

# Kindergarten teachers' perspectives on media education in Austria

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## Abstract

*Given the importance of teachers' views and perspectives in promoting media literacy among students and children, this study examines the perspectives of kindergarten teachers in Austria on media education. Data was collected through an online survey of kindergarten teachers who participated in a training. The results show that common approaches to media literacy among kindergarten teachers are protectionist and technical approaches. Critical and reflective approaches to media were rarely mentioned by kindergarten teachers.*

**Keywords:** kindergarten; media literacy; critical approach; ideology critique.

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## Introduction

Media literacy as a child's right (Swertz & Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2021) and as a basic entitlement for children requires that they become active and empowered users of media and technology, not only through the development of technical skills and protection, but also through a social, political, economic and cultural understanding of media (Buckingham, 2019). Media literacy is fundamental to a healthy democracy and participation in civil society (Buckingham, 2019) by empowering children to critically analyze and reflect on media messages and to create media in order to be active participants in a democratic society.

Developing media literacy throughout the education system requires media literate teachers to be equipped with frameworks and pedagogies that enable them to guide their students in questioning and critically analyzing different types of messages in their everyday lives, as well as producing alternative media texts (Kellner & Share, 2019). In other words, developing students' media literacy through curriculum and instruction requires teachers who are critically media literate, "teachers cannot teach what they have not learned, and learned to value, themselves" (Goetze, Brown, & Schwarz, 2005, p. 161).

In this regard, teachers' perspectives and attitudes towards media literacy and education play a crucial role in the development of critical media literacy in schools and kindergartens. Understanding teachers' perspectives on media education is a starting point for integrating critical media literacy into preschools, schools, and teacher education programs.

A review of the literature reveals that very little is known about kindergarten teachers' views and perspectives on media literacy and media education. Given the lack of knowledge and research in this area, this study aims to explore kindergarten teachers' perspectives on media education in Austria, recognizing the critical role teachers play in promoting media literacy.

The data on kindergarten teachers' views and perspectives on media education will help researchers, media educators and teacher training centers, and Austrian policy makers to develop and improve media literacy training for teachers, to make learning relevant, and to deepen critical understanding of media, technology, and information to enable teachers and children to become fully engaged citizens in a contemporary media culture.

## **1. Approaches to Media Education**

There are different perspectives on media education and literacy, as well as different classifications of approaches. Five main perspectives, mainly based on the classification of Buckingham (2019) and Kellner and Share (2005, 2007), are discussed here.

A mainstream perspective in media education is the instrumental or technical approach, which sees media education only as teaching technical skills and merely maximizing the benefits of using media and technology without a critical understanding of the technology and its social, economic and political implications. Using media and technology as teaching and learning tools is one view in this perspective. It is only teaching through and with media rather than teaching about media.

Media and technology are used to maximize students' learning of school subjects and simply as a means of delivering content and learning better (Buckingham, 2019). Another aspect of this perspective is to prepare and equip students for jobs in the digital economy by teaching problem solving, coding and computer programming, which according to Buckingham (2018, 2019) is largely false.

From this perspective, today's citizens are those who can only use media and technology. They become media literate when they develop their skills and abilities only in the use of media and new technologies for online services. In this view, citizenship means using technology to access services such as online banking, e-government, and e-commerce (Ferrari & Punie, 2013).

The *protectionist or defensive* approach is another perspective. This approach emerges "from fear of media and aims to protect or inoculate people against the dangers of media manipulation and addiction" (Share, 2009, p. 8). This view sees the media as the cause of many social problems, especially among children and adolescents. When there is an increase in violence, sexualization, obesity, drugs, consumerism, or almost any other social problem in society, the media are blamed as the main cause. Media education then aims to address and prevent the risks and harmful effects (Buckingham, 2019).

