

# **Introducing Media Education in the Early Childhood Curriculum in Tanzania**

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## **Abstract**

The mass media exert tremendous influence globally and on individual states, affecting all members of society of different ages in all walks of life. The unprecedented increase in communication technology has accelerated this trend. In urban and rural areas at home, school, and worship places or on the streets; the cultural values, norms, beliefs and attitudes are continually being altered by media messages. These messages are delivered in various forms, aimed at achieving specific goals for specific groups of people. Children's high receptivity and absorption of information indiscriminately renders them vulnerable to developing unwanted socio-cultural behaviours. This article builds a case for an urgent need to introduce and implement media education in early childhood programmes in Tanzania as a way of curbing adverse media influences on young children.

**Key words:** Media education, early childhood programmes, Tanzania.

## **Introduction**

The mass media, which represent the various modes of passing on information to the audience whether electronically or physically, constitute one of the most influential tools in shaping the human mind and general behaviour. They exert an influence on all sections of humankind from infancy to adulthood. Such an influence has increased in intensity and variety following the advances in information technology worldwide. The mass media not only reflect peoples' values, attitudes and norms but also shape the same (Wayne, 2001). For this reason, the mass media have being described as one of the "four educators" the others being teachers, parents and the physical environment (see Edwards, et al., 1998; Elkind, 1991). It could be argued that the younger the age the more the expected effects of the mass media and the persistence of such effects due to children's critical stage of development. It is now becoming increasingly clear that, unless people are media literate right from early childhood, unexpected behavioural tendencies that die hard are likely to develop early in life.

The experiences children have before primary education determine later life (Heckman, 2004; 2006; Young, 2002). Hence, the types and ways the messages in the media are presented to young children matter. The types and modes of presentation need to be developmentally and culturally appropriate (Wayne, 2001) to avoid children's vulnerability to "unacceptable" media messages. While observance of the cultural and developmental appropriateness of the mass media may be difficult to achieve due to differences in mass media producers' motivation as well as the existence and enforcement of the Government's checking mechanisms of mass media production, the most assured intervention is the empowerment of children through the development of critical minds. The constant and almost omnipotent children's immersion in a media-rich environment requires that various stakeholders, particularly parents and teachers, work together in to make young children media literate.

### **Conceptual and Functional Issues in Media Education**

Media education or media literacy is an important curricular intervention for preparing young children for effective participation in their respective societies and the world in general. The United Nation's Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines media education as

the study, learning and teaching of, and about, the modern media of communication and expression as a specific and autonomous area of knowledge within educational theory and practice, distinct from their use as aids for the teaching and learning of other areas of knowledge, such as mathematics, science and geography (IFTC, 1997, p. 3).

Although media education or media literacy is defined differently in different countries (see Masterman, 1992; Minkkinen & Liorca, 1978), there is a general consensus that media education seeks to develop critical awareness and creative expression in students through the use of a child-centred approach to teaching and learning. The knowledge, skills and attitudes gained from media education make students explorers, discoverers, imaginative persons and creative media text producers and readers. In the USA, media education prepares students to make informed choices about the types of media to view and the time spent on them to view media texts sceptically, and develop the skills needed to understand the media production process as well as to situate the mass media within specific social, political and economic conditions and how it advances consumerism ideology (Thoman, 1995). Overall, young children's creative expression

and development of critical awareness need to be the springboard of the early childhood curriculum and should serve as a guide to every learning activity or learning experience.

Media education has been found to be useful in the development of critical minds in young children (Wayne, 2001) as one aspect of multiple literacies (see Bonanno, 2002; Harste, 2003; Kellner, 1998). It has been introduced in schools for young and older children in various countries across the world such as England, Canada, Hong Kong and Australia (see Cheung, 2001; 2005). Its introduction has been necessitated by, among other things, the increased in use of the media (Cheung, 2001).

