

Alexander Fedorov

Teachers' Attitudes about Media Education [1]

Alexander Fedorov, Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute, Russia

Fedorov, Ph.D., is professor of Media Education, in Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute and President of Russian Association for Film and Media Education

Abstract

The analysis of the conducted questionnaire among teachers of secondary schools showed that realizing the great importance of the media in the contemporary information society, three quarters of them support the idea of media education at schools. However, in spite of the fact that majority of teachers define the aim to develop the critical thinking of the audience as one of the most important, they significantly overestimate the weight of “protectionist” approach to media studies today.

Introduction

Media education in the modern world can be described as the process of the development of personality with the help of and on the material of media, aimed at the shaping of culture of the interaction with media, development of the creative, communicative skills, critical thinking, perception, interpretation, analysis and evaluation of media texts, teaching different forms of self-expression using technology.

Media literacy, as an outcome of this process, helps a person to actively use opportunities of the information field provided by the television, radio, video, film, press and Internet (Fedorov 2001, 8).

The year 2002 was marked by the important event in the history of the Russian media education movement. The academic-methodical institution of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation has registered the new university-level specialization (Minor) “Media Education” (03.13.30) within the education area. In other words, for the first time in its history media education in Russia has gained an official status.

However are the Russian teachers ready for the implementation of the media education ideas? What is their general attitude to the problem of media education in school and university? What objectives are the most important for them? To what extent do they use media education elements in their lessons?

These are the questions that we tried to answer by the questioning of 57 teachers of secondary schools (schools NN 12, 27, 36, 37, 38 and others) in Taganrog, Russia. Undoubtedly, my survey cannot claim for the total representativeness. On the other hand, its results seem to us characteristic of the media education process in general, the more so as many of its issues reecho with the findings of the research of media education tendencies in 12 European countries (Hart & Suss 2002).

The General Attitudes of Teachers to Media Education

The analysis shows that the majority of teachers believe in the necessity of media education of pupils in the form of a mandatory subject (63,16%) or as an elective (34,84%). The same is true concerning the obligatory (56,14%) or elective (21,05%) media education for university students. 57,89% of the teachers questioned (83,33% of men and 46,15% of women) have also expressed their support of the introduction of the new pedagogical Major “Media Education” in higher education institutions. In addition, the mandatory media education for pupils/students and the suggestion for Major in “Media Education” have gained the strongest support in the age group of teachers between 31 and 40 years (83,33% of voices in all questions).

The teachers that took part in our project, think that media education of pupils/students should be integrated into the mandatory courses (45,61% without any noticeable gender or age differences), autonomous (24,56% without any major gender or age differences as well), or the combination of both (50,88%). Only 14,03% of the teachers oppose media education for pupils claiming its uselessness. There are 3 times more of the women’s voices here than of the men’s, and older generation predominates (in the age group between 21 and 30 years there is no single person who is against media education for schoolchildren).

However, even the teachers’ opposition changes its point of view when it comes to the status of media education for university-level students. Just 3,51% of the teachers reject it. By the way, this group consists entirely of women older than 50 years, who are probably too conservative to change their traditional opinion about the teaching process.

In general, more than 75% of the teachers in this or another way do support media education for pupils and students, and 58% of them believe that it is high time to introduce the new area of expertise for universities - “Media Education”. It proves the point that the intense development of the media evokes the adequate reaction of Russian pedagogues - they realize that life in the world of IT s and mass communication boom is demanding media literacy to the extent not less than it is demanding the traditional literacy.

It seems interesting to me to compare several positions with the results of the questionnaire of 26 experts in media education around the world (media educators from 10 different countries participated, such as O.Baranov, R.Cornell, A.Korochensky, B.MacMahon, J.Pungente, S.Penzin, L.Roser, K.Tyner, E.Yakushina, and others) that I conducted for UNESCO in 2003 (Fedorov, 2003). The difference in the opinions of teachers and experts featured most strongly in their attitude to the autonomous media education. In contrast to 25,64% of Russian schoolteachers, only 7,69% of the experts in the field think that media literacy should be taught in separate courses/lessons. There is no significant difference between the support for the integrated media education: 46,15% of Russian teachers vs. 30,77% of the experts. The number of advocates of the combination of the integrated and autonomous media education in these two groups is even closer: 53,85% of teachers compared to 61,54% of the experts. On the whole, majority of Russian teachers and international experts agree on the point that the most

promising way for the development of modern media education is the union of autonomous and integrated lessons with schoolchildren and students.