From this perspective, media audiences are passive consumers and automatically internalize every idea presented in the media (Hobbs, 1999). Thus, "it assumes that, if we can encourage children to control their own use of media, and to resist and reject certain kinds of media messages, we will somehow inoculate them against media influence" (Buckingham, 2019, p. 49). As a result, the central component of media education in this approach is teaching children to stay safe online, to protect their privacy and avoid inappropriate content, or to recognize fake news and distinguish it from real news. By warning children and young people of the dangers in the media, especially on the Internet, they must protect themselves by internalizing some rules of good behaviour. "From this perspective, media literacy is primarily seen as a matter of self-protection or self-regulation" (Buckingham, 2019, p. 29). Since the media are seen as the root cause of many social problems, such as violence and drugs, teaching children media literacy can reduce the harmful influence of the media.

The problem with perspective is not that media have no impact or that people should not protect themselves in the media world, it is that social problems are oversimplified because media are seen in isolation from wider social, cultural and economic developments (Buckingham, 2019; Kellner & Share, 2007). It views media literacy as an individualistic solution to a broader set of social problems (Buckingham, 2019), and the unidirectional notions of cause and effect do little to explain the role of media in society and children's lives (Buckingham, 2023).

Furthermore, the efficacy of this view on children's behavior is questionable and even counterproductive (Buckingham, 2019). Telling students that movies and other media texts on the Internet teach them bad behavior and violence will not stop them from watching and using the media and will have no effect on reducing violence (Buckingham, 2019, 2020).

Media arts education (Kellner & Share, 2007) or creativity (Buckingham, 2019) is the next approach. It is concerned with the use of creativity for self-expression through the creation of art and media, lacking critical analysis of structures of oppression and alternative media production (Kellner & Share, 2009). According to Buckingham (2019), the approach lacks the precision of the meaning of creativity and considers creativity as a good thing in itself, regardless of what is created or for what purpose.

For making students active participants in media culture, focusing only on creativity is not sufficient, they need critical understanding of the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of media, and only creative production does not lead to this understanding (Buckingham, 2015).

The *Media literacy movement* is another approach to media literacy. In this view, media literacy is seen as a set of communication skills, including the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate (The Alliance for a Media Literate America in Kellner & Share, 2007). This approach is a mainstream approach in media literacy education since it claims to be apolitical as well as ideology and bias free and tries to be politically neutral by downplaying ideological criticism and the issues of power (Livingstone, 2013).

Although the omission and overlooking of power, bias, and ideologies in media representation helps the dissemination of the approach in schools and education systems in many countries, "it also waters down the transformative potential for media education to become a powerful instrument to challenge oppression and strengthen democracy" (Kellner and Share, 2007, p. 8).

The last one is the *critical* approach. Many scholars in media education claim that their perspective in media literacy is critical but it is not clear what critical means in their views. Here, three perspectives are discussed because critical aspects of media literacy are clearly defined in their theories.

Kellner and Share (2019) defines “critical as an aspect of a dialectical, sociocultural, and analytical process.... critical thinking that is more than just a cognitive idea; it is also a sociocultural understanding that seeks to develop in students a social consciousness as well as a working knowledge of how media operate” (p.19).

Critical media literacy from this approach has six core concepts (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016; Kellner & Share, 2019) and its goal is “to engage with media through critically examining representations, systems, structures, ideologies, and power dynamics that shape and reproduce culture and society” (Share, 2022, p. 131). The politics of representation and challenging power, bias and ideologies such as sexism, racism, classism and homophobia in the media are central concerns (Hammer, 2009) and make media literacy critical.

In Buckingham’s (2019) view critical thinking is a *reflexive* process which “demands in-depth knowledge, rigorous analysis and careful study; it requires us to reflect on our personal uses of the media, and our emotional and symbolic investments in them; and it entails a broader awareness of how media relate to more general social, cultural, politic and historical developments” (Buckingham 2019, p.41).

According to Buckingham (2003), critical thinking in media education has four conceptual understandings and the process of critical understanding of media culture and power “requires a dynamic relationship between practice and theory, between action and reflection, and between creativity and critique” (Buckingham, 2018, p.10).

Although Buckingham tries to distance himself from considering ideology critique as a critical aspect of media education, in his view the main concern in critical thinking in media education is the issues of economics, politics and ideology, representation and social justice, but also aesthetics, pleasure and fantasy (Buckingham, 2019, 2022).

