



Violence IN THE Media: A Critical Literacy Intervention in the Ontario Curriculum

"The level of violence to which children are exposed through the media has reached such horrific proportions that health professionals, parents, legislators and educators agree something has to be done."

American Academy of Pediatrics, 1997



By Peter Jaffe, Ray Hughes and Katie Cole

The proliferation of violent acts and imagery in the media increases dramatically each year. Considering how much time our children spend consuming various forms of media, growing media violence creates grave concern and an urgent need for action. The Spring 2007 issue of *Education Today* highlighted that today's school-age children average six and a half hours a day interacting with media; the time they spend on homework, chores or physical activities scarcely rises above one meagre hour. And according to the Kaiser Family Foundation's 2003 survey *Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers*, children under the age of 6 spend two hours a day watching television. Much of this viewing is not even supervised.

A concern even greater than unsupervised television viewing is the popularity of violence-themed video games. Over 90 percent of these games glorify graphic violence, frequently featuring a "first-person shooter" perspective, and the player wins by killing and maiming human beings. Many researchers have found that exposure to violent video games increases aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, physiological arousal and aggressive behaviours, and induces a corresponding decrease in helpful behaviours. A 2001 report in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* cited the findings of a randomized, controlled, school-based trial designed to assess the effects of reducing television and video game use on aggressive behaviours among grade 3 and 4 students. Children in the intervention group received an 18-lesson, six-month classroom curriculum designed to reduce television, videotape and video game use. At the end of the trial period, based on ratings by peers and observations by parents, the children in the intervention group were found to have significantly lower levels of verbal and physical aggression when compared with children in the control group, who did not receive the curriculum.

Although we may be acutely aware of violence in video games, movies and television, there are other media that undermine healthy self-concepts

in children and are much more subtle in their approach. Magazine advertisements are a prime example. In one recent ad, Ashley Simpson poses on plush white bed linens accompanied by a cute white teddy bear and surrounded by pink purses promoting the Candie's brand name. Candie's, an American label that sells shoes, clothing and jewellery to teens and preteens, is just one of many merchandising groups that use celebrities to reach this market. The teenaged singer is peering seductively over her shoulder and looking into the camera. Upon closer examination, the reader would notice that Ashley is not wearing pants, her shirt is unbuttoned and her pink lace bra and panties are visible. Did we mention she is wearing lacy knee-high socks and pink heels?

"Age compression" is a marketing strategy in which adult products or attitudes are pushed onto a younger market. The sly message to young consumers in this case is that although you may be young, you can still be sexy, coy and playfully desirable. To appreciate the irony, visit the Candie's Foundation and check the mission statement: to "educate youth on the devastating consequences of teen pregnancy."

The Candie's advertisement represents a growing trend in magazine advertisements that encourage unhealthy behaviours. A browse through the offerings on the magazine stand at your local store will show pages of glossy advertisements that attribute glamour to physical violence, domination, emaciation and drug addiction under the guise of art or fashion.

While some youth are flicking through pages in a magazine, others are clicking their way through Web pages. Millions of Internet users visit YouTube every day, making it the Web's most popular video-sharing site. Major conglomerates initially considered YouTube a distraction from conventional advertising, but now, recognizing its mass appeal and accessibility, they use the site for their own marketing purposes. Banned television commercials deemed too sexually explicit or too violent are easily accessed by visitors to YouTube.

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Its terms of use policy states that nudity, graphic violence or hate is not allowed in any posting, but in the same breath, it admits that some content may be offensive and users should be over the age of 13. Users are offered two ways to handle the problem of offensive material: if the video violates the terms of use, users can flag it as “inappropriate”; or they can just ignore it and click on something else. Flagging a video ensures that YouTube staff will review the video but does not mean they will remove it. A warning will, at times, be posted before a video opens, but the material is still accessible simply by clicking Confirm.

YouTube’s tagline is “Broadcast yourself,” and that’s what some young users are doing. They post videos of themselves performing dangerous stunts set to music, and their creative editing techniques make these videos appealing to potential “copycat” kids. Without a critical eye, young viewers cannot determine what is real and what is constructed, nor can they predict the actual consequences of the acts they view. The proliferation of violence occurs when harmful videos, rated by community members or viewers and complete with posted comments, spur on further and more extreme instances of dangerous behaviour. Some of these videos can gain such notoriety that they are shared with

others by e-mail, profile links, cellphones or other devices – thereby earning the label “viral video.” Like a virus, some videos not only infect our computers but have the potential to infect our impressionable children. And asking our children to simply ignore offensive, sexual or dangerous material is not a solution.

Critical literacy – the ability to question and make connections to better understand how a text can entertain, persuade, educate or influence an audience – is part of the solution to this problem. Critical literacy skills can be taught. We can provide students with the thinking tools to analyze and make informed judgments about the media images,

stimuli and messages they encounter every day.

Educators are now facilitating this type of critical thinking in classrooms, thanks to the revised Ontario language curriculum. Students are learning to recognize how media can shape the attitudes and actions of individuals and society, and to understand more clearly the persuasive nature of viral videos and sexually suggestive advertisements. They are examining media and asking important questions about its construction and meaning, its commercial implications, the audience participation or perspectives, and its social and political impact. Especially when addressing the issue of media violence, teachers need to prompt their students to become active audience members, not passive passengers.

