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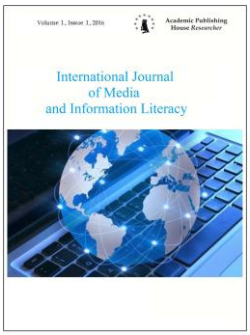

The Impact of Media Literacy Curriculum on the Literate Behavior of At-risk Adolescents

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Abstract

This paper offers an inquiry that involves media education, literacy, media production, and analysis as modes of teaching and inquiry related to students labeled "at-risk." Included are traditional, methodological, interpretive, social, and media issues that are inherent in literacy practices in classroom settings. At the same time, it outlines, practical, and tried non-traditional approaches that consider literary practices with an expanded notion of literacy, both a conceptual and practical bearing on areas such as English Language Arts Methods and Media Education curriculum, multi-media, video production, media text analysis and collaborative learning. Finally this paper argues that the struggle for literacy is one that can often be resolved in unexpected ways.

Some of the key questions of this paper are:

1. To what extent are the observations I made about the responses of the ACE students to my Media Education Curriculum idiosyncratic?

2. To what extent are the ACE students' abilities in dealing with traditional forms of texts affected by their experiences with Media Education Curriculum?

3. Perhaps most important, are the curricular and pedagogical questions which arise from my inquiry. One question is, "Are we willing to rethink who, how, and what we are teaching in order to develop approaches and methodologies that motivate and encourage, not only students who are struggling with traditional schooling practices, but also all students?"

Keywords: English language, arts methods, media literacy, media text analysis, literacy.

1. Introduction

This paper offers an inquiry that involves media education, literacy, media production, and analysis as modes of teaching and inquiry related to students labeled "at-risk." Included are traditional, methodological, interpretive, social, and media issues that are inherent in literacy practices in classroom settings. At the same time, it outlines, practical, and tried non-traditional approaches that consider literary practices with an expanded notion of literacy, both a conceptual and practical bearing on areas such as English Language Arts Methods and Media Education curriculum, multi-media, video production, media text analysis and collaborative learning. Finally this paper argues that the struggle for literacy is one that can often be resolved in unexpected ways.

Introducing the Alternative Career Education (ACE) Program and Students

It is important at the outset to provide a brief background for the context in which the inquiry took place and the students involved.

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The global aim of the Alternative Career Education (ACE) Program is to assist at-risk students in acquiring personal and employability skills necessary to participate in the information work place and society by providing a learning environment that links learning in school with learning in the workplace. The ACE Program promotes the notion that learning is on going and occurs both within formal schooling as well as in the broader social communities, of which the workplace is a vital element.

The Alternative Career Education students vary in age from sixteen to nineteen years. Most are English speaking mother tongue, many are French, bilingual. They are physically and socially indistinguishable from typical high school students. The ACE Students aspire to be successful academically and vocationally, and contrary to the stereotypical image of at-risk students, most are actually quite capable learners. Indeed, many ACE Students want to succeed and learn, do not want to drop out of school, are naturally curious, adaptable to new situations and capable of higher-level thinking.

As part of their studies in the ACE Program, the ACE students participate in On-the-Job Training, i.e. work placements outside of the school environment, twice a year for approximately six weeks at a time and as such they are in many ways modern day apprentices.

So what identifies the ACE Students as at-risk?

- While their average age is sixteen, their typical reading levels, as determined by a standardized reading test is between grades five and seven, placing them well below grade nine, the norm for students of their age.
- At the extreme, there are ACE students who are reading and writing at the pre-high school level.
- They have been denied access to a high school diploma within the structures, as they now exist in Quebec high schools.
- Most have very few high school credits, some have none.
- They cannot complete the required courses in the allotted amount of time, using approaches and methods of evaluation. Indeed, some never will.
- The results of their negative experiences in school, and at home, have left many students "turned off" to schooling.

The Curriculum: An Integrated English Language Arts/Media Education Program

Using a re-conceptualization of literacy I devised a Media Education curriculum in which the ACE Students analyzed/read and wrote/produced popular media texts. Through this investigation insights were gained into the 'literate abilities and behaviors' that at-risk students possess and can demonstrate, which traditional measures of literacy were unable to uncover. This included learning about the mass media and the technologies associated with it, using and studying popular culture texts in the classroom and producing their own media texts. It should be noted that the term text in this paper erfers to both print and non-print media.