Another theory is Dieter Baacke's media competence, which is widely used in German-speaking countries. In his view, media competence has four components: media criticism, media studies, media use and media design (Swertz, 2012). Media criticism involves understanding social processes such as media ownership. It also includes ethical considerations, which deal with the responsible use of media in order not to hurt others.

From his point of view, media criticism requires a reflexive approach to media, which on the one hand enables participation in society, but on the other hand also emancipated reflection on society (Swertz, 2012).

Despite some differences in the critical dimension of media literacy between critical perspectives, they all emphasize media creation and action as an essential core of media literacy. Critical reading of media aims at students' active participation in social and political processes by using media in constructive ways and creating alternative media production (Kellner & Share, 2007, 2019). In other words, media education is not only about critical understanding of media, but critical analysis of media should also encourage students to explore alternatives and must lead to critical action and demand for change (Buckingham, 2019).

## **2. Kindergarten Teachers' Perspectives on Media Education**

Future kindergarten teachers' understanding of the definition, elements, and teaching of new media literacy for children was investigated by Silawati (2019) through questionnaires and interviews with 30 students in the sixth semester of an early childhood teacher education program at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. Luke's (2007) definition of new media literacy, which is a combination of media literacy, cultural literacy, and information or technology literacy skills, and Jenkins' (2006) elements of new media literacy were used to analyze the data. The result shows that pre-service teachers understand some aspects very well, such as being familiar with different types of media suitable for children, while few of them knew other elements of new media literacy and its teaching strategies.

In a survey of 107 kindergarten teachers and principals and 20 interviews by Cheung (2012) in Hong Kong, the principals and teachers believed that media education is important for young children. 85% of the teachers were willing to implement media literacy in kindergarten, but the aim of media education from their views was more to protect children from the negative effects of media, as well as to provide them with positive values and to train children's ability to distinguish between good and bad media. The least goal of media education in their view was to interpret media messages, monitor media, and express themselves through the use of media.

Vodopivec's (2011) study of 22 educators' opinions on media literacy in kindergartens in Slovenia through a survey shows that 54.5% of the teachers support the promotion of media literacy, while 45.5% of them reject it. The results show that teachers integrate media into the educational process in kindergartens, most often radio, because the kindergartens were insufficiently equipped with other media. Active participation of children in the use of media was rare.

A study by Friedrichs-Liesenkötter (2015) in kindergartens in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with media education teachers in educator training, future educators in the second year of their course, and future educators in the third year, shows that despite a consensus among educators about the important role of electronic media in children's daily lives, both media education and digital media such as computers are rarely used in the educational work of kindergartens because they believe that digital media have negative effects on children.

The review of literature reveals that little is known about the attitudes and views of kindergarten teachers on media literacy and education. The review shows that the inclusion of media literacy in kindergartens and when the educators have positive views about media literacy and its integration in kindergartens, it is mainly as a tool to inoculate children since they believe that media has harmful effects on them.

### 3. Method

The study aims to answer the question: What are the perspectives and views of kindergarten teachers on media literacy and media education? The data were collected through an online survey at the beginning of a training course "Sprachförderung mit digitalen Medien" for kindergarten teachers at a private teacher training university in Austria. One goal of the training is to develop teaching and learning strategies for media education that is integrated into everyday life and that deals critically and reflexively with socially relevant influences of digital media and technology ("Sprachförderung mit digitalen Medien", 20-23). This paper is based on data from a survey to explore the views and perspectives of kindergarten teachers on media education and literacy prior to the training. 69 out of 74 participating kindergarten teachers completed the questionnaire.

The survey included both closed and open-ended questions. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis (Mayring, 2004). For predetermined codes related to media education perspectives; instrumental, protectionist, creative and critical approach were used to code and categorize the qualitative data. Any text that could not be categorized with the predetermined codes was considered a new code. The new codes were analyzed to determine whether they represented a new category or a new perspective on media education.

### 4. Results

The results provide an overview of the participants' demographics, attitudes toward media literacy, views on the reasons for teaching media literacy, the elements of media literacy, and their understanding of media education.

