

Media Education in Church Schools in Malta

Joseph Borg

During a discussion I had with a class of 15 year old girls about the use they make of t.v. I found that in spite of the fact that they were preparing for the G.C.E. examination they watch approximately an average of 2.5 hours a day. (This is a bit lower than the national average which according to a study made by GALLUP LTD. in 1984 is 2.64 hours daily.) This amounts to 38 days a year. We tried to compare this with the time students spend at school. They have 175 school days a year with 5 hours every day which gives a total of 36 days a year. Both the school administrators and the students were greatly surprised with the result.

This little incident helped me a lot in my meetings with different heads of schools while discussing with them the need of introducing media education in their schools.

1. Media Use by Children

Survey in Church Schools

In April 1986 the Secretariat for Social Communications (here referred to as SSC) surveyed 417 boys and girls attending the lower forms of four church secondary schools. These were questioned about their media use. The study gave the following results:

TV VIEWING

	During School Days	During Holidays
Watch every day	95%	100%
Watch under 2 hrs. a day	76%	28%
Watch over 2 hrs. a day.	19%	72%

It's interesting to note that older children watch more than younger ones. During the holidays boys watch more than girls.

NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

	Girls	Boys
Read a newspaper every day	46%	71%
Read a magazine regularly	69%	80%

The most popular newspaper page with both girls and boys is the t.v. page.

RADIO AND CASSETTES

Listen to radio every day:	79%
Listen to radio for less than an hour:	84%
Prefer music and singing programmes:	84%
Listen to music on cassettes:	91%
Listen for more than an hour every day.	37%

The survey confirms the incident quoted above. An average student spends many an hour using the media every day.

MEDIA VS SCHOOL?

The media are in competition with the school on at least three counts: time, method and content. They take more of the children's time than the school does. They provide an "alternative education" based on a non-directive method of story telling, music, bright colours, movement etc. They portray a value system many times in contrast with that taught at school. Another aspect of the media which contrasts sharply with the school system is the fact that one uses the media on one's own free choice, whereas attending school is compulsory. It would be a bit more difficult to dispose of an annoying teacher in the same way!

How should the school react to this challenge? How can it help students cope with the media dominated world?

There are those who advocate abstention and opposition. They believe that the school should do its utmost to persuade the children to use the media less and less. This generally betrays an alarmist mentality. On the other hand there are those who advocate media education instead of abstention. They say that as school would be a failure if its students are not able to read and/or write, it should also be considered a failure if students are "illiterate" in today's media.

2. Church's Option: Media Education

The Catholic Church has opted for media education.

In 1963 the Second Vatican Council in its Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication (Inter Mirifica) stated:

"The wise use of the mass media of social communication (press, radio, t.v. films) which are so accessible to all ages and levels of culture, depends on proper habits of reading, listening and viewing being taught to different categories of users. Hence, methods of media education especially when designed for young people, should be encouraged, developed and orientated according to Christian moral principles. This should be done in Catholic schools at all levels.." (para. 25).

In 1971 the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications issued a Pastoral Instruction which had been mandated by the second Vatican Council. "Unity and Advancement" (Communio et Progressio) was approved by Pope Paul VI and ordered to be published and put into effect immediately. This document stated:

"The Church considers it to be one of her most important tasks to provide the means for educating recipients of the media in Christian principles. Catholic schools and organizations cannot ignore the urgent duty they have in this field. It is never too early to start encouraging in children artistic tastes, a keen critical faculty and a sense of personal responsibility based on sound morality. This sort of training must be given a regular place in schools curricula. It must be given, and systematically, at every stage of education." (26)

The word "immediately" in Church circles does not have the same ring of immediacy as it has in secular circles. In many countries the urgency proposed by Paul VI was not felt with the result that very little happened.

The local Church has only now officially adopted the work that the SSC has been doing in Church schools these last few years and included a provision for media education in its PASTORAL PLAN. The PLAN states:

"8.9 Media education should be an integral part of the educative programme given in school. For this reason:

(i) this type of education should be integrated in the curricula of all Church schools."