2. Materials and methods

Using a single case classroom based action research design, the primary research question for this study is: what kinds of 'literate behaviors' do at-risk students demonstrate following the implementation of a Media Education Curriculum? I use the term behavior in this paper as "a conscious use of new or expanding repertoires as readers and writers" [Emery, Anderson, Rother, Tiseo, Mitchell, & Brandeis, 1995].

Associated with this question are the following considerations:

- What kinds of knowledge do at-risk students bring to bear as producers and consumers of media, following participation in a Media Education Curriculum?
- Does Media Education Curriculum assist at-risk students' understanding of traditional print texts?
- What kinds of Media Education approaches and methodologies are appropriate?

3. Discussion

The Literate Behavior of Analyzing/Reading: A Dialogic Approach to Analyzing Texts

In the process of analyzing media texts with students, I adopted visual as well as film literacy. According to P. Yenawine (1997) visual literacy is the ability to find meaning in imagery, involving a set of skills ranging from simple identification to complex interpretation of contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels. In the process various cognitive characteristics, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing are engaged. At the same time Frank Baker (email 2011) describes film literacy as active viewing: being aware of all of the elements that go into production.

In terms of critical pedagogy the methodology employed in analyzing media texts with the ACE Students is best characterized by Freire (1973) as a dialogue that involves an "I-Thou relationship between two subjects" (p. 52) in which the students and I engaged in a two-way communication. Masterman (1985) characterizes dialogue as a "genuine sharing of power" (p. 33) in which each participant listens carefully and responds to what has been said. The intent is to come to a better understanding of the issue or topic at hand.

The Text: The Apprentice

The Apprentice is a video of an animated film produced by the National Film Board of Canada. It tells the story of a teacher and his apprentice as they travel across the countryside. The bizarre nature of The Apprentice, and the fact that it seemed to be aimed at a young audience, made me apprehensive about using it with the ACE students. Still, since there was no dialogue, it presented a good opportunity for my students to demonstrate what they had learned about "reading" visual texts earlier in the school year. I told the ACE Students that we would read/view the video without stopping and without interruptions. Following this, we would discuss the beginning, middle and end, plot and characters. I invited them to take notes but as is often the case with students who have writing difficulties, few did. Without any further introduction, the video was presented in its entirety.

As I had expected, many thought that the video had no point at all. Surprisingly, this actually added to their interest and curiosity. The classroom echoed to a chorus of, "Let's see it again." Surprised by their response, we viewed it again. With each reading and rereading of the Apprentice, the students analyzed and reconsidered their earlier readings. They developed associations and connections that provided them with insights to their initial understandings, predictions and inferences.

I quickly began to realize that the students were moving beyond a simple retelling of the narrative; that is the beginning, middle and end of the story. Subsequently, I shifted the activity toward interpretation, getting the students to share what they felt the author of the video intended and what meaning they found in the text.

Since I wanted to see what elements helped them read the video, I asked them to tell me what visual cues assisted them. Some of the symbols, which the students considered significant, and the meanings they associated with them, are listed below:

- Apprentice - a beginner; self
- Teacher - wisdom, experience
- Laughing flowers - pressure; society laughing at our mistakes distraction; frustration
- Cliff - obstacles; people who fell off and didn't get back up to try again
- Hourglass - time is running out
- Two roads - fate; temptation
- Cliff/fall - stupidity; mistakes
- Tree - realization; obstacle
- Sword – strength
- Nose - discouraging; truth; lesson; challenge

By referring to the list of symbols they developed the following themes:

- Making mistakes
- Learn by your mistakes
- Don't think you know it all
- Let someone guide you, listen and understand
- Let experience guide you.
- Learning the hard way
- Avoiding obstacles
- Learn first; don't rush

Our discussion of The Apprentice was in essence dialogues, between the students and me, about what it means to read stories, as symbols through which we could better understand ourselves. The symbols provided ways for the students to incorporate into their readings of the text, their own experiences as ACE students – apprentices and as part–time workers – as well as their experiences with other mass media texts about the world of work and the family.