In early childhood, media education encompasses preparing children to critically engage the various ways used for communication such as TV, radio, computer, newspapers, games, cartoons, pictures and models. At this age, critical minds refer to the young child's ability to "tell different stories" about a single media source. These "stories" would include: (a) who is likely to be the producer of a particular media text and why? (b) which area, social or cultural group does the media text represent? (c) what messages does the media producer intend to communicate? (d) what other ways could be used to communicate the intended message(s)? (e) what is good or bad about the media text and why? Through discussions between adults and children and among children themselves children develop multiple perspectives when interacting with any type of media. They begin to see everything as discourse.

Although young children in Tanzania are exposed to a variety of media that vary in their worth, less has been done to prepare young children to be responsible, media-literate people, capable of assessing the worth of messages contained in mass media. The various programmes on TV for example, whether designed for young children or not, have a tremendous impact on children's behaviour. Violent TV programmes have great potential to change young children into future violent citizens. The relevance of media programmes aimed at young children in Tanzania has never been stressed. This article builds a case for the urgent need to introduce and implement media education in early childhood programmes in Tanzania as a way of curbing adverse media influences on young children.

## Theoretical Groundings

Studies on neuroscience and child development have consistently confirmed that the early years of life are critical for the child's learning and optimum functioning for the rest of life. Several child development and learning theories have stressed the role that early childhood plays in learning and future performance at school and in society. They include, for example, those by Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner, Erikson, Bronfenbrenner, Bandura and Montessori. In this section, I discuss the sensitivity of early childhood using Montessori's theory and the various studies on neuroscience as well as the empirical evidence in the field of early childhood education. The Social Learning theory by Bandura is discussed towards the end of this section. Montessori's theory is used in this article due to what I consider is its explicitness and use of terms that signify the sensitivity of early childhood. Although this theory, like others, was developed in a different socio-cultural context from that of Tanzania, it provides a general overview of the early years' sensitivity to learning and development. On the other hand, the Social Learning theory, more specifically, the *observational learning* theoretical stance provides a crucial message as far as the media is concerned.

Montessori (1870-1952) divided the development of a human being into 3 stages: ***absorbent mind*** (conception to 6 years), ***childhood*** (6 to 12 years) and ***adolescence*** (12 to 18 years) (Isaacs, 2007). The absorbent mind is viewed as consisting of 2 phases: unconscious absorbent mind (birth to 3) and conscious absorbent mind (3 to 6). She characterised the absorbent mind into 3 broad features reflecting embryonic stages: physical embryo (embryo formation), spiritual embryo (post-natal emergence of child's uniqueness) and social embryo (internalisation of socio-cultural conventions). Basically, the absorbent mind, as the term suggests, is the developmental period characterised by massive "absorption" of information from the environment as a result of the child's innate curiosity (which Montessori termed "horme") to make sense of the world around him or her. The unconscious absorbent mind involves children "absorbing indiscriminately from the environment that surrounds them" while the conscious absorbent mind reflects the "child's ability to organise and classify information, experiences and concepts" (Isaacs, 2007, p. 11). Montessori saw that this stage had critical periods associated with movement, language acquisition, routines, and awareness of small details, refinement of the senses and internalisation of cultural norms, values and beliefs.

Montessori described the childhood stage as characterised by children's eagerness and desire to belong (Isaacs, 2007). It is the stage where the child acquires the cultural aspects of life. In adolescence, Montessori theorised that people's behaviour becomes turbulent, unpredictable and volatile (Isaacs, 2007). She further sub-divided this stage into puberty (12 to 13 years) and adolescence (15 to 18 years). As early childhood programmes in Tanzania cater for children from birth to six, only the absorbent mind applies in this article.