3. Schools Teaching Media

Media education will this year be systematically taught in 26 Church schools. These will be using MEDIA WORKBOOKS entirely produced by the Secretariat for Social Communications for Grades 4, 5 and 6 of the primary level. The number of schools teaching media this year is slightly more than the number of Church schools which had started teaching media education last year as part of a project launched by the S.S.C. This increase means that almost all Church schools having Grades 4, 5 and 6 will now be teaching media education. Thirteen schools will also be teaching the subject in Form I. Four schools which had joined the S.S.C. experiment from the very beginning will also be teaching it in other forms as well.

The project had started on an experimental basis in October 1981. The Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition introduced the subject in the curricula of Senior 2 of their school at Raġal Ġdid, and at Senior 3 in their schools at Blata l-Bajda and Sliema. St. Aloysius College, run by the Jesuits, and Savio College, run by the Salesians, followed suit.

In just over four years (1981-1985) the number of Church schools teaching media has increased from three to twenty-two. Four other schools have joined the project this year. This increase shows the success of the programme worked out by the S.S.C. The programme aimed at increasing awareness of the important role that the media are playing in the lives of contemporary men, and proposed media education as an answer to this phenomenon. The awareness and the need to do something was gradually recognised by the heads of Church schools and has now been adopted in the PASTORAL PLAN as the official policy of the Maltese Church.

4. What the Programme Needs

Reflecting on the experience gained during the years that I have been responsible for the project, I propose that for any media education programme to succeed it needs to involve all interested parties, co-ordinate their effort and produce needed resources. In this case the interested parties are school administrators, teachers, parents and students. The main resources are the textbooks, teacher's handbook and supportive material.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The SSC decided from the very beginning that it would not try to impose the programme on the schools but that it would try to persuade school administrators of the usefulness and necessity of such a programme. An imposition without a conviction leads nowhere. This option implied that the school administrators had to be party to the basic policy decisions guiding the project. Otherwise the programme could have been very easily aborted.

The first contact with the heads of school happened during a talk I gave in 1980. Several heads were interested in the project but the grave difficulties that government was creating prevented many from moving ahead. Fortunately some schools courageously went ahead.

A temporary agreement was reached on the church schools question in April 1985. This gave the SSC and the schools the breathing space that they needed. The SSC held a seminar for heads of schools in June 1985. During that seminar the heads saw the positive results achieved by the schools that were pioneering the project. In the light of this, important policy decisions were taken regarding the objectives of the programme, place in curricula, years to be taught in, and help needed.

OBJECTIVES

The basic aim of the project is to transform the media user from a passive consumer to an active media partner. The student should be helped to become someone who "uses" the media to suit his needs and fulfil his aim in life rather than be someone who lets himself be used and perhaps abused by the media and their owners. This aim is reached when the students are able to:

1. "Read" the media: acquire the knowledge, the capabilities and the attitudes to understand their message;
2. Assess critically the message that the media present and be able to judge the values and life styles portrayed;
3. Learn about the process that is involved in the production of different media;
4. Know how the media influence society and how society influences the media;
5. "Write" with the media by being given the possibility and the opportunity to express themselves through their own productions.

PLACE IN CURRICULA

Two different trends were brought forward during the discussion: Should there be a period assigned to media education or should this be integrated with different subjects? Both possibilities had their own pros and cons.

During the discussion it was clarified that the outlined objectives had three aspects: the "formal" aspect, the "contents" aspect, and the "social" aspect. The first consisted mainly of the "language" of each medium, e.g. use of different shots, editing, colour in t.v. and film; and the use of particular headings, placement in paper for the print media. The second treated mainly the values portrayed by the content. The last aspect concerned the influence of the media on society and vice versa as well as media structures and ownership systems.

