

School's out?

Informelle und formelle Medienbildung

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Inhalt

Sandra Aßmann/Dorothee M. Meister/Anja Pielsticker	
School's out?	7
Informelle und formelle Medienbildung	

1. Theoretische Zugänge

Benjamin Jörissen	
Artikulationen	13
Bildung in und von medialen Architekturen	

Franz Josef Röhl	
Zum Spannungsverhältnis von organisierter Bildung und neuen Lernformen	29

Bardo Herzig/Sandra Aßmann	
Entgrenzung von Schule in der digitalen Welt	43

2. Handlungspraxis

Stephan Münte-Goussar	
(e)Portfolio – eine ambivalente Selbsttechnik	59

Ines Müller-Hansen	
Konzepte zur Vermittlung von Filmbildungsstandards in der Lehrerbildung	73

Martina Ide	
InteractiveWall	85
Eine körper- und raumbezogene Umgebung für informelles Lernen	

Sebastian Seitz	
Free and Open Schools	97
Wie freie und Open-Source-Software die Schule wandeln kann	

Jens Wiemken/Kristina Jonas/Marten Jonas
Hauptsache Action & MyVideoGame 105
Kontrastierung von informellen und formellen
Medienbildungsprojekten

Irmgard Rothkirch
Formell, informell – originell? 119
Bildungsarbeit im Heinz Nixdorf MuseumsForum

3. Internationale Perspektiven

Ida Pöttinger/Dorothee M. Meister
School's out? 135
Informal and formal media education –
an international perspective

Gianna Cappello
A glimpse at media education in Italy 137

Interview with Juana M. Sancho-Gil
Media education in Spain 145

Interview with Christian Swertz
Media education in Austria 151

Interview with Helen Manchester
Media education in the UK 157

Interview with Ola Erstad
Media education in Norway 163

Autorinnen und Autoren 167

Abbildungsnachweis 173

Gianna Cappello

A glimpse at media education in Italy

Media education in formal and informal educational contexts: the institutional framework between promising policies and economic cuts

If we look at the general institutional framework of policies regarding children and youth – indeed a pre-condition for stabilizing media education at an institutional level – three positive and strictly related aspects emerge: a *growing interest* from the government (both at central and local level) which has led to the *establishment of specific institutional actors* and to the *regionalization of these policies* in order to better address local needs and initiatives. Yet, some critical aspects need to be pointed out as well: the fragmentation and dis-homogeneity of the legislative activity; the delay in fully adopting international conventions, directives and recommendations; the territorial disparities brought forth by the regionalization process; the lack of a consistently pursued integration of the projects and actions enacted by public actors and NGOs; and, of course, a series of drastic cuts in public funding of any sort of social policies.

As we shall see below in more detail, there are many Italian initiatives in the field of media education, but no real coordination and coherent development exists among them. Therefore a major challenge is to identify a global strategy (with institutional support both at local and national level) for long-term *structural/structured actions*, as those are indeed the only ones which may impact on children's media and internet usages effectively.

At an institutional level, a first important step towards the implementation of this global strategy was the establishment of the "Board for the Promotion of Online Children's Rights" (*Comitato Consultivo per la promozione dei diritti online dei minori*) in 2010 with a strong emphasis on media education issues¹. The Comitato currently represents 50 organizations including public institutions, academic associations and universities, media industries and NGOs. In addition to promoting research programmes on safeguarding children online as well as facilitating the exchange and networking of the initiatives carried out by the members of the *Comitato*, three macro areas of planning and action have been identified, each pursuing a series of spe-

cific objectives, as expressed by the different organizations involved in the *Comitato*:

- *Education and information* – within this macro area planning and actions aim at promoting social communication campaigns and mapping the actions carried out at local, national and EU levels to identify best practices and develop a model for the various educational contexts.
- *Media Industries* – within this macro area planning and actions aim at designing and implementing a strategy for collecting online abuse reports to help police and law enforcement authorities to enforce the law.
- *Policy* – within this macro area planning and actions aim at: a) mapping the policies regarding online safeguarding of children at the national and the European level, b) evaluating these policies according to a set of shared criteria, c) suggesting proposals and recommendations to private and public stakeholders.