Useful knowledge has been generated from studies on neuroscience, child development and animals, all of which indicate that the first few years of life are critical. McCain and Mustard (1999, p. 21) summarise the main findings pertinent to the early years as follows:

(1) Early brain development is interactive, rapid and dramatic; (2) During critical periods, particular parts of the brain need positive stimulation to develop properly; (3) The quality of early sensory stimulation influences the brain's ability to think and regulate bodily functions; (4) Negative experiences in the early years have long-lasting effects that can be difficult to overcome later; (5) Good nutrition and nurturing support optimise early brain and physical development and later learning and behaviour; (6) There are initiatives that can improve early child development.

There is sufficient empirical evidence that children's encounters in their early lives stay with them for a life time (Young, 2002). Insufficient, improper or the absence of stimulation has been found to have negative effects that persist, despite remedial action and vice versa (Heckman, 2004; 2006; Loeb et al., 2004). These findings suggest that whatever young children are subjected to leave permanent or "hard to die" behaviours. The mass media as "another teacher" and tool for enculturation (Minkkinen & Liorca, 1978) could exert positive or adverse influences on children's values, attitudes, norms and behaviour in general, depending on the type of messages they carry and how such messages are presented. In this regard, media illiteracy young children exposes them to dangers associated with the mass media considered to be culturally unsuitable. Because young children learn differently from older ones, it is essential to discuss the concept of developmental and cultural appropriateness. This discussion would inform teachers and parents of the need for media modes and messages to be developmentally and culturally appropriate, if children are to acquire desired beliefs, values, attitudes and world views. It also

helps those concerned with the mass media production to understand the power of mass media and how the content and mode of presentation affect young children.

More insights into the influence of the media on young children could be gleaned from the Social Learning theory by Albert Bandura (see Blair-Broeker et al., 2003). Albert Bandura in his theoretical stance termed *observational learning* did seminal experiments in the 1960s that, made it clear that by observing violent scenarios, children replicate violence. He demonstrated this by placing a child in a room where an adult in another part of the room exhibited violent behaviour towards an inflatable doll. The adult tossed the doll around continuously for about 10 minutes while shouting things such as “Sock him in the nose. ... Hit him down. ... Kick him.” (Blair-Broeker et al., 2003, p. 326). Next, he moved the child to another room with several toys. Amid the excitement shown by the child, the adult interrupted by saying that the toys needed to be saved for another group of children. As the child became frustrated, the adult moved him to yet another room with a few toys, including the inflatable doll, to see how the child would now behave. The child demonstrated the exact violent behaviour and words towards that doll. This proves that when young children are left to watch TV programmes showing violence or any other anti-social behaviours, they are likely to demonstrate similar behaviour.

### **Methods and Procedures**

This theoretical study surveyed selected documents about media education written in different contexts across the world. A balance was observed where literature from the West and the East were analysed. In the analysis, major themes were determined based on the prominence of issues being reviewed in relation to the theoretical stance adopted by the study. Hence, the themes were “grounded in data” rather than predetermined. All the data in this study were qualitative. The major themes were: 1. Developmental and cultural appropriateness; 2. Media education and parental education; 3. Media education in the early childhood education curriculum; 4. Media education pedagogy for early childhood programmes.

## Results and Discussion

### *Developmental and Cultural Appropriateness*

The literature survey revealed that developmental and cultural considerations were critical in discussions about the media in early childhood. Various types of media exert an immense influence and in a complex way on children's thinking, behaviour, world-view and personalities. The extent of the influence largely depends on the type of media (and its messages) to which children are exposed, the duration of the child's exposure to the media, the age of the child and, most importantly, the extent to which young children are media literate. It is almost impossible to detach children from encounters with the media. As Cheung (2001, p. 192) argues using the case of Hong Kong, "It is not surprising that young people in Hong Kong have been familiar with various media from infancy for they spend a lot of time on the media". This section illuminates the nature of the media and its influences on young children.

