Media literacy at the county councils of experts in Croatia: The perspective of senior advisors for primary education

Katarina Vanek*, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education, Zagreb, Croatia

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to gain an insight into the professional development of Croatian primary education teachers when it comes to informing about media literacy at their County Councils of Experts (CCE) from the perspective of senior advisors for primary education. Five senior advisors were interviewed, and they pointed out that media literacy has sometimes been the topic at the councils, but they consider that it should be more often discussed. The results show that Croatian teachers mostly get information about the theoretical background and present examples of good practice. There are a lot of improvements which might be carried out to encourage media literacy. The results suggest anticipating greater importance to media literacy and the recognition of its importance by the Croatian authorities. Croatian primary education teachers are poorly informed about media literacy at their CCE. These results can be a starting point for further research.

Keywords: Councils of experts, media literacy, primary teachers, senior advisors, professional development.

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* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Katarina Vanek,** Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia.
E-mail address: katarina.vanek@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

Digitalisation in the world has led to significant changes and the creation of the so-called 'digital generation' (Matijevic, Bilic & Opic, 2016, p. 291). The growing use of digital media has generated the concept of media literacy, which has led to the development of media pedagogy. 'The main role of media pedagogy is to deal with new media to develop appropriate competency and prevent media manipulation' (Tolic, 2008, p. 1). There has been a broadening of the concept of literacy. Now it also includes forms of literacy needed for understanding and creating media content, particularly digital content. As forms of modern concepts of literacy, VrkicDimic (2014, p. 382) cites 'standard, computer, informatics, information, digital, Internet and media literacy'. One of these forms is media literacy, for which we can find many definitions in the literature. Potter (2011) defines it as a set of viewpoints we use to interpret the meaning of the messages we receive. According to Spiranec (2003), it is the ability to 'consume' and to think critically about the information we receive through mass media, while Tolic (2008) defines it as 'the ability to critically analyse media offers and to express yourself creatively through the media', leading to the achievement of the main goal of media education. It is obvious that media literacy is defined in various ways, but its perception continues to expand under the influence of digital technology development (Okur & Alevli, 2018).

Media, alongside numerous advantages, bring many dangers as well, especially for children and young people. 'The media is neither useful nor harmful on their own but can be both' (ZgrabljicRotar, 2005, p. 3). Precisely because media influences can be both harmful and positive, and timely development of media literacy is important. Children and young people often develop their media literacy independently without the involvement of adults in the process and often know more about new media environments than most parents and teachers (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison & Weigel, 2007). Therefore, media literacy education should start at the earliest age possible. It enables teachers' competency about media literacy education in order to successfully develop media literacy of children and youth. For the implementation of media literacy, the emphasis is placed on teachers because a person who educates students in the media also needs pedagogical skills (Hipeli, 2019). This is why their education on media literacy is extremely important to successfully implement it with their students. Moreover, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2011), educating teachers in media competency serves as a prerequisite to a modern school curriculum which develops critical and reflective thinking. It is because the media in a way changes the role of the school, making media competency an important part of the contemporary school curriculum (Milisa, Tolic & Vertovsek, 2010). Also, Hentig (2007) emphasised the importance of media education in school and considers the ability to use the media as an extension of a person's ability to live.

According to the first results of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2019) on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in households and individuals in 2019, 99% of the most frequent Internet users fell within the 16–24 years age group. It can be seen that young people spend a lot of time using digital media, which is increasingly used by younger children as well. Furthermore, Icen (2020) considers children between 5 and 15 years of age a risk group. Early exposure to information and communication technologies is confirmed by numerous investigations, indicating their impact on a person from the earliest age (Rogulj, 2014). Despite the frequent use of digital media, a survey conducted with eighth-grade students in Zagreb showed that the majority of subjects assessed their knowledge of digital media as unsatisfactory, suggesting that pupils in Croatia do not consider themselves sufficiently media competent at the end of primary education in the aspect of digital media to which they are most exposed (Ciboci, 2018).