It was agreed that the "formal" elements should be taught on their own while the "contents" and "social" element could be integrated with such subjects as civics, religion, languages and life skills. There was also a possible element of integration for the formal elements, e.g. during art or language classes.

YEARS TO BE TAUGHT IN

For a practical and pedagogical reason, it was agreed that the subject would at first be introduced in Grades 4, 5 and 6 - the higher classes of the primary schools. Several secondary schools have a pre-secondary level consisting of Grades 5 and 6 generally called Prep I and II. This decision meant that media education was being introduced in both the primary and secondary schools at the same time. From there it was thought that it would be easier for the subject to "filter" down the lower grades and move up to higher forms as the children are promoted to the same forms.

This option has also a pedagogical foundation. It was decided to highlight the formal aspects in the primary school years and in the first three years of the secondary school. This decision could be considered as paradoxical. Integration was easier to achieve in the primary level since only one teacher was responsible for all tuition. In the secondary years different teachers were teaching different subjects. This meant that integration on this level implied coordination between more people and the training of more teachers. But we concluded that there were more advantages. The main one was that it was important for the children to be introduced to the formal aspects from a very young age. This would make the children more familiar with the language of each medium. The "content" and "values" of programmes could be judged in the light of a medium's language. The "contents" and "social" aspects would be introduced to a very limited extent in the lower grades and would be emphasised more and more in higher grades or forms.

HELP NEEDED

It was also decided that for Grades 4, 5 and 6 workbooks were more adequate than textbooks. These workbooks were to contain enough exercises and material on different media to help the teacher throughout the year. The teacher should also be provided with a handbook.

The heads also agreed to set up a Media Education Library at a central place. The offices of the SSC were chosen and the schools contributed financially towards the setting up of this library.

5. TEACHERS

After these decisions were taken with the heads of schools the SSC called a meeting for the media teachers. The reactions of the teachers varied from one of enthusiasm to one of fear. Several confessed ignorance of the subject, lack of training and material.

After these reactions were vented, a number of teachers who had taught media education gave their experience. These teachers explained how together with SSC a plan of action was adopted so that the difficulties they had foreseen before starting teaching media could be overcome and unexpected difficulties tackled.

It was agreed that a similar plan of action be adopted. This plan had to cater for training; and continuous support.

A training course was planned to take place between September and December. The days on which to meet, times and content of the course were agreed upon by the 90 teachers who were involved in teaching the subject and who participated in the course. This consisted of ten two-hour sessions. There were lectures and audio-visual presentations explaining aspects of the different media featuring in the children's workbooks. The exercises found in the same workbooks were explained and sometimes worked out by the teachers themselves. Very useful throughout the course were the constant discussions about the progress of the programme. The teachers had the opportunity to bring forward difficulties they were encountering and listen to how other teachers were coping with similar difficulties. Several teachers also brought charts which they or the children had produced.

At the end of the course it was decided to hold periodic meetings for teachers according to grades. It was also agreed to hold another more intensive course to a smaller number of teachers. The aim was to have a "more" qualified teacher in each school who could help the other teachers. This course was held as planned between January and March. One of its results was the formation of a core group of three teachers who agreed to work with me on the revision of the children's workbooks.

6. Parents

The heads and also the teachers were preoccupied with what the reaction of the parents was going to be. This pre-occupation was strongest in those schools which prepare children for a competitive entrance exam into a secondary school. It was feared that parents in general and the parents of these children in particular would look upon media education as a waste of time. To try and obviate this difficulty it was agreed that the schools would organize meetings for parents during which parents would be able to discuss their difficulties with members of the SSC and the media teachers. Several such meetings were held with very positive results. The vast majority of the parents reacted very positively to the programme.

We proposed to the teachers to use some of the parents as resource persons. From among parents the teachers found journalists, musicians, camera persons, t.v. producers, printers etc. They gave talks, made demonstrations and helped in practical projects. This, besides enhancing the programme increased the support from parents.