The media and their associated messages have a powerful impact on young children's lives. There is an abundance of channels of information available for young children in Tanzania and the world in general, including, *inter alia*, TV, the Internet, radio, magazines, computer games, films, and advertisements. Goldstein et al., (2004) argue that children get and use information from the media in complex ways. Information gained from one channel of information is used to acquire information from other sources, which in turn influence children's participation in socio-cultural activities. Children's lives are surrounded by these various channels of information. The main question here is whether the messages contained in them facilitate children's development and learning and maximise their participation in the social and cultural life of their society.

One critical problem with the media is that their messages are not necessarily direct, and understanding and using them needs great care. As Masterman (1994, p. 33) argues, "the media do not present reality, they represent it". This signifies the necessity for media education to be discussed shortly. Wayne (2001) critically writes about media culture and media violence for the purpose of making the TV work for young children. Violence, sex and sexuality (e.g. gender roles) are some of the media messages that could negatively impact children's lives. Contrary to the earlier *Aggression Catharsis* Hypothesis, where children's exposure to violent scenarios in the media was believed to reduce violence in children, the opposite has recently been proved. For

example, Wegener-Spöhring (2004) conducted a study with fourth graders (ages 9 to 12) in 1985 and then in 2002 about the effects of violent messages in the media on children's lives. She hypothesised that children could demonstrate "balanced aggressiveness" (p. 19), that is, children could limit aggressive elements to the level of pretence rather than actual violence. Seventeen years later, after children's exposure to violent messages, she found that children demonstrated both internalised aggression and externalised aggression. Statements such as "I've a Barbie (doll) but I once tore off her leg" (p. 30) and "When we make war too brutally, my friend leaves for home crying ..." (p. 29) were common. The main problem with young children is that they have difficulty differentiating between fantasy and reality. Too much exposure to TV that uses violence as a solution to problems make children use violence as a solution to problems in life instead of negotiations (Wayne, 2001). Further, it has been learnt that "Aggressive skills are acquired earlier and more easily than mental and social skills" (Wayne, 2001, p. 4).

In the same vein, sex and sexuality as well as messages concerning the use of alcohol and drugs, unless checked by media literacy, tend to rush children into adulthood too early or lead to the development of undesirable behaviour. Such exposures tend to send the message to young children that "everyone does it" (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1996; cited in Wayne, 2001, p. 5). They lead to the disappearance of childhood (Postman, 1984) or the death of childhood (Buckingham, 2000).

The impact of the media is not only limited to the types of messages they portray but also the length of time to which children are exposed to the messages. Wayne (2001) argues that, despite the type of media message, too much exposure to any one type of message does not yield good results. It could lead to consumerism and passivity as children fail to engage in active play. However, Goldstein et al., (2004) state that exposure to the media, as well as games and toys, actively engage children mentally. In their studies, they found that "children are far from being the passive victims" (Goldstein et al., 2004, p. 3). Essentially, the effects of any type of media and/or message depend on the age of the child and whether such a child is media literate. It is hard to say when the child's exposure to the media is too long. This is also complicated by cultural variations where different expectations are possible.



### ***Media Education and Parental Involvement***

It was apparent from the literature survey that parents play a critical role in facilitating or inhibiting children's ability to interact with the media productively. Media literacy or media education is one of the many literacies that have become critical in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for preparing people to function maximally in their societies and the world in general. In early childhood education, and media education, like any other knowledge, skills, dispositions and feelings that are expected to be developed in young children, requires parental involvement for the best results. Parents are children's "first and most continuous teachers" (Elkind, 1991, p. 77). The fact that children are continually immersed in a rich media environment, whether at school, at home or on the streets, justifies the need for parental involvement. In addition, the key issues addressed by media literacy, as will be discussed subsequently, obligate those who produce programmes for young children to work in partnership with their parents.