The European Union and its member states integrated media literacy into their policy (Van Audenhove, Marien & Vanwynsberghe, 2018). In Croatia, media literacy is partly implemented within the framework of teaching the Croatian language. According to the elementary school teaching plan and programme (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2006), media education is provided for engagement with theatre, film, radio, press, comic books and computers; and reception of theatre

performances, films, radio and television shows, as well as training for the evaluation of radio and television shows and film productions (Ministry of Science and Education, 2019). Media literacy includes a large scope of skills such as accessing, analysing, evaluating and creating media content (Aufderheide, 1992 as cited in Livingstone, 2003; ZgrabljicRotar, 2005). All these skills cannot be efficiently integrated in the Croatian language classes along with all the other important matters related to the Croatian language. Education reform in Croatia, named 'School for Life', brought about a significant change by introducing the cross-curricular theme 'Use of ICT'. It stipulated the adoption of the rules of conduct in the digital environment for pupils of grades 1–4 of elementary school by exploring information on the given topic, explaining the choice of selected information and assessing their quality (Ministry of Science and Education, 2019). Also, various forms of media literacy can be found in other cross-curricular themes, but to a significantly lesser extent. However, despite the predicted aims, teachers' competency to teach media literacy is questionable. This problem is highlighted by the study which led the author to the conclusion that lack of education on media and media literacy is a greater barrier for the development of media literacy than the lack of an ICT infrastructure (Mateus, 2018).

The problem of educational competency for teaching media literacy was an incentive for this research on whether teachers of primary education in Croatia are informed enough to educate students about the media. The most frequent professional training of Croatian teachers of primary education is held at the County Councils of Experts (CCE) that is organised three times a year by county advisors on the topic set by the education and teacher training agency (ETTA), which previously receives state instructions following the national care and education policy.

The purpose of this research is twofold: first, it aims to gather opinions and experiences of senior advisors for primary education on informing teachers of primary education about the importance and methods for teaching media literacy to students of grades 1–4 of elementary school at the CCE. Second, it aims to collect information on whether senior advisors are sufficiently informed about the topic in order to present it at the councils and what they anticipate regarding the topic in the next 5 years. I chose to study the professional training at the CCE under the assumption that they are geographically and financially most accessible to teachers and that they are, therefore, most often present at them. Accordingly, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How much information primary education teachers receive about the importance of media literacy at their CCE?
2. Are primary education teachers at their CCE familiarised with the theory and examples of practice they could use in their classes to teach media literacy to students?
3. Based on the Croatian curriculum, does CCE relate the media literacy topics only to media culture?
4. Do senior advisors for primary education consider themselves sufficiently informed about media literacy to present this to the teachers?
5. What changes do senior advisors predict will happen in the next 5 years regarding the provision of adequate information on media literacy to teachers of primary education at their CCE?

2. Methods

2.1. Research model

This research was carried out according to the qualitative research method.

2.2. Participants

The sample of this research comprised senior advisors for primary education in Croatia. In the research, five senior advisors for primary education at the ETTA from the central office in Zagreb participated, as well as branches in Osijek and Split who have worked in this position ranging from 4 to 16 years. The sample was non-probabilistic and was obtained using the snowball sampling technique.

As there are 10 senior advisories for primary education in Croatia, this sample represents 50% of the population, i.e. 50% of the total number of senior advisors for primary education in Croatia. During the research, all the ethical principles were considered by obtaining consent from research participants, protecting their confidentiality and anonymity, giving them the right to withdraw from the research etc.

2.3. Data collection tools

A semi-structured interview was used to collect data. It consisted of 10 open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted during February and March 2020. Three interviews were conducted live and two during a telephone conversation and all the answers were written down. The obtained data were processed by qualitative analysis by encoding in *NVivo* software, and the results are described by a descriptive method.

2.4. Data analysis

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Theme 1: CCE attendance

From the interview codes, it is evident that no participant was present at all CCE. Only Participant 3 was at most CCE in the designated area. Statements by participants indicated a tendency to reduce their presence at CCE in recent years. Three participants stated that one of the reasons for this was the functioning of the ETTA. Participant 2 said, 'the reason for this is that our administration did not allow travelling to CCE if we were not lecturers, i.e. the expenditures were reduced'. Participant 1 stated, 'There was a time that we didn't even go because our expenses weren't covered if we didn't have lectures there'. Participant 5 pointed out that, 'We can only go there when we are lecturers'. Participant 4 reflected on the reason for her absence at all or most CCE by saying, 'I could not go to everything because every county advisor is obliged to organise the meeting three times'. Statements from the participants indicate that it is likely that the senior advisors for primary education were not fully able to provide accurate data because none of them were present at all CCE in their designated area.

3.2. Theme 2: focusing on informing teachers

Three participants stated that the topic of media literacy was rare, and little represented at CCE they attended. Participant 1 said, 'Topics aimed at informing teachers about the importance of media literacy were very rarely discussed'. 'Several years ago, there were some topics aimed at informing teachers about the importance of media literacy', said Participant 2. Participant 3 stated, 'In the last 2 years, we have had few topics focused on media literacy because of the current education reform'. Participants 5 and 4 stated that they held professional training on media literacy:

'I organised a webinar for all CCE. There were 760 teachers. It was in 2015'.