The Critical Media Literacy project, an initiative of the Violence in the Media Committee, supported by Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat funding, provides resource materials dealing specifically with media violence and integrated with the Ontario curriculum. There are critical literacy resources for all grades from kindergarten through grade 12 (see sidebar). Following completion of field testing this fall, the resources will be rolled out in CD format to every school in Ontario by January 2008. This initiative will be supported by dedicated professional development events for teachers as well as parallel parent education and student engagement activities.

Educating our children is only part of the process. Creating a partnership between teachers, parents, community organizations and students is the proactive approach to dealing with the problem of media violence effectively.

Teachers need professional development opportunities to learn how to use new technology and share relevant resources. Since young people tend to tune out anything they see as dated, and since media changes so rapidly, teachers need to be aware of shifts in popular culture. For the consistency and progression of media literacy strategies, teachers need time to plan lessons. They need to consider how each grade will meet the

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new curriculum expectations, which resources are grade-appropriate, and how the program will flow logically through each grade level. Collaboration with teachers in other disciplines or grades will allow for the creation of cross-curricular activities. When it comes to online sharing, an online community for the distribution of instructional videos can be found on TeacherTube, an “educationally focused venue for teachers, schools, and home learners” and a safe alternative to YouTube.

Parents, too, need access to resources for better media awareness. Workshops should be available so that parents learn these same media literacy strategies and get help in developing rules about media activity at home. With improved dialogue between home and school through parent information nights, they can participate in awareness initiatives such as TV Turnoff Week and Internet Safety Month and take a confident lead in modelling good media habits. Why not involve parents in lessons? For example, children and parents could be required to view a television show together, play a video game, visit their social networking profiles and then share their perspectives on the possible dangers and violence existing in these contexts.

Promoting Critical Literacy Skills: Grade-Specific Lessons

These skills will help defuse the potential harmful effects of violent media by helping children and teenagers better manage and understand their own media environments.

- › In junior kindergarten, students watch a series of clips from the 2006 movie *Happy Feet* focusing on colour, music, mood and the facial expressions of characters. Students learn vocabulary and observational skills to develop empathy by recognizing the feelings of the characters. In kindergarten, students examine gender identity, as represented by superheroes or fashion dolls, and challenge roles and stereotypes.
- › Grade 4 boys and girls learn about biased reporting when reading storybooks such as *The True Story* or *The Three Little Pigs* as told from the wolf’s point of view.
- › Grade 5 students learn about manipulation in commercials such as “House Hippo,” where photo and video editing makes it seem that a hippopotamus would make a wonderful pet.
- › Grade 6 students decode alcohol and smoking advertisements to analyze marketing techniques used to sell these products.
- › Grade 7 students identify the essential features of graphic novels and comics to investigate how good and evil are represented.
- › Grade 8 students describe the language and visuals used to report on conflict or violence in the news.
- › In high school, students have the opportunity to take an entire course devoted to media studies. Imagine the possibilities when courses and subject areas connect through media. An English class writes an anti-bullying script, a media studies class creates a storyboard for this script, and a drama class performs it while the communications technology class films and edits. The result is a public service announcement to be played for the school at an assembly.

Taking It Further

- › A variety of technologies are accessible in schools; why can’t they be used for the digital sharing and creation of multimedia projects? What better way to engage children than with interactive technologies such as SMART boards, the Internet, cameras and Webcams. What better way for students to understand the power of media than by using the very technologies, tools and resources they love.
- › Consider how students can use software programs like MovieMaker, to create a parody of a violent movie trailer, or Photoshop, to create their own advertisement. Personal responses to media violence can be written as a blog, Wikipedia can be used for researching Internet safety, anti-racism public service announcements could be transmitted in the form of a podcast, or a “positive media” link could be created on a school Web site, with student reviews on new movies, games, television, books, Web sites or music.

Students can become responsible for the media safety of their peers through student-created seminars and school committees like Youth Safe Schools and Peer Support. Community clubs, associations and school board programs on anti-bullying and critical literacy can contribute materials and disseminate recent information for all to use. This cohesion of effort will certainly promote awareness of violent media. At the same time, it will help prevent the unhealthy behaviours linked to violent media, foster positive media choices and encourage everyone to take action.

These ideas are at the core of the Violence in the Media Committee, an exceptional partnership between teachers, parents, students, community agencies and trustees. Hosted by the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, the committee works on a number of fronts to address the connection between media violence and maintaining safe school environments. The committee

regularly lobbies provincial and federal governments to examine their legislative role in protecting children from media violence. Another area of focus is support for parents, many of whom grew up in a time before computers and are running as fast as they can to keep pace with their children, who have no experience of a world that doesn't offer 24-hour information and entertainment at the click of a mouse. The committee has also placed strong emphasis and resources on integrated curriculum approaches to support teachers as they ensure their students have a highly developed critical awareness of the messages in the media and, in particular, how media violence can influence attitudes and behaviours.

The committee partners believe that education will make the difference in challenging the status quo. Their unique collaboration represents a strong determination to make a difference, to help to raise a generation that values and works for a caring society. **ET**

Peter Jaffe, Ph.D., is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario and a trustee with the Thames Valley District School Board.

Ray Hughes, M.Ed., is the national coordinator of the Fourth R Project through the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and a safe schools lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario.

Katie Cole, B.A., B.Ed., teaches media literacy at Medway High School with the Thames Valley District School Board.

For a list of Web sites relating to this article, see pg. 36.

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