The students positioned themselves within the fictional world of the characters in the video. Their reading was more than a shallow retelling of the narrative such as its plot, themes, script, conflict/resolution, and symbolism. They responded to the narrative's structure in very specific and personal ways (Masterman, 1985). At the same time they viewed and identified with the characters on the television monitor, reorganizing them in relation to their own experiences and as participants in the viewing process. In Britton's (1975) terms the ACE students acted in the role of spectator. I argue that acting in the role of spectator is a highly literate behavior indeed.

By appropriating the author's intended message(s) (Willinsky, 1991), and relating it to their own situation, that is to their on-the-job training sessions, the students reworked the narrative, constructing it as their own personal narratives. In doing so, the students themselves became storytellers. The students unraveled each thread of the story's rhetoric and spun it into their own autobiographies. By assigning themselves as the main character (student/apprentices in the ACE Program), they retold the story from their particular perspectives and points of view – in the process discovering more about themselves. In Moffett's (1968) words, The Apprentice was for the students, about growth and self–knowledge.

The ACE students' reading of The Apprentice was not an isolated experience. Each student made meaning of the text; sharing their interpretations and representations constituted a collaborative experience. Willinsky (1992) writes that texts serve as foundations for telling and retelling stories, built upon social and cultural experiences. English Language Arts theorists/educators such as Medway (1980) speak of coming to terms with our inner self through talking, reading and writing. The ACE students' interpretations and hypotheses about how they see themselves and how others see them, developed through social interaction, primarily through sharing their ideas with other students in the class. Britton (1970) called this expressive language, and (Barnes, 1992), referred to this as exploratory talk.

The ACE students read – they understood and responded to, written and visual languages. They wrote – they used print, oral/aural, and visual forms of language, within a social context, for specific and relevant purposes and for different audiences. Britton (1975) calls these activities of reading and writing means of coming to terms with ideas and experiences and of communicating with others. These are the expressive, transactional and poetic functions of language.

As well, the ACE Students' reading of The Apprentice brings to mind the notion of semiotics as sign–systems, which underlie the fundamental principle of Media Education. The principle of non–transparency asserts that, "media are symbolic (or sign) systems which need to be actively read, and not unproblematic self–explanatory reflections of external reality" (Masterman, 1985: 20). In order to be media literate a student must be able to understand the sign and symbol system of media (Silverblatt, 1995), something of which the ACE Students were quite adept.

The viewing of The Apprentice provided a forum for the students to talk openly and purposefully about their lives, goals and experiences as apprentices in an open atmosphere, which to the students, was personally purposeful. The students' ideas came from their own stories, real

and imagined, and which enabled them to construct an idea of a common culture, making sense of their social world. Shirley Brice Heath (1983) remarks that finding meaning in a text is a social as well as a literary understanding. The interaction among the ACE students and the text demonstrated to me that their reading/viewing was more complex than I had previously thought. It also reinforced for me that the language involved in such social discourse should be included in English Language Arts classrooms, in the same way as are other social discourses.

The ACE students are often referred to as "reluctant readers". I would argue that this is a stereotyped label. While they may be reluctant to read the specific texts demanded of them in schooling, my experience, as I have illustrated here, has been that they are indeed eager readers.

In the process of reading and dialoguing about The Apprentice the students were able to make personal meaning from the text. They were then able to articulate that meaning to the rest of the class. This is what Moffet and Wagner (1976) said about reading and writing involving the ability to move from interior dialogue based on personal values and experiences to social speech. Rosenblatt's (1978) notion of reading as a transactional process in which readers act upon texts by reconstructing them, explains the ACE students' ability to make connections among their life experiences, with various ideas and experiences represented in The Apprentice. The Students' retelling of the text, based on their own life experiences is evidence of the notion that texts are not fixed creations but develop through collaboration and appropriation of texts (Willinsky, 1991).

There are several things I want to say about the reading experiences, which I think contributed to generating evidence of the ACE students' literate behavior. One concerns twin notions of interdependency and independence, the other issue is inclusiveness.