'In 2018, I organised a professional meeting with the subject of media literacy within the framework of the new Curriculum and after that, some colleagues included the subject in the CCE because it proved necessary but it was far from sufficient as professional training on the subject, except at my meeting'.

According to the participants' statements, it can be seen from their point of view that the topics on media literacy were truly little represented at the CCE for primary education teachers. However, three of them stated that this topic was not completely neglected, as reflected in the meetings held in 2015 and 2018, but it was not within the CCE. Kanizaj and Car (2015) stated that from 1990 to 2000, mostly the ETTA organised numerous activities aimed at raising awareness of the need for media education.

According to the participants' statements, the situation in the past 20 years has not improved at CCE for primary education teachers, since all participants say that there have been few such topics in the last 16 years.

3.3. Theme 3: activities

The activities conducted at CCE significantly differ. Participant 1 cited, 'Film-related activities because there are many films we watch in primary education classes, and much was said about the content that children will watch because it cannot be inappropriate to them, which depends on what grade they are'. Participant 3 pointed out that, 'There were topics related to how the news is produced, how it is modified, how it is made public, and we spoke less about methodology. More focus was on criticism or critical approach to the content that the child is exposed to in the media'. Also, Participant 4 states it was carried out 'in terms of educating teachers to be critical themselves and how to critically look at content in order to teach children those skills'. Participants' answers indicate that teachers were taught critical thinking and pointed out the concept of a film, about which teaching is prescribed according to the elementary school teaching plan and programme (2006) and is included in the Croatian Language Curriculum (2019). It is necessary to point out a statement from Participant 3, who is the only one emphasising cooperation with media experts who informed teachers about how the news is produced and how it is made public.

According to statements from Participants 3 and 5, the activities conducted with teachers at CCE equally focused on theory and examples of good practice. Participant 1 stated, 'The emphasis was on examples of practice'. Participant 4 pointed out that, 'Examples and theory, with the emphasis more on the theoretical part'. Participant 2 stated, 'The activities conducted at these CCE focused on lectures, i.e. educating teachers precisely in this field'. The participants' statements suggest a somewhat more pronounced focus only on theory or only on practice, and less frequently on both. Also, Participant 4 is the only one explaining the importance of educating teachers on critical thinking about media content to be able to teach students the same, which is suggested by *Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers* (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2011) as well. Furthermore, Participant 5 reflected on the problems that not all teachers are at the same level of knowledge on digital technologies or sufficiently interested in this field by saying:

'First, they need to have a critical attitude and filter information to know what information is important, which can be presented to students. I'm not happy with that information filtering. Students are often shown things without a filter. Everything is offered from the Internet etc., without creating a true filter of how functional, educational, and age-appropriate this content is. We need to know that media literacy is some new form of education, so to speak. So, new technologies brought some new forms and new content that is desirable to implement in class. However, there is also the fact that not all teachers are either digitally mature or interested in this way, nor motivated to seek such knowledge. They prefer to stick to the already established and prescribed matter'.

These differences in the implementation of media education and its quality in school practice are underlined by Kanizaj and Car (2015), who stated that the differences are not only significant but also that it does not depend only on teachers. It also depends on school principals who play an important role in the professional training of teachers, especially when it comes to financial support. Earlier conducted research shows that 61.9% of surveyed principals financially support additional media education, while others argue that the reasons for less frequent financing or non-financing at all are lack of funding, lack of teacher interest and general lack of quality media training (Ciboci, Gazdic-Aleric & Kanizaj, 2019). Such results also indicate current problems in Croatia when it comes to the implementation of media literacy and teachers' education about it.

Based on the conducted activities, Participant 1 said, 'These examples from practice were related to the content prescribed by the Curriculum'. Participant 3 stated, 'When the National Curriculum

Framework was adopted, which touched on the topics of media culture, we then worked on the topics of interdisciplinary connection between media culture and other subjects, such as Homeroom class, Science and Croatian language, and then we provided examples of practice on how that matter can be incorporated into regular classes'. Participant 4 said, 'The lectures were based on the matter outside the prescribed content by the Curriculum'. Participant 5 said, 'These topics were both those covered by the Curriculum and those beyond it'. Participants' statements suggest that the activities related to media literacy included content both within and outside the curriculum. Participant 5 underlined that the topics focused mainly on films. Kanizaj and Car (2015) stated the frequent focus only on films as an example of a partial approach to media education.