Teachers' Opinions about their Attitude to Main Aims of Media Education

The analysis leads us to the conclusion that the teachers support the following theories of media education (in descending order):

1. Development of the critical thinking (the main aim is to develop the critical thinking, personality's autonomy towards the media/media texts) - 63,16% (without significant gender differentiation, but with the dominance of younger generation of teachers);
2. Aesthetic (the main goals are to develop the "good" aesthetic perception, taste, abilities for the efficient evaluation of the aesthetic quality of a media text, for understanding of media texts; propaganda of the masterpieces of media culture) - 57, 89% (there are about 11% more of women's voices here than men's);
3. Ideological (the main aim is the development of the skills for political, ideological analysis of different aspects of media/media culture) – 50, 88%.
4. Cultural Studies (the main aim is to develop the audiences' skills for the analysis of media texts in the broad cultural, and social context) – 43, 86%;
5. Practical (the main goal is to teach the audience practical skills of operating media technology) – 43, 86%;
6. Semiotic (the main aim is the development of the audiences' skills for perception, understanding and analysis of the media language) – 36, 84% (there are 14% more of female than male voices);
7. Inoculatory/Protectionist (the main aim to protect the audience from the harmful affects of media) - 35, 09% (women's votes dominate by 11%);
8. Development of the democratic thinking (the main goal is to prepare young people for living in the democratic society with the help of media/ media culture)- 35, 09% (there are 14% of men's voices, than women's);
9. Satisfaction of the audience's needs - 33, 33% (the main aim is to satisfy the needs of the audience in the area of media/ media culture).

Herewith, teachers consider the following to be important: development of the skills for moral, psychological analysis of different aspects of media, media culture (26, 31%, the women's voices are twice as many as the men's); communicative abilities (29, 82%, men's voices are twice as many as the women's); skills to self expression through media, creation of media texts (17, 54%). Such objectives as the knowledge about the history of media/ media culture (14, 03) and theory of media and media culture (7, 02%) got the smallest rating, though in the latter case it is not quite clear how one can develop, for instance, critical thinking of the audience or teach about the media language without reliance on the theories of media.

Comparison of these data and the results of the questionnaire of the international expert group (Fedorov, 2003) shows that the opinions of Russian teachers are close to those of the experts' in many cases: the teachers (though the percentage is smaller) place the aim of the

development of critical thinking on the top, as well as the experts (84, 61% of experts, 63, 16% of teachers). The difference in attitude towards aesthetic (57, 89% of the teachers, 46, 15% of the experts), ideological (50, 88% of the teachers, 38, 46% of the experts), practical (43, 86% of the teachers, 50% of the experts) and “consumerism” (33, 33% of the teachers, 30, 77% of the experts) objectives of media education is not crucial, as you can see from the figures above.

Yet the comparison with the experts’ rating of the objectives reveals that Russian teachers tend to over estimate the role of “protectionist” (35, 09% of the teachers vs. 15, 38 % of the experts) objectives of media education, to the detriment of the semiotic and cultural studies aims, which got 57 to 70 % of the experts’ votes.

Almost twice less rating was made by such a popular with the experts (61, 89%) category as the development of the critical thinking. The same is true for the communicative aim (57, 34% of the experts vs. only 29, 82% of the teachers) and for the development of the skills for self-expression through media (53, 85% of experts, 17, 54% of teachers).

The importance of the knowledge about the history and theory of media/ media culture turned out to be also underestimated by the teachers, compared to the expert group. There are 37 to 48% of supporters of these aspects among the experts, while only 7 to 14% among teachers.

All of this leads us to a conclusion that in spite of the general support given by the experts and the teachers to the priority of the development of critical thinking on the material of media culture, there is no sufficient understanding among the in-service Russian teachers of the importance of several other media educational objectives. For example, the potential of the media education lessons aimed at the development of the democratic thinking of the audience are clearly estimated too low, while the weight of the protectionist objectives is exaggerated. So, the analysis offer some idea of the “theoretical” background which influences the teacher’s work. However, we needed to find out, to what extent the teachers really implement elements of media education at their classes.