In the ACE Program, the students and I nurtured each other's ideas, constructing our own interpretations of the texts. As we talked about the videos, I acted as secretary, writing the students' ideas on the blackboard so that we could all see each other's contribution to the discussion and the results of our individual and collective thinking. This approach enabled the students to understand that:

1. Not everyone reads stories the same way.
2. We can read the same text differently.
3. Individuals have the ability to add to the shared meaning.

By using the responses of their fellow classmates' writing on the board, the students were able to tease out ideas, gradually progressing to more sophisticated understandings of the texts. I am reminded here of what Dewey (1934) wrote that education comes about through the inspiration a student gets from those with whom he interacts, including his/her classmates and his/her teacher. The technique of open dialogue of student responses and writing them on the board also gave the students opportunities to voice uncertainties about ideas. They realized that not knowing and/or questioning their own ideas was acceptable and did not mean that they were "stupid".

Often the feedback given to students helped them clarify their ideas. Freire (1970) wrote: "education is a live and creative dialogue in which everyone knows something and does not know others, in which we all seek together to know more" (Freire, 1970: 113).

A second, and what I consider an extremely important aspect of the socialization experiences described above, is the issue of inclusiveness. Approaching the reading experiences through dialogue and discussion created an inclusive reading environment. Grade and/or credit levels, and social status in the class, were inconsequential. The reading experiences let each student see that his/her idea had value and contributed to our collective understanding, something that was especially important for the traditionally weaker students. Frequently, we discourage weaker students from participating by trying to draw out more than what they are able to offer "on the spot". By prodding too much, many of these students are reluctant to take risks and tend to draw away from these situations. In creating an inclusive atmosphere, all of the students were encouraged to continue reading and to actively participate.

The students were actively involved in analyzing, reading, talking, writing. The classroom atmosphere was alive. In most instances the students were stimulated. I trusted the students to learn and they trusted me to get out of their way and let them learn. I encouraged the students to develop their own patterns of addressing the problems they were pursuing. I let them organize their learning strategies, and they let me in on their learning, as a mentor and coach. There was no set routine to the learning. While I had an idea of the direction I wanted the class to go in the initial

reading/viewing activities, the students shaped and implemented the days that followed. Some days they worked in class, on others, with the required preparations, their investigations took them outside of the class into the larger community. Some days they worked in the classroom at their desks, on others they were scattered about on computers, video editing or hidden in a closet producing a radio show. Vygotsky (1978) referred to this approach as 'taking advantage of the zone of proximal development' in which a student is guided to solve problems on his own, using all of his/her prior understanding (scientific conceptual knowledge). It was messy learning, but it was real learning. It was the kind of learning which created a sense of community.

Further, the ACE Students' analysis/reading of The Apprentice reinforced my view regarding the importance of a student's repertoires (McCormick, Waller and Flower, 1992) in the reading, and writing process. The students' reading of The Apprentice drew from their own experiences, memories (Britton, 1970).

Literate Behavior of Reading/Analysis

The preceding confirmed that the ACE students possess the following literate behaviors of reading/analysis:

- A sophisticated understanding of and critical stance toward the dominant means of communication in their lives - the mass media.
- Ability to conceptualize ideas for themselves and others.
- Express those ideas in words, images and sounds.
- Encode those ideas in organized, sequential, and clear presentations, which includes an articulation of their personal sensibilities.
- Participate openly in an exchange of ideas and opinions as scholars/producers of media texts.
- Use inquiry and critical thinking skills to develop their interests.
- Develop self-expression and feeling of self-worth.
- Evidence that meaning in texts is determined not by what individual words express, but rather by what words convey through their relationship to each other.

I am not totally surprised by these findings. The ACE students like most other students, bring experiences of thousands of hours of viewing, listening and interacting with media to school. In other words, students, such as those in the ACE Program, come to school with an already developed repertoire of media consumption that needs to be fully acknowledged, organized and exploited within the context of schooling.

