TOPICAL PHD THESIS: SHORT ACCOUNT

Promoting media literacy education in China: a case study of a primary school
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With the changing media environment, media literacy education is an emerging field in China. Many studies have shown the significance of media literacy education, but they have mostly been conducted in the Western context, and there have been a few studies investigating media literacy education in the Asian context. Based on this understanding, this study aimed to explore the implementation of, and approaches to, media literacy education in a Chinese primary school. It aimed to shift media literacy education from an international context to a local setting, and offers a point of reference to enrich the theory and practice of the process of localisation. The research questions focused on how media literacy education was initiated in the context of the national curriculum reform in mainland, and two ways in which it was implemented in a primary school. It was a qualitative case study, using observation, interview, focus groups, group meetings and document analysis as the main methods of collecting data in the field.

Keywords: youth; media literacy; primary students

The introduction of media literacy education in the primary school under study is consistent with the national curriculum reform, which provides an opportunity for the development of media literacy education. Through the changes in management structure and curriculum standards, the school receives official support in promoting its curriculum innovation through media literacy education. In the curriculum practice of media literacy education, students’ media culture is brought into the classroom and students are encouraged to interact with a digital society from the perspective of constructivism and critical pedagogy. Students construct new knowledge and fulfil personal growth by interacting with teachers and peers in a constructivist approach. In addition, they become aware of the media environment and their roles in a world dominated by the media.

From inoculation to understanding

When the school first decided to implement media literacy education, the principal and teachers considered it from two perspectives. One was the students’ lives and how to make use of their media experience in the media literacy course; the other perspective was the negative effects of the media and how to counteract them. The principal and teachers talked a lot about the negative effects of the media and thought that media literacy

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education could help to counteract these effects. Inevitably, certain values were taken for granted, even though the team members and teachers tried to avoid making value judgements regarding the media. The students were expected to discuss media topics and explore their own ideas and values. For example, when the teachers described the characteristics of the ‘Idol’ TV series, some students automatically rejected this series. They showed a strong bias against those who enjoyed watching this kind of series. Some students even used exaggerated expressions to show their dislike. When the teacher asked the students the reason, they did not suggest reasons of their own, but said that their parents and teachers had discouraged them from viewing the series. The aspect of students being protected by teachers and parents was obvious. In the primary school under study, the practice was to focus more on appreciating and decoding media text and techniques. The paradigm of decoding semiotics and ideology within the media did not occur in this case. Wink (2011) pointed out that, from the perspective of critical pedagogy, Eastern cultures tend to focus on synthesising rather than on analysing. Through some of the activities, the students realised that the media do not always present reality; however, the media literacy curriculum design for the primary school did not include recognition of the power and dominant ideology in the broader social and political context in practice. The media literacy curriculum required the teachers and students to challenge the inequalities in knowledge and power that exist between those who produce information dominantly and those who receive it passively (Masterman, 1985). Understanding the issues of power and ideology in the media could help the students to know the real situation around them and their role in social interaction. Through not analysing power and ideology in practice, the students may have been limited in understanding fully their power to make change in society, even though they had the opportunity for self-expression to some extent.

**The changing pedagogy: go back to students’ lives and empower them to be involved in social interaction**

The media literacy curriculum in the primary school under study focused on the students’ lives and aimed to make them aware of their media surroundings. It connected the students’ prior knowledge and media experiences to new literacy learning. The practice was to focus the teaching and learning on the students’ everyday lives, particularly in this media-saturated age. The teachers and the principal wanted to make changes in schooling in order to draw upon the students’ real interests in life. As media literacy education developed in the school, the teachers and the principal felt the students’ engagement in it. The students were highly involved in classroom activities. The students were given assignments requiring them to reflect on the media they experienced everyday, followed by discussions of these reflections. The media literacy curriculum homed in on students’ lives outside school and incorporated them into their schooling. The students were required to do some assignments with their parents, which connected schooling with family. For example, when the students were asked to interview their parents on their parents’ favourite stars, the students compared whom they liked the most with those whom their parents favoured. When they shared these ideas with other students, they gained an understanding of the evolution of popular culture from the perspective of two generations. Giroux (1989) asserted that the pedagogical goal in critical pedagogy is not for students to practise rigorous analytical skills to achieve the right answer, but for students to practise making rational choices through a critical understanding of what the symbols and codes mean which construct different meanings and interests into particular configurations of knowledge and power. ‘Right’ or ‘wrong’ was not the objective. In the activities, there
were few pre-assumed answers. The processes of sharing diversified opinions and reconstructing their minds were more important. The students explored their media lives and reflected on their media consumption. In the focus group interviews, the students mentioned that media literacy education made them feel relaxed, since the topics were interesting to them. As there were no absolute right or wrong answers, the students did not need to memorise knowledge and facts about the media mechanically. The media literacy curriculum stressed the experiences of those taught rather than presenting fixed facts unrelated to the students’ lives.

Schooling is a form of cultural politics in which the dominant ideology is imparted to students. Similarly, the media conveys the dominant culture in the broadest context, which is an important channel for students to understand the world. Considering this point, media literacy education is conducive to cultivating critical thinking about media and school knowledge. Giroux (1989) thought that the discourse of students’ experience allows students to make use of their own experience and cultural resources, which also enabled them to play a self-consciously active role as producers of knowledge within the process of teaching and learning. In the practice of media literacy education in the school under study, the interactions between the students and teachers were active. The teachers tried to familiarise themselves with the students’ media experiences, while the students attempted to develop a critical view of their daily media consumption. The students did not feel the pressure of studying fixed and pre-assumed knowledge and skills. They constructed knowledge by interacting with their peers and teachers. The process of sharing drew their attention to the multiple interests that constituted their individual and collective voices. Furthermore, they became involved in thinking how multiple interests were implicated and reproduced within media texts.

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