7. Students

The aim of the media education programme is to help students to be intelligent masters of the media and so be able to cope better with the environment they live in. Our evaluation of the programme showed that the students appreciated this, so much so that their reaction was very positive and encouraging. At first this perhaps was because watching t.v. or writing about their favourite actor or "comic" hero is the kind of homework that no child would object to, but as time went by the students realized more and more that the exercises they were being asked to do during the media classes were not mere games.

Teachers commented that media education soon became one of the favourite subjects of their students. Even students who were not considered to be bright students and were generally not very co-operative participated fully in the programme. "Media education brings out the most creative elements of the children", commented one teacher. This creativity was witnessed in the vast number of projects that many children compiled. One class produced a tape slide presentation. They wrote the script, took the photos, acted the story, recorded it etc. The audio visual was presented to the parents and was received very well. Another class did a model of an outside broadcasting unit "transmitting" a football match. After an EgyptAir plane was hijacked in Malta another class collected newspaper reports and pointed out differences in

the reportage of the story. Others collected pictures and photos showing signs and symbols for the section on non-verbal communication. Still another group went round different schools involved in the project, interviewed teachers and students, took photos and made a report on how media education was developing in the schools. A selection of these and other projects were exhibited in an exhibition held in May 1986 at one of the schools.

Teachers commented that the children, after following the course, could distinguish more clearly the difference between reality and fantasy, news and comments. They recognize stereotypes and understand the use of different shots and editing in t.v. as well as headlines and photos in newspapers. It seems that the subject opened a new world for the children. For the first time they were not simply being told "don't read this" or "don't see that". Instead they were being helped to demystify the media, understand them better, let them influence less and become more mature media users or partners.

8. Workbooks and Handbook

The June 1985 seminar held for heads agreed that workbooks should be produced for the children and a handbook for the teachers. The SSC through its MEDIA EDUCATION GROUP promised to produce these WORKBOOKS, one for each grade, for use in October 1985. This was a very tough commitment considering that none of the group was working full time on the project. The Group consisted of two teachers, three heads of schools (two of them were also teaching media) and myself. The books were produced with the understanding that after one year they would be evaluated and where necessary re-written.

The Grade 4 Workbook had sections on signs and body language; comics; television and radio. The Grade 5 book also featured a small unit about newspapers besides the topics taught in Grade 4. The Workbook for Grade 6 did not include a section about signs and body language but included more material about comics, t.v. radio and newspapers.

The Workbooks were evaluated by means of a detailed questionnaire sent to teachers of media education as well as by means of discussions with some of the teachers. The results of the evaluation showed that:

1. Comics were not as popular as we thought them to be. There were many schools where children hardly bought any comics;
2. The section on newspapers was too difficult for the children in Grades 5 and 6. Many teachers were also afraid that

discussion on newspapers in class could lead to quarrels among children and “mis-understandings” from parents. Teachers expressed their fear after considering the political bias of most Maltese newspapers and the state of political polarization the country is in. This fear made some discard the section and others treat only little parts of it.

3. The section on t.v. proved to be very popular though some material was found to be difficult for children.

4. There were no problems with the section on signs and body language.

5. The section on radio was described as very short and the reaction to it was that it should remain so.

6. The teachers agreed that workbooks were better than textbooks but several expressed the idea that information about different media should be included in the same workbooks.

The core group mentioned above worked on the revision of the workbooks in the light of the evaluation made by the teachers.

It was decided that there would not be a section called comics. This was replaced by a section called “picture stories”. In this way the exercises given can be done using comics, picture books (e.g. classics or lives of famous people or

historical events in cartoon/picture form) or even t.v. cartoons. This section helps the children understand the basic elements of picture language, learn how it is used and how to use it, and also discuss their “picture story” heroes and their values. Several of the picture stories in this section were modified to correct a bias in favour of the boys. Now both sexes are better represented. A general introduction on communication in general and the mass media in particular was added to the workbook of Grade 4. The section on newspapers was changed and references to the local situation were kept to the minimum possible. Some of the new exercises make use of a children’s newspaper. The Grade 6 Workbook though has a direct reference to all Maltese dailies and weeklies. The section on television was changed where necessary e.g. sections from Grade 5 were “upgraded” to Grade 6; more pictures and graphics were introduced and the local element became more evident. This section still remained the largest single section in each workbook. Every section of each workbook now has an introductory page consisting of information about the medium under discussion, an illustration and the objectives of that unit.