The Literate Behavior of Writing/Producing: Marketing A Popular Culture Product

Marketing A Popular Culture Product: A Simulation in Entrepreneurship was a multi-media, cross discipline project. In this section I will describe the ACE students' knowledge of specific aspects of media industries, including advertising, audience research, economics, and the processes by which media and popular culture products are produced and distributed. As well, I will provide examples of their awareness of the form and conventions associated with media texts produced by media industries.

In groups of three or four, ACE students were required to develop a popular culture product, adapted from something in existence or something new, aimed at a specific audience. Group members assumed one of the following roles: media producers, researchers, text editors, video editors, artists and talent. The students were provided with a "fictional" amount of money, as a working budget from which to finance the development of a prototype, packaging and a multi-media advertising campaign, such as television, radio and print, for their product.

In the process of working on the Marketing Project, many of the ACE students described the links between the production and ownership of popular culture texts. For example, each group gave itself a company name and an associated trademark and slogan. I recall one student forcefully

stating that "his company" needed to place a copyright symbol on their package so that other groups of students would not be able to steal their ideas. This led to each group doing the same.

Cowles and Dick (1984) suggested that Media Education should begin in a classroom with exploring the commercial aspects of media. As cultural artifacts, media representations are produced, owned and controlled by individuals and organizations.

The process of constructing media texts is influenced by the powers and motives of ownership; that is, media texts have embedded in them the dominant ideology of capitalism and private property. Furthermore, media producers are also subject to constraints: technological, legal, economic, codes and practices that may mitigate the messages of the texts themselves. The objective of exploring production is to help students understand the relationship among these dimensions of media production, including an understanding of the infrastructures of media monopolies, their creation, ownership, control and relationship to other independent media, how media ownership influences content, and how the media industry is regulated (Masterman, 1985, 1994; Silverblatt, 1995).

The Marketing Project required the students to produce multi-media advertising campaign including a print advertisement such as a newspaper or magazine ad, a 30 second television and radio commercial. I started the advertising section of the project by reviewing the communication model as a sender, a receiver, and a message, bound by a purpose; all communication should involve feedback, where the receiver of the message becomes the sender of information to indicate whether or not the message has been received and understood (p. 3). Having presented the model, the students participated in several activities focusing on how advertisements are developed for specific audiences. The students demonstrated their knowledge of the communication model, as a set of relations among sender, receiver and message (Moffett and Wagner, 1976), as well as a "sense of audience". This is illustrated in the student exchange:

S.H: Communication is about getting a message across.
Me: Right, communication is also about sharing ideas.
J.N: Ya, passing on information, but you've got to be able to understand the information.
M.D: Ya, what's the use of receiving information if you don't understand it?
You have to be able to take some kind of action.

The advertising activities provided the students with an awareness of how advertisers reach an audience. Students were able to display the literate behavior of constructing subjective meanings based on their prior knowledge. For example, they linked their previous social and cultural knowledge of stereotypical images of the ideal man and woman, with an awareness of how advertisements use words and images to play into the desire to live up to theses images. In other words, the students made connections between their previous social and cultural knowledge with that of specific texts, conventions and genre. They also demonstrated that particular products are developed with very specific demographic information in mind.

Also, the students were aware of the notion of agency in advertising – the idea that there are individuals behind the advertisements whose motivation is to manipulate a viewer.

While activities previously described provided the students with an awareness of how advertisers reach an audience, it was in the process of producing their own commercials they began to understand the importance of making a message clear to the audience. Further, actual hands–on experiences using various media technology demystified for them how media can be used to attract an audience to a product. One aspect of the students' work, which may not be apparent here, is that they produced many drafts of their work, according to my and their discussions – revising, editing and revising again. Perhaps most significant was that they rarely complained about having to revise their work. In fact, many of them took pride in the number of drafts they produced. Indeed, I think that they felt a sense of accomplishment. This in itself is significant when we consider that writing was something that most at-risk students greatly dislike, and in some cases fear.

When discussing the idea of product placement, that is, "an advertising technique used by companies to subtly promote their products through a non-traditional advertising technique, usually through appearances in film, television, or other media" (businessdictionary.com), one student stated:

"I am constantly counting covert commercials. I can't watch anything without noticing a covert commercial. It gets on my parents are surprised that I know what a covert commercial is, so they can't say I don't listen and learn in class".