### ***Media Education in the Early Childhood Education Curriculum***

Media education is considered to be one of the school subjects that is a cross-cutting issue in the school curriculum at all levels of education except pre-school (see Cheung, 2001). Early childhood education could be better viewed as requiring integration with other subjects rather than being a distinct subject. Most early childhood curricula across the world advocate integrated curricula (see Zhu & Wang, 2005). One of the reasons has been that young children are unable to view knowledge as belonging to specific disciplines or subjects. In the early childhood curriculum distinctions based on disciplines do not match pupils' mental ability to comprehend them. In addition, such distinctions compartmentalise pupils' learning and development which threatens children's holistic development. Indeed, media education itself as a form of literacy requires application to every aspect of life that involves the meaning-making process. Kellner and Share (2005, p. 369) define literacy as follows: "Literacy involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artefacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one's culture and society". Children engage in the process of message extraction from the various types of media discussed in this article. It is these messages that affect children's behaviour. It is therefore important to provide young children with the critical analytical tools that are necessary and suitable to their developmental level to prevent them from becoming victims of "unsorted media messages".

Most media educators have attempted to delineate the key issues that need to be addressed in media education. Kellner and Share (2005, p. 374-377) revisited various literature and found that at least five issues were critical for one to extract messages from the media critically. The next part discusses these issues while attempting to relate them to the age of pre-schoolers for developmental appropriateness.

*Key issue 1. Principle of non-transparency: All media messages are “constructed”*

In this issue it is cautioned that messages contained in the media are not straightforward. Any person extracting a message from any of the media needs to view it as problematic. This heralds the need for media literacy and the challenges teachers and parents face in making young children media literate. For example, how can parents and teachers work together to make young children capable of differentiating between fantasy and reality, of deducing multiple messages from a single media text and deciding which one suits their age level and cultural life?

*Key issue 2. Codes and conventions: media messages are constructed using creative language with its own rules*

This point cautions that there is no direct, one-to-one relationship between the words, signs and symbols and the intended message (connotation vs. denotation). Kellner and Share (2005, p. 374) argue that “With younger students the terms (connotation and denotation) are simplified into separating what they see or hear from what they think or feel”. In early childhood education, it could involve asking children to represent various concepts such as rich, poor, strong, weak, master, slave, police, prisoner, and so on using different methods of representing messages. These methods of representing messages would include the use of pictures and creation of models.

*Key issue 3. Audience decoding: Different people experience the same message differently*

It has been established that people do not receive and interpret media messages in the same way. One source of information could contain different messages for different people. Ang (2002, p. 180) states: “Textual meanings do not reside in the texts themselves: a certain text can come to mean different things, depending on the inter-discursive context in which viewers interpret it”.

This fact helps to parents and teachers to carefully select the media to which they expose their children, bearing in mind that media texts are interpreted differently. In practice, teachers and parents could expose young children to one type of media such as a cartoon or a picture and ask them to explain what it is all about. This helps children realise that one media text could mean different things to different people – a skill which is essential in life.

Cognitive flexibility characterised by children's awareness of perceptual differences of the same phenomenon is critical in multicultural societies. As Tanzania is gradually becoming multicultural, particularly in big cities like Dar es Salaam, Mwanza, Dodoma and Arusha, the need for this cognitive attribute cannot be overemphasised. Kellner and Share's (2005, p. 375) statement about this attribute is illuminating: "The ability for students to see how diverse people can interpret the same message differently is important for multicultural education, since understanding differences means more than merely tolerating one and other".

*Key issue 4. Content and message: the Media have embedded values and points of view*

This point seeks to draw the attention of those interacting with the media to the need to be critical of their content so as to discern any bias, objectivity or subjectivity caused by certain world-views and values. The messages contained in the media content are hardly neutral; they always relate to particular socio-cultural positions. This is basically the essence of postmodernism. In programmes serving young children, parents and teachers could use the various types of media discussed in this article to inculcate specific values and world-views in children. It is also necessary to help children develop an awareness that the content of the media holds a specific world-view and is value-laden, which could be done by relating it to specific contexts. For example, adults could give children a certain statement and ask them to explain who might have said it and why.