#### 4.1 Demographics

Table 1 shows that the participants of the training were of different ages, with the highest percentage belonging to the age group between 30-34 years (23.2%) and the majority (65.8%) was older than 30 years.

**Table 1.** Teachers' age

| Age group | N  | %    |
|-----------|----|------|
| 20-24     | 9  | 13   |
| 25-29     | 9  | 13   |
| 30-34     | 16 | 23.2 |
| 35-39     | 12 | 17.4 |
| 40-44     | 7  | 10.1 |
| 45-49     | 11 | 15.9 |
| 50-54     | 4  | 7.6  |

In terms of their qualifications, Table 2 shows that most of the teachers (82.6%) had a degree in early childhood education (BAfEP/BAKIP/KGP) and the rest had a bachelor's (11.6%) and master's (5.8%) degree.

**Table 2.** Teachers' degree

| Degree          | N  | %    |
|-----------------|----|------|
| BAfEP/BAKIP/KGP | 57 | 82.6 |
| Bachelor        | 8  | 11.6 |
| Master/Diplom   | 4  | 5.8  |

The results show (Table 3) that 74% of the participants had more than 10 years of teaching experience.

**Table 3.** Teachers' teaching experience

| Year of experience | N  | %    |
|--------------------|----|------|
| 1-4                | 9  | 13   |
| 5-9                | 9  | 13   |
| 10-14              | 9  | 13   |
| 15-19              | 12 | 17.4 |
| 20-24              | 12 | 17.4 |
| 25-29              | 11 | 15.9 |
| 30-34              | 5  | 7.2  |

#### 4.2 Attitude to Media Education

When asked about their interest in media literacy (Table 4), more than half of the participants (56%) were very interested, while 43.5% were interested in media literacy.

**Table 4.** Teachers interest in media education

| Interest in media education | N  | %    |
|-----------------------------|----|------|
| Very interested             | 39 | 56.5 |
| Interested                  | 30 | 43.5 |
| Uninterested                | 0  | 0    |
| Very uninterested           | 0  | 0    |

Regarding the interest in media education in terms of age, Table 5 shows that kindergarten teachers in the age group of 30-34 years are more interested in media education than other age groups, because the highest percentage of participants belonged to the age group of 30-34 years (Table 5). In other words, there is no relationship between age and interest in media education.

**Table 5.** Interest in media education in terms of age groups

| Age groups | Very interested | Interested | Total | %    |
|------------|-----------------|------------|-------|------|
| 20-24      | 6               | 3          | 9     | 13.2 |
| 25-29      | 4               | 5          | 9     | 13.2 |
| 30-34      | 11              | 5          | 16    | 23.5 |
| 35-39      | 8               | 4          | 12    | 17.6 |
| 40-44      | 3               | 4          | 7     | 10.3 |
| 45-49      | 6               | 5          | 11    | 16.2 |
| 50-54      | 1               | 3          | 4     | 5.9  |

When asked about the importance of teaching media literacy in kindergarten (Table 6), about half of the respondents (50.7%) thought it was important to teach media literacy and the other half (49.3%) thought it was very important. This indicates that all kindergarten teachers have a positive view of teaching media literacy.

**Table 6.** Importance of teaching media literacy

| Importance of teaching media literacy | N  | %    |
|---------------------------------------|----|------|
| Very important                        | 34 | 49.3 |
| Important                             | 35 | 50.7 |
| Unimportant                           | 0  | 0    |
| Very unimportant                      | 0  | 0    |

As a result of being interested in media literacy and considering it important to teach it, Table 7 shows that a large majority of respondents (94.7%) attended the training because they were interested in the content of the training, while teaching digital and media literacy came next, with a large difference, at 17.4% as a reason for attending the training. Only 4.3% attended the training because their supervisors asked them to. The result shows that the vast majority of respondents attended the course because they were interested in the content of the training rather than the teaching of media literacy, although they all believed that teaching media literacy was important.