In 2011 the long-awaited establishment of the National Authority for Children and Adolescents (*Garante dell'Infanzia*)² and its joining the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC)³ and other international networks, was also an important step towards a global strategy of synergic planning and action. The Law establishing the Authority also established a National Board of all the associations and organizations working for the promotion and safeguarding of children's and adolescents' rights (article 8, Presidential Decree n. 168). The *Garante* has started collaborating with public institutions as well as private companies. It started with the launch of a large-scale communication campaign, together with the public national broadcasting service (RAI), to raise awareness on children's rights and the issuance of official recommendations about starting an official, systematic and extensive collection of data about the general status of children's welfare in Italy. This has created a foundation on which more effective policies and practices can be built. An example of the activities the *Garante* has conducted together with local governments, schools and the NGOs is the project "Connected Generations" that was developed within the framework of the "EU Safer Internet Programme". The project activities were conducted with two of the most important NGOs working on children's rights and child violence prevention in Italy: Telefono Azzurro and Save the Children. "Connected Generations" was set up in 2012 and provided two hotlines for children: www.stop-it.org, coordinated by Save the Children, and www.azzurro.it, coordinated by Telefono Azzurro [accessed on August 2013]. With specific reference to media education, this cooperation has produced some interesting initiatives at local levels such as the project 'Youth and the Internet' involving Save the Children-Italy, the municipality of Lissone (Milan) as well as some local schools, families and NGOs⁴.

Also MED (the Italian Association for Media Education, www.mediaeducationmed.it [accessed on August 2013]) has conducted several initiatives attempting to implement synergic activities among the different stakeholders operating in the field of media education. One of these initiatives is the "Gamepaddle" project. The project, funded through the "Youth in Action" EU programme⁵, aims at working with young people and videogames and involves researchers, educators and teachers from Austria, Germany, Italy and Sweden. The Italian partners (the Milan Catholic University in Milan and MED) developed an action-research activity (still ongoing) that is experimenting with the educational use of a simulation video game (*SimCity*) in a youth club (the *Centro Tau*) located in a highly disadvantaged and mafia-infested area of Palermo (Italy). A double hypothesis inspired the research: 1) the intermediaries supporting individual and community social empowerment (families, schools, youth and health services, both public and private, cultural and social entrepreneurs) could use video games to improve the effectiveness of their interventions and 2) young people could experience new and more involving forms of learning⁶. From our initial findings, it appears that, by *SIM*aging their ideal *CITY*, the youth at Centro Tau started to think about "civic" issues on a very concrete and practical level. Despite the strong affective ties they showed towards their neighbourhood, they lucidly identified its negative aspects and confronted themselves on the choices and solutions necessary to reinvent it as a better urban setting (a *SIM*aged city) inspired by a vision for sustainable development (more green areas, recreational structures, meeting places for young people, big and modern sports facilities, working places). It also appears that gaming may represent for them an important and powerful opportunity, a kind of "training ground", for experiencing collective action, peer-based learning and self-esteem. In other words, we think that the Gamepaddle activities were for the youth of the Centro Tau a significant step towards developing a self-determined sense of active and responsible citizenship and towards acting accordingly.

Unfortunately, as was pointed out earlier, the financial resources allocated to social policies have constantly decreased, for the greater part due to the economic crisis that started in 2008. That has consequently led to an insufficient flow of public funds to implement the actions contained in the different programmatic policy documents. If we consider for example the field of policies for childhood we notice that the National Fund for Childhood – which is the main source of funding for the actions identified by the Action Plans for Childhood – suffered a 10 percent decrease in 2013, compared to its 2008 budget and it will be further diminished in 2014-2015, bringing the total decrease to nearly 12 percent in 2015.

In spite of this problematic situation, scholars, teachers, educators, practitioners and leaders of NGOs do keep on carrying out across Italy many small scale innovative projects, but as a result of these cut backs they are constantly frustrated by the challenges of finding funds for large scale initiatives as well as the publicity and support needed to mobilize communities. Therefore, despite the fact that at all territorial levels a wide array of actions have been set up, this engagement is neither uniform nor standardized, and consistent variations are one of the few characteristics shared by all public and private institutions involved in these actions.