Outcomes of the ACE students' learning, resulting from the media projects, were not always immediate. It is only through classroom discussions that the learning becomes apparent, as is evident in the following Student comment:

"I see things much differently since I've worked with the media, and I've only learned a little. I seem to have learned very much. With books and magazines I get to read articles, and now I pick up more than I would normally have. In TV and movies some parts in the shots they take, and I critic them and think of what kind of shot I would have taken."

Further, in the process of participating in Marketing a Popular Culture Product, the ability to form bridges among one's prior knowledge into new areas of understanding in the process of reading and/or writing a media text. In the comment below, the student made reference to her awareness that she had heard certain words in what she was viewing on television, and as a result of the media projects, had come to realize their meaning and how they relate to his understanding of gender issues.

"It all changed when we started all the projects. I started to hear more words on T.V. that we used in class and I would of never known these words or understood the meaning of the topic. I noticed more and more as I went along every project that I learned more and more".

Being aware of and being able to use specific visual conventions, such as camera shots, angles, and movement to convey meaning is an important aspect of the Literate Behavior of Writing. Many ACE Students were pleased with their newly acquired knowledge of media production as evident in the comment below:

"Before I started media production I just questioned some of it like why they did it or why they did it this way. And now after taking the media course I can understand. Like in movies, it can be an action or romance, whatever. Like how different shots can change the mood of things. Like a close-up or long shot make it seem like different feelings. I practiced angle, shots, you get to understand how it works and how they do that. Ya, like I know how to do that or I'd like to know how to do that".

Media production work seemed to interact with many of the ACE Students' more traditional literacy skills, strengthening each other reflexively. For some students this meant increasing their efforts to advance their writing skills. Many began to be more conscious of different writing techniques. Working with the video cameras gave students different points of view, not only about the media and/or social issues, but also about ways of learning. Some saw that improved writing skills were necessary to produce better videos. Creating storyboards helped these students conceptualize their ideas, so that their writing was better organized and clearer. Knowing that there was an audience, besides a teacher, made writing a more purposeful activity. On many occasions, students sought my, and/or their classmates, advice on how best to word a sentence so that it was clearer, or how to be more economical with their words. Many ACE students realized that media technology and media production provided an avenue for print and visual expression of ideas.

The Literate Behavior of Writing

In the process of working on Marketing Project, there were several instances when ACE students exhibited their understanding of the conventions used in various media texts, and the links among language form and content. Examples of these understandings include their discussions about advertisements genres, audiences, purposes and contexts could be identified by: the specific spoken language - vocabulary, dialect; sound effects and music; and/or the specific production techniques - camera shots, angles, movement, pacing. Their media projects displayed their understanding of how language forms and media languages could be manipulated for specific audiences, purposes and contexts.

Writing and/or producing a print and a media text invoke similar processes: rehearsing/planning, drafting/organizing, revising, editing and publishing/presenting. Both writing and media productions begin with imagining in the mind's eye the message that is to be conveyed to an audience and the words/images that will create the intended message. All kinds of texts involve the printed word at some stage of their development.

So for instance, before embarking on their media productions, the ACE students first met in groups and rehearsed what message they wanted to create in their productions and planned how they were going to go about creating the message. The students then, drafted a production proposal and organized themselves according to the people, places and things, which they needed to complete their productions. Part of the organization also included revising, drafting and editing the production.

Results

The ACE Students' Struggle for Literacy

I have come to the conclusion that the ACE Students are literate and that traditional practices of literacy education prevented us from acknowledging their literacy. Schooling's notion of literacy which used de-contextualized print texts as the only data source to determine the ACE students' literacy reflects almost exactly Street's (1984) characterization of a model of literacy that is outdated and inadequate. The principal assumption of the "autonomous model" is that literacy is largely determined by performance on "essay texts", and from performance accessors generalize broadly from what is, in fact, a narrow culture-specific practice. Other features of the model include the following assumptions:

- There is a single direction in which literacy development can be traced, and are all the direct result of that development – 'progress', 'civilization', individual liberty and social mobility.
- That literacy is distinguishable from schooling.
- That literacy can be isolated as an independent variable and the consequent claim that we can study its consequences.
- That the consequences are represented in terms of cognitive skills and/or economic 'take off'.