The Workbook for every grade was sent to several teachers, some teaching boys, some teaching girls and some teaching a mixed class. The final edition reflects the comments of these teachers.

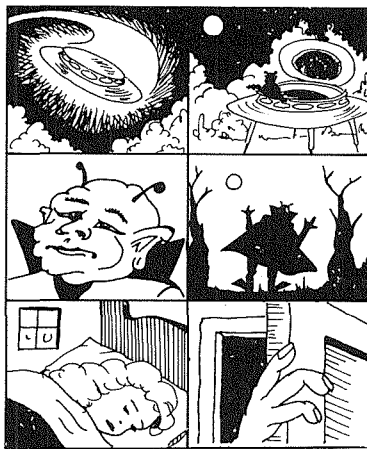
MEDIA WORKBOOK
GRADE SIX

TELEVISION

MAN FROM OUTER SPACE STORY

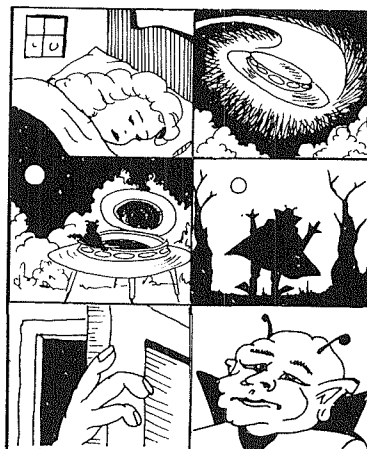
An editor can juggle camera shots and tell a story in one of several ways. This is called editing. Look at these two versions of the MAN FROM OUTER SPACE STORY. Which is the most dramatic and why?

VERSION A



Why do you think it is more dramatic?

VERSION B



Describe some of the shots and camera angles.

TEACHERS HANDBOOK.

The SSC also published a MEDIA TEACHER'S HANDBOOK FOR GRADES 4, 5, AND 6 to accompany the workbooks. The Handbook gives the teachers directives and directions of how to use the workbooks in a better way. It gives supplementary material and background information. It was decided to include the material for all three grades in one Handbook. This helps the teachers have a better overview of how the subject is covered during those three years.

Areas for Future Developments

Presently the SSC is working on two projects vis-a-vis the parents. In the near future short media courses will be organized for parents whose children are studying media education. These courses were asked for during meetings that SSC officials had with parents last year. The SSC is also studying the possibility of publishing a booklet for parents. The aim is that the booklet will be the parents' "companion" to the children's media workbooks. The parents will be given background information to be able to help their children. Games and exercises that the family can do together will also be proposed.

Form 1 of the secondary level is one other area of work in the future. Since October 1986, 13 Church schools are teaching media education in this form. The MEDIA EDUCATION GROUP of the SSC has produced notes and handouts for the teachers and planned a six session introductory course. This will highlight newspapers, advertising and television. It is planned that a core group of media teachers will be chosen from those attending the course. Their task will be to evaluate the teaching of media done in the year 1986/87 and produce a text book for Form 1 by October 1987.

The Media Education Library is a resource that the SSC plans to develop further during the year. At present the library has a number of books and tape slide presentations. More locally produced tape slide presentations are planned for 1987.

The SSC has up to now been experimenting and working with Church schools. Now that the project has, at least in some areas, passed the phase of experimentation the SSC will be offering its experience and service to the government's Education Department. The introduction of this subject in government schools will make media education accessible to all Maltese children.