Teachers’ Use of Media Education Elements in Schools

Let’s remind ourselves that the analysis showed that about 75% of the teachers think that media education of the schoolchildren is the essential component of the modern educational process. At the same time in reality only 35, 09% (50% of men and 28,2% of women with the majority under 51 years old) of the questioned teachers were confident to say that they use elements of media education during their lessons. 21, 05% of the teachers (11,11% of men and 25, 64% of women, the majority belongs to the elder generation) confess that they never use media education elements at their classes. The rest of the teachers are not sure what to answer. We can see the reason for that: the analysis reveals that about half of the teachers use media material during their lessons very seldom, because they feel that they lack knowledge about theory and methods of teaching media (the latter, to our mind, is another serious argument for the introduction of the new university-level Major- ‘Media Education’ in pedagogical institutes).

Teachers Opinions about Frequency of Media Education Elements Occurred During their Lessons

Only 8, 77% (the most active group within it are men teachers aged 21-30) of the teachers use elements of media education on a regular basis. 28, 07% of teachers integrate them from time to time (men are 15% more than women). Noticeably, 63, 15% of the teachers (there are more women, especially elder ones, about 20% more than men) declared that they seldom if ever use media literacy activities in their lessons. Taking into consideration that 21, 05% of the teachers had previously said that they do not teach about media, this number goes down to 42, 1% of the questioned teachers.

Reasons that Prevent Teachers from Integrating Media Education Elements During their Classes

Certainly, I was also interested to know what the hindrances on the way of media education at schools are. The majority of teachers point to the lack of financial motivation as the biggest obstacle on their way (89, 47%, teachers over 30 mostly, women outnumber men by 25%). Then follow complains about the corresponding guidelines/ directions from the school authorities (77, 19%, among them there is 35% more of the men teacher, aged 41-50). About half of the teachers (54, 38% aged above 30) realize that they lack knowledge about theory and practice of media education. 24, 56% of the teachers (only 5, 55% of men among them, 33, 33% of elder women) consider the serious impediment is that they are not familiar with media technology. And only 14, 03% (teachers over 60 years old mostly) of teachers do not want to deal with the media during their classes. There is no one in the age group of 21-30 who expressed a hostile attitude to media education.

Hence, the most significant hindrance of the development of media education according to Russian teachers is the low salary, definitely not enough to become enthusiastic about new technologies and re-writing their usual syllabuses. Though further more we find out that another major problem is the lack of the initiative of the teachers, who do not venture upon the innovation without the directives from the authority. With that, the obstacle, not in the least less, is the insufficient media literacy of teachers themselves.

General Conclusions

The analysis of the conducted questionnaire among teachers of secondary schools showed that realizing the great importance of the media in the contemporary information society, three quarters of them support the idea of media education at schools and 58% believe that a new major for pedagogical institutes needs to be introduced - "Media Education". Most of teachers justly think that the combination of the autonomous and integrated media lessons is the most effective way today for the development of media education in Russia, and therefore - for the increase of media literacy of the young generation.

However, in spite of the fact that majority of teachers define the aim to develop the critical thinking of the audience as one of the most important, they significantly overestimate the weight of "protectionist" approach to media studies today, and on the contrary, undervalue the goals to develop the democratic thinking of the pupils, their knowledge about theory and

history of media and media culture. Moreover, despite of the general support of media education ideas (in theory) expressed by 75% of the teachers, actually only one third of them use some elements of media education at their lessons (in reality), and one fifth of the group does not do anything about it.

The hardest obstacle on the way of media education into the Russian classrooms is the absence of financial motivation, according to the teachers, though to our point of view, last but not the least is the passive anticipation of the authority's directives and insufficient level of knowledge of today's Russian teachers in terms of the theory and methods of media education.

Thus, the analysis of the teachers' questionnaire has given us additional proof for the necessity of the official introduction of the new university-level Major - "Media Education" (namely, Major because the homonymous Minor was registered in 2002) and media education courses for the students of all pedagogical institutes. Only when the media literate graduates of universities come to work in schools, we will be able to evaluate the position of media education within the curriculum.

Endnote

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Prof. Dr. Alexander Fedorov

1954alex@mail.ru