Media education in Italy: present state and future perspectives

In order to give a brief account of the situation of media education in Italy two levels must be distinguished. At a macro level, especially with the advent of digital media, a techno-utopian rhetoric has prevailed, promoting the revolutionary use of educational technology in schools, where modern classrooms are filled with state of the art computers and other technological devices. Both inside and outside of schools, there has been a sort of *fetishization* of technological tools as status symbols (subsequently leading to a progressive marginalization of teachers, educators and mediation figures in general) and a confusion of *media education* and the *educational use of technology*. More precision is therefore needed in how the aims and theoretical backgrounds of media education are expressed, especially if we want to "de-fetishize" technology and connect media education to the practicing of critical thinking in relation to a contemporary digital citizenship. As a result of this techno-utopian rhetoric, while media education still struggles to be officially recognized in school curricula, the educational use of media has increasingly been given funding and attention from public institutions and private companies.

At a more micro level, in addition to the difficulties mentioned above, media education activities suffer from a lack of systematic planning and implementation of the activities (which occur only occasionally and are bound to the enthusiasm of single principals and/or teachers), on the one hand, and a lack of assessment and evaluatory documentation, on the other. Admittedly, non-school informal contexts have specific settings and parameters for planning, implementing and evaluation of media education activities, yet these drawbacks are common to both school and non-school contexts.

Media education activities are then scattered across the national territory and no real mapping of them has ever been done. An effort towards this direction has been carried out in the last 20 years by MED and eventually

by other associations/NGOs which have now joined together in the above-mentioned *Comitato Consultivo per la promozione dei diritti online dei minori*.

Ultimately, the promotion and development of media education in both formal and informal educational contexts depends on the adoption of a manifold strategy, a *multidimensional framework*, based on a series of interdependent elements and partnerships between a range of interested parties functioning on international, national and local levels. Any intervention must necessarily take account of the specific factors in play at any time, as well as the shifting relationships between them⁷ (see Figure 1).