Schooling's adherence to what I consider an outdated view of literacy has had disastrous consequences for the kinds of students who are "at–risk". In spite of the fact that I have discovered how literate my ACE students are in reading and writing their texts, I continue to be frustrated by the refusal of my school system, and, I believe most of the outside world, to relinquish its hold on this "autonomous model" and the concomitant consequences that result. For the ACE students their "illiteracy" will continue to result in a: … struggle for development, justice, greater equality, respect of cultures and recognition of human dignity of all and the claims of each to an economic, social and political stake in society and the fruits which derive there from (UNESCO, 1989: 4).

Over the last thirty years, many educators have tried to boost the self–esteem of at–risk students through various "feel good" approaches and activities, but these educators have not fundamentally changed their conceptualizations of literacy or pedagogy. Ironically for the ACE students, the results have been the opposite of these educators' intentions.

Traditional methods and approaches have inadvertently contributed to poor feelings of self worth and a lack of interest in school. The Media Education Curriculum I developed for this inquiry challenged, involved and encouraged the ACE students to develop their overall literacy. Several ACE Students said that it was one of the principal reasons for their staying in school.

J.A. was one of my students who, on her own, decided that the "regular program" was not meeting her needs and conversely she was not able to meet its demands, and decided that the ACE Program might help. In her journal, she wrote:

I was one of those students who felt I was at a dead end. I thought there was no help for me and everyone, including myself, thought I was a lost cause. I started to have very low self–esteem.

After a couple of weeks in the ACE Program, my self–esteem soared. I started feeling good about myself. I finally felt I had a place in school. I started getting active and happy in doing my assigned tasks. I went to school everyday with a smile rather than a frown. It felt good waking up in the morning.

On the basis of my experience with the ACE students, I wish to argue that education needs to rethink how it approaches literacy so that it recognizes:

1. Reading and writing as socio–cultural practices that are context bound.
2. Texts students are asked to read and write include both print and audio–visual forms.
3. That texts students are asked to read have relevancy to them (i.e., that they take cognizance of the students' own socio-cultural contexts) and that students' response to these texts form the basis of their literacy education. One of the ways that would ensure the authenticity and relevancy of responses is to have students choose texts.
4. That the data sources used to assess students' literacy take cognizance of and reflect the context–bound nature of literacy practices of these young people.

I have attempted in this inquiry to situate literacy within a broader set of individual and social competencies. I have chosen in this inquiry to focus on ways in which the ACE students exhibited their own form of literate behaviors in the process of reading and writing media texts. I believe that the Media Education Curriculum I developed enabled me to identify some of the parameters of the ACE students' literacy and to confirm the effectiveness of the Media Education Curriculum and the pedagogy I used in developing the literate abilities of the ACE students.

Conclusion

The results of the inquiry suggest that the consideration of Media Education within a conceptual framework of literacy holds considerable promise for research, curriculum development and pedagogy for not only at-risk students but also all students.

In many ways, this inquiry has left me with as many questions as answers. Some of the questions which have arisen from this inquiry and which are points for future qualitative explorations are:

1. To what extent are the observations I made about the responses of the ACE students to my Media Education Curriculum idiosyncratic? I believe that the results of this inquiry do have potential benefits for similar alternatives programs. However, more studies of Media Education Curriculum and Pedagogy with at–risk students should be undertaken.
2. To what extent are the ACE students' abilities in dealing with traditional forms of texts affected by their experiences with Media Education Curriculum? I presented indications that the ACE students were able to translate their literate interpretations and constructions of media texts to more traditional forms, but much more investigative work needs to be done on this, both with at-risk and mainstream students.
3. Perhaps most important, are the curricular and pedagogical questions which arise from my inquiry. One question is, "Are we willing to rethink who, how, and what we are teaching in order to develop approaches and methodologies that motivate and encourage, not only students who are struggling with traditional schooling practices, but also all students?" A broader question is implicated, "What types of investigations must educators perform regarding factors which lead schooling to resist the kinds of literacy I, and what changes in education must occur if such a model is to work?

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