**Table 7.** Reasons for taking the course.

| Reason for taking the course                                                       | N  | %    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|------|
| I am interested in the content.                                                    | 66 | 95.7 |
| I must or will teach digital literacy or teach media literacy in educational work. | 12 | 17.4 |
| I have been asked to participate by my supervisor(s)                               | 3  | 4.3  |

#### 4.3 Reason to teach Media Literacy

There are two questions about the reasons for teaching media literacy, one closed-ended and one open-ended. The result of the closed questions shows that the most important reason for teaching media literacy (Table 8), with the highest frequency of 46.45%, was to protect children from negative effects of media. This indicates that a little less than half of the kindergarten teachers believe that since media have harmful influences on children, they need to be protected by teaching media literacy. The other reasons are the correct use of media and the development of critical thinking with 30.4% and 18.2% respectively. Significantly, only one participant (2.6%) mentioned teaching media literacy to prepare children to become active citizens in a democratic society. Preparing children for the labour market by teaching them digital literacy is also mentioned by only one participant (2.6%).

**Table 8.** Reasons for teaching media literacy

| Most important reason for teaching media literacy                       | N  | %    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|------|
| To protect children from negative influences of media                   | 32 | 46.4 |
| To develop critical thinking                                            | 13 | 18.8 |
| To help kids to become active citizens in a just and democratic society | 1  | 1.4  |
| To prepare kids to requirements of the job market                       | 1  | 1.4  |
| To teach kids how to use media correctly                                | 21 | 30.4 |

The responses to the open-ended questions confirm the findings and reveal three main themes. The first theme is protection, which shows that kindergarten teachers believe that teaching media literacy is important because children need to be inoculated against the negative and harmful effects of media by knowing and recognizing potential dangers, abuses in social media and the Internet, and learning how to deal with them and protect themselves and their privacy. Media literacy can also help them recognize fake content, regulate themselves through routines, and control the amount of time they spend with media.

The second theme is media use, which shows that they consider the teaching of media literacy to be crucial as it develops technical skills and enables them to use new media and technologies. The next theme is media ubiquity. They believe that since media is everywhere and pervasive in every aspect of our lives, teaching media literacy is necessary to deal with it. Developing critical thinking and creativity is rarely mentioned as a reason for teaching media literacy.

#### 4.4 Elements of Media Literacy

Analyzing the responses to an open-ended question about the components of media literacy, "What do you think is part of media literacy for children and youth?" reveals the same main themes. Coding and categorizing the responses reveals protection as the first theme. From the participants' point of view, media literacy should include knowledge about dangers in the media and how to be safe, protect and defend themselves from harm in different ways, such as age and child-appropriate use of media, screen time, controlling media use, setting clear rules and guidelines, and protecting data.

Media use is the next topic. Educators stated that media literacy for children needs to include teaching the skills and abilities to use media and technology, especially digital media, including PCs, digital toys, mobile phones, and the Internet. Critical analysis, another theme, was mentioned in a few cases as a component of media literacy, with an emphasis on a critical and reflective view of media and its content. Critique of ideology and identification of bias in the media were not included as elements of media literacy.

#### 4.5 Understanding of Media Education

The coding and categorizing of the data regarding the kindergarten teachers' understanding of media education shows similar main themes: protection and media use. Similarly, protection indicates that they perceive media education as a means to make people aware of the dangers of media, healthy use of media, how to protect themselves from dangers such as cyberbullying, how to prevent addiction, how to identify fake news, and how to set clear rules for using media. In

media use, another theme, they understood media literacy as learning technical skills and how to use media to share and expand their knowledge and information.

A noticeable theme that was found in their understanding of media education is critical analysis, but it was not significant. They see media education as a critical view and approach to media, questioning and reflecting on media and responsible use of media, although in some cases it is not clear what they mean by critical as it has different meanings. Similarly, criticizing ideology and bias in critical analysis of media was not mentioned by any of the kindergarten teachers.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to explore kindergarten teachers' approaches and perspectives on media literacy and education. Data were collected from kindergarten teachers before they received training on the use of digital media for language improvement, in which the development of media literacy was one of the objectives. Using an online survey, we have shown the kindergarten teachers' attitudes towards media literacy, their understandings and perspectives on media literacy and education.