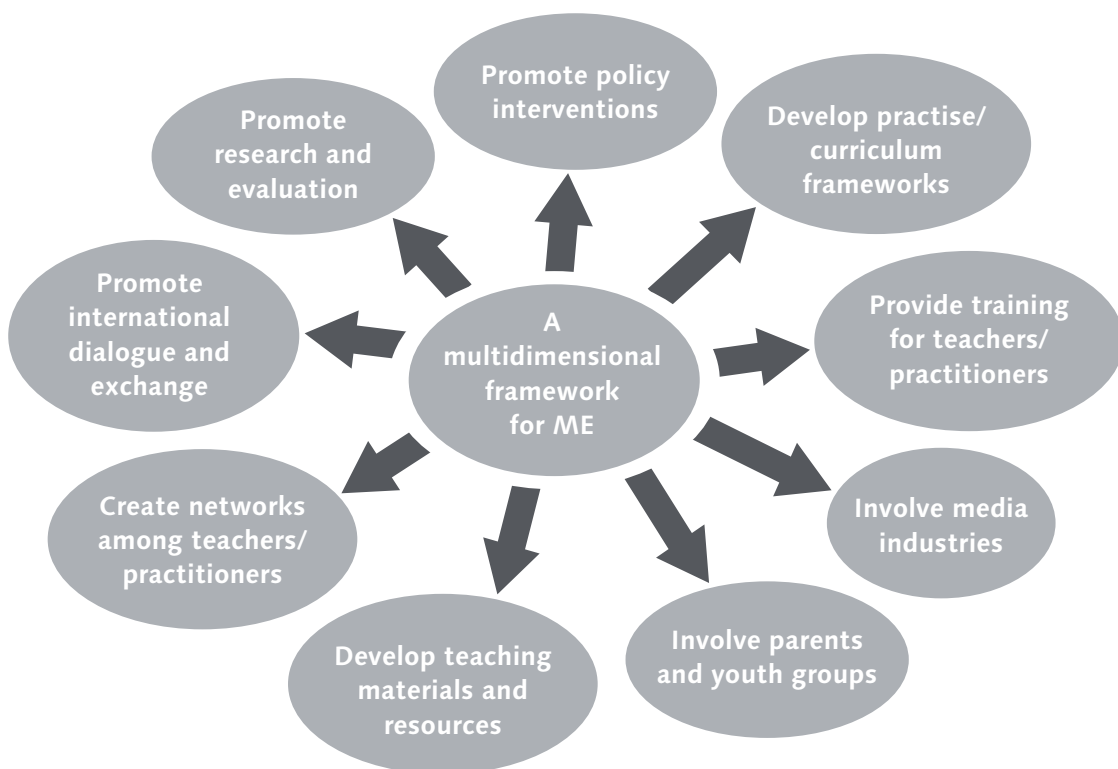


Figure 1: A multidimensional framework for media education

- *Promote policy interventions*: we need clear, coherent and authoritative documents that define media education and provide a rationale for its implementation at a national level.
- *Develop practice/curriculum frameworks*: we need more specific documents for implementing practices offering a clear model of learning progression with specific learning outcomes as well as criteria and procedures for assessment and evaluation.
- *Provide constant training for teachers/practitioners*: well-intended documents and practice frameworks are worthless without trained staff to

implement them. Elements of training in media education should be a part of teachers'/practitioners' ongoing professional development.

- *Involve media industries:* media professionals need to be convinced of their responsibility towards media education, both in their own work and in building partnerships with teachers and educators. Other bodies that might have a role to play are industry regulatory bodies and relevant government departments.
- *Involve parents and youth groups:* many parents express concern about the media to which their children are exposed and feel relatively powerless to intervene. Parents too need to be recruited and empowered to become active participants, rather than to be simply told what they should or should not do. Of course, any educational initiatives aimed at parents need to take into account cultural differences, social stratification, prejudices, skills and competence, etc. Also the involvement of more or less independent groups of young people is a further key dimension of media education. Such groups may come together in formal school settings, but they are likely to function more effectively in less formal situations; and, indeed, media educators may have a great deal to learn from the kinds of "peer education" that are developed in such contexts.
- *Develop teaching materials and resources:* well-designed and professionally produced teaching materials are indeed necessary. They can also serve as a form of training in themselves, particularly where they are supported by appropriate documentation. They should be of high quality, in terms of the research and evaluation that is utilised for their production. They also need to specify the levels of resources that are required for effective practice: media education does not have to be a 'high tech' enterprise, yet it should at least reflect the levels of competence that children have.
- *Create networks among teachers/practitioners:* all those involved in media education projects (educators, media producers, parents and children) need ongoing opportunities to share experiences, to exchange resources and to collaborate on producing new plans and projects. Networking through associations is crucial to have a powerful voice in national/international debates about educational policy. Such organisations may also sponsor publications written by and for media educators, in-service training events and conferences, etc.
- *Promote international dialogue and exchange:* international networks have begun to develop in this field. There is a need for dialogue and exchange to be sustained on a systematic basis, rather than in the form of one-time conferences taking place only occasionally.

- *Promote research and evaluation:* media education activities should reflect current theoretical advances in our understanding of children's relationships with media, including their pedagogical implications. There needs to be a greater dialogue between researchers and teachers/educators in order to combine the practical perspective with the research perspective.

It is crucial, as Buckingham notes, to understand that all these elements are strictly interrelated. If any of them is absent or weak, it puts the entire field at risk. For instance, well-designed policy documents or curriculum frameworks without practical development (and the necessary funding for that) may only amount to the empty rhetoric's, that policy makers are so fond of. On the other hand practical development and networking is fairly meaningless and self-referential if there are no clear curriculum frameworks or inspirational policy documents. *Ultimately, policy, practice and research must be interconnected: development in each area should support (and be supported by) development in the others.*

Notes

- 1 Official website: <http://www.sicurinrete.it/che-cose-il-comitato/> [accessed on August 2013]. For a short description of the activities and objectives of the Comitato see: http://images.savethechildren.it/IT/f/img_pubblicazioni/img162_b.pdf [accessed on August 2013].
- 2 Official website: <http://www.garanteinfanzia.org/> [accessed on August 2013].
- 3 Official website: <http://www.crin.org/enoc/> [accessed on August 2013].
- 4 The full Report of this project is available online at: http://images.savethechildren.it/IT/f/img_pubblicazioni/img140_b.pdf [accessed on August 2013].
- 5 For details: <http://www.gamepaddle.eu> [accessed on August 2013].
- 6 Andreoletti, M./Cappello, G.: SIMaging the CITY. The Educational Use of Simulation Video Games for Disadvantaged Youth. (forthcoming).
- 7 See Buckingham, D. (2001): Media education. A Global Strategy for Development (unpublished paper prepared for UNESCO).