*Key issue 5. Motivation: the Media are organized to gain profit and/or power*

Here the main issue is to help young children gain an understanding that the media are produced for various purposes including profit and/or power. This issue is closely related to issue number four above, but here the main task is to make children aware of the media producers' agenda. As

Wayne (2001, p. 1) argues, “thinking and talking” together with children helps to address many problems and challenges posed by the media.

### ***Media Education Pedagogy for Early Childhood Programmes***

Just as young children learn differently from older children so does the pedagogy for young children differ from that for older ones. Young children learn best through active engagement in hands-on activities and discussions based on daily life experiences (Katz, 1995). Shared learning between adults and children using materials available in the environment lies at the heart of the pedagogy in early childhood programmes (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). This is the scaffolding that is used in the socio-cultural framework (Vygotsky, 1978) with “the child as an active agent of the environment and the teacher as a facilitator of the child’s development” according to the Montessori theory (Isaacs, 2007). This section outlines the role of adults vis-à-vis young children in the process of making young children media literate.

The five key issues outlined in the foregoing section serve as benchmark for media education pedagogy. These issues constitute higher mental functions whose development in children requires their active engagement in the learning process. Higher mental functions are mental processes such as perception, attention, memory and thinking which become internalised, mediated and used deliberately by children in problem situations (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Children need to develop specific strategies that they can use to critically engage with the media for the purpose of making sound judgements on media messages. All the types of media discussed in this article and others not discussed here should be used as avenues for shared learning between children and adults and among children themselves.

It has been argued in this article that young children in Tanzania are being continually immersed in a rich media environment. Within this environment children perpetually engage in “spontaneous learning” (Isaacs, 2007). Restricting children from contact with the media could not only be a formidable task but could also deprive children of their rights. To prevent “unacceptable” media messages from reaching children, other countries have enacted laws to deter media producers from delivering media such as advertisements that negatively affect children (see Wayne, 2001). While this strategy could work in some ways, these article views

curricular and pedagogical strategies as the most powerful alternatives, leading to the development of critical minds that last for a lifetime.

Tanzania's early childhood programmes need curricular and pedagogical intervention in the form of media education early on in children's lives for the best results, but the later we attempt to introduce media education, the worse the results. Isaacs' (2007, p. 13) characterisation of the environment and the role of adults and children is worth quoting:

As the child responds to the stimuli within a given environment, be it at home, school or nursery, the adults present should observe and interpret behaviours according to the developmental stage of the child. With this in mind, they should ensure that the activities, materials, objects and occupations in the environment are brought to the attention of the child to facilitate, scaffold and extend developmental opportunities for the child. Adults, as well as child's peers, act to some extent as a catalyst in the maturation process, while the materials, objects and occupations within the environment scaffold the child's learning.

## **Conclusion**

The influence of the mass media on children's lives is immense. It goes without saying that, the younger the child, the stronger the effects. As experiences in children's early life have been found to have effects that last a lifetime, deliberate curricular and pedagogical interventions in the form of media education early on in children's lives constitute a prudent strategy. Such a strategy needs to be developmentally and culturally appropriate. For the best results, the pre-school teacher education programme in Tanzania needs to be redesigned to accommodate media education. Preparation of teaching and learning materials also requires a new perspective so as to align such materials with the media education requirements. It also needs to involve parents because children are exposed to the media at home, early childhood centres, and worship places or on the streets. The strategies for involving parental will differ from one context to another and from programme to programme due to socio-cultural and contextual differences. Due to the children's age, it is suggested that media education be integrated with other learning activities in the curriculum. The goal should be to develop higher mental functions in children that will enable them to reflect critically on media messages so as to make sound judgements. In addition, media education in relation to early childhood programmes in Tanzania has the potential to prepare children to competently and comfortably live in a multicultural society, whose emergency can hardly be avoided.

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