The analysis of the teachers' views shows a positive attitude towards media literacy. The results show that all teachers are interested in media literacy. Although they all consider it crucial and important to teach media literacy to children and young people, only a few of them attended the training with the intention of teaching media literacy in their kindergartens. Developing their own media literacy was the main reason for attending the training.

Applying the common perspectives on media literacy, technical, protectionist, media arts education, critical approaches to analyzing the data collected from open-ended questions show protectionist and technical approaches as common perspectives among kindergarten teachers.

The most obvious finding from this study is that a protectionist or defensive view of media is the most prevalent approach among kindergarten teachers. They see the media as the cause of many problems among children and see media literacy as a way and a tool to deal with these problems by protecting children from the dangers and harms of the media. In their view, media addiction, cyberbullying, fake news and other negative media influences can be reduced by teaching media literacy.

In other words, from their perspective, children are victims who need to be inoculated with media literacy and encouraged to control their own media use, self-protection, or self-regulation to resist and reject certain types of media messages (Buckingham, 2019).

Our findings are consistent with those of Cheung (2012) and Friedrichs (2015), who found that kindergarten teachers are interested in media literacy and believe that media literacy education is important, but when it comes to their reasons for teaching, they think more about protecting children from the negative effects of media. In fact, as Buckingham (2019) and Kellner and Share (2007) state, by oversimplifying social issues and considering media in isolation from social, political, and economic structures, they see media literacy as an individualistic solution to broader social problems.

Another important finding was the technical and instrumental approach of educators. They understand media literacy as learning and teaching how to use different media. This finding supports Vodopivec's (2011) research, in which many educators in kindergartens understood media literacy as how to use media. As Buckingham (2019) argues, this is merely maximizing the benefits of using media and technology without paying attention to a critical understanding of technology and its social, economic, and political implications.

The findings also show that few teachers considered media literacy as learning and teaching through media. Educational media and maximizing children's learning through the use of media have no place in their approach to media literacy.

A very significant finding is that only one participant believed that teaching media literacy prepares students to be civic participants in a democratic society. This result is not surprising when the focus and emphasis is only on protecting children and how to use media, rather than on critical reflection and understanding of media. This view tends to view individuals as passive and inactive rather than as agents, subjects, and justice-oriented citizens who "critically evaluate social, political, and economic structures and consider collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address the root causes of problems....The emphasis is on preparing students to improve society by critically analyzing and addressing social problems and injustices" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 243).

In other words, through a critical understanding of media culture, people are not passive and inactive, but active subjects in changing structures of injustice, fighting for a better and less oppressive society, and as a result, developing skills that promote democratization and civic participation (Kellner & Share, 2009).

Another important finding is that educators considered the ubiquity of media as a reason to teach media literacy to children. As Swertz (2012) argues, this reason is not a pedagogical reason and cannot be persuasive on its own. Just because something is there does not make it pedagogically relevant. In fact, media are not simply there, like water is on earth, but they are made by people, they are connected to people's intentions, and these are transported into kindergarten when people work with media in kindergarten (Swertz, 2012). Media messages are created and shaped by people, and that is why they are not only not transparent windows to the world and reality (Masterman, 2003), but also have purposes.

Media creation and creativity have almost no place in teachers' views of media literacy. In fact, critical action through media production for liberation and having a better society is not a matter in their point of view about media literacy.

In conclusion, the results of this study reveal the conspicuous lack of a critical approach to media among kindergarten teachers. The findings of this study suggest that a robust democracy in a media-saturated world requires not only a shift in the views of kindergarten teachers from viewing media in an individualistic perspective to a holistic one, analyzing them in their social, political, and economic context, but also the development of media literacy to empower children to use media and technology to promote liberation, freedom.

They need to learn that the best way to protect children is to provide them with critical and reflexive views of the media, which could empower them with critical autonomy and prepare them to participate as active citizens in critical solidarity with the world around them (Share, 2009).

Finally, the entitlement of children to media literacy as a right requires a fundamental shift in the perspectives of kindergarten teachers from a predominant emphasis on protection and technical skills to a more critical and reflexive approach to media education that "enables participation in society on the one hand, but also emancipated reflection on society on the other" (Swertz, 2012, p. 7).

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