was also positively evaluated, with most ratings at "agree" or "strongly agree," although slight variation in Q6 – where one teacher responded neutrally – suggests that classroom dynamics or teaching styles may shape outcomes. The teacher's role as facilitator (Q7 – Q9) received unanimous support, with all respondents strongly agreeing that the model enabled them to guide inquiry, stimulate reflection, and foster higher–order thinking. Similarly, the appropriateness of media and technical tools (Q10 – Q11) was rated favorably, though some divergence appeared in Q11, indicating that contextual factors such as resource availability may influence perceptions (Fig. 1).

Overall, the results underscore a strong consensus that the model is pedagogically sound, adaptable to diverse contexts, and effective in fostering differentiated learning, sustained engagement, and higher-order cognitive processes. Teachers highlighted as a key strength the model's provision of a clear framework that articulates both the overarching aim and the internal structure of each unit, explicitly aligning activities with progressive levels of thinking. Each unit was supported by examples, strategies, and pedagogical ideas that enhanced children's media literacy development. Particularly valuable was the flexibility afforded to educators in selecting stories or fairy tales of their choice and presenting them in multiple media forms and formats. This creative dimension not only increased learner motivation and enjoyment but also deepened their critical engagement with media. In this way, the model demonstrated its potential to lead beyond participation toward higher levels of media literacy, cultivating learners' capacity to critically interpret, analyze, and create media across modalities.

Figure 1. Teacher survey results on the Critical Media Literacy Model



Source: Results of the Teacher Survey on the Model for Developing Critical Media Literacy among Young Learners (Stoyanova, field study, 2025)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study underscore that, despite the ubiquity of technological devices and the abundance of media content in children's lives, independent comprehension of media rarely develops without intentional pedagogical intervention. Mere exposure to digital tools may stimulate curiosity but does not necessarily result in critical engagement or ensure equitable participation. By contrast, a judicious integration of traditional and digital media yields more substantial educational outcomes. For instance, activities such as creating a children's book – whether through software-supported digital production or traditional paper-based methods – allow learners to interact with core media characteristics while applying the analytical criteria embedded in the model. Notably, this approach does not depend on access to the most advanced technologies, thereby broadening its applicability to diverse educational contexts.

The model further emphasizes the importance of cognitive processes, such as sustained attention, concentration, and progression through hierarchical levels of thinking. Incorporating activities like neuro-gymnastics, designed to foster brain function and bilateral engagement, complements the development of media literacy by supporting children's overall cognitive readiness. These strategies align with evidence that educational outcomes largely reflect the practices emphasized in instruction: the memorization of facts tends to yield reproduction, whereas early teaching focused on skills and competencies increases the likelihood of fostering critical thinking and adaptive capacities (Moore & Stanley, 2013). This confirms that critical thinking is not an incidental by–product of learning but rather the result of deliberate, skill-oriented pedagogy.

Beyond experimental validation, classroom observations with children aged 7–9 confirmed the adaptability of the model, demonstrating its effectiveness in sustaining engagement, promoting collaborative learning, and supporting differentiated instruction. Observed progression across Bloom's taxonomy – from recognition and comprehension to analysis, evaluation, and creative synthesis – highlighted the model's capacity to scaffold children's thinking in developmentally appropriate ways.

Equally important are the findings from the teacher survey, which revealed consistently high levels of agreement across all measured dimensions. Teachers affirmed the clarity of the model's goals, its capacity to foster active participation, and its ability to position educators as facilitators of inquiry and reflection. They also recognized its adaptability to classroom needs and the appropriateness of the media and technical tools employed. Teachers particularly emphasized the value of the model's clear structure, alignment with progressive levels of thinking, and its creative flexibility – especially the opportunity to select and present stories in multiple media formats, which proved both motivating and inspiring for learners. These responses not only validated the model's design but also provided practical confirmation of its relevance and applicability in early education settings.

Taken together, the experimental data, classroom observations, and teacher evaluations affirm that the Model for Developing Critical Media Literacy is both pedagogically sound and adaptable across contexts. By combining diagnostic and instructional functions, integrating traditional and digital resources, and aligning with Bloom's taxonomy, the model offers a coherent framework for cultivating critical media literacy as a dynamic and evolving competence. It contributes not only to the development of analytical and evaluative skills but also to the nurturing of reflective dispositions, ethical awareness, and participatory engagement. In doing so, it lays the foundation for the emergence of resilient, adaptive, and critically aware individuals capable of navigating the complexities of contemporary media environments from the earliest stages of education.

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