3.4. Theme 4: sufficiency of professional training

The participants also referred to the sufficiency of professional training of primary education teachers at CCE to stimulate media literacy of students at elementary school grades 1–4. All participants clearly stated that their previous experience was insufficient regarding the professional training of primary education teachers to encourage media literacy of students at elementary school grades 1–4. Participant 5 pointed out that, 'I think that work on this topic needs to be intensified, and I don't think it's sufficiently represented in the current curriculum'.

3.5. Theme 5: suggestions for improvement

Based on the dissatisfaction with the current situation of stimulating media literacy of students of grades 1–4 of elementary school, participants present their ideas of possible solutions to these problems: isolating media culture from the Croatian language subject and creating a separate subject or cross-curricular theme; by changing the new curriculum stemming from the curriculum reform 'School for Life', more frequent cooperation with university experts in this field and generally increasing the scope of teacher education on this topic. Participant 2, who proposes the formation of a separate subject or cross-curricular theme, supports their idea with dissatisfaction with the current implementation of media culture content in the subject of Croatian language:

'If we talk about media culture in Croatian language subject, it is minimal, simply underrepresented. There is even less of this in practice. It exists on paper but the actual implementation is so minimal and that is an actual problem, work should be done with teachers to direct them because they still don't realise that they are the creators of most of the matter that they will work on with their students. They stick to the work materials somewhat blindly, and it can be seen from them that the ratio is minimal. Teachers at school often miss the near-to-far principle when it comes to media literacy, because children are exposed to media content for hours every day, and in school, this is not perceived as important at all'.

Similarly, Kanizaj and Car (2015) suggested that media education and its quality are often neglected and left to the enthusiasm of teachers and extracurricular subjects. However, despite the proposals for improvement of the previous practice, Participant 1 explained the reasons why they are often not implemented:

'I have proposals for improvement, but some other proposals are coming our way and we need to implement them now. At present, the curricular reform is what we must implement first, and the rest we have to put aside'.

The statement of Participant 1 indicates the problem caused by the state institutions superior to ETTA. However, the statement is partially denied by the statement of Participant 2, who claims that there were no topics imposed on CCE:

'CCE is mostly organised by us, and instructions coming from the relevant ministry come regarding county expert meetings we hold. There were no topics imposed on the CCE itself. This is where I organised a meeting with my three groups of teachers, the county leaders, every year, and I actually

listened to what the teachers wanted, and so it happened those different cities were doing different topics because we responded to the teachers' needs'.

However, the fact is that CCE have changed their previous method of implementation since the beginning of the curricular reform 'School for Life' at the beginning of the 2018/2019 school year. They have become meetings aimed almost exclusively at training teachers for the work methods envisaged by the reform which are organised by the relevant ministry.

Furthermore, while Participant 5 suggests that media literacy is not sufficiently represented in the curriculum resulting from the curriculum reform 'School for Life', which removes films from the third grade and under-represents popular science films. Participant 3 takes the opposite view, 'The current curriculum enables precisely this interdisciplinary approach so now I see more space for it'.

These opposite participants' opinions indicate that the perception of the representation of media literacy in prescribed documents may be different for each individual, which reflects on the school practice. Therefore, some teachers integrate media literacy into their classes and others do not.

Moreover, the two participants stress the reasons for the importance of encouraging media literacy. Participant 4 indicated, 'We have to realise how much the media is part of our everyday life and how much we actually have to be careful when perceiving the content coming from the media, and we also have to know how to assess the truth or the falsity of the information'. Also, Participant 3 said, 'All the more so since media space is constantly spreading through digital development and availability of digital technology to children'. In support of the reasons such as these goes the assumption that if children and young people nowadays spend only about 2 hours a day in front of screens, it is more than 700 hours a year, which is more than the total duration of primary school education in Croatia by 10 years (Matijevic et al., 2016).

3.6. Theme 6: views on own level of subject knowledge

Since all participants consider it necessary to change the form of media literacy education and more frequent education of primary education teachers about it, they were asked how much they feel informed about the importance of media literacy so that they could present it to teachers at CCE. Three participants consider themselves sufficiently informed, while the other two did not give a concrete answer. Participant 2 said, 'I, personally, consider myself competent enough to dare to inform teachers at CCE about media literacy. However, since this is a vast domain, I do not dare say that I am an expert but I could give a lecture to teachers because we are still talking about a basic level of awareness of the topic. I could initiate their reflection on the topic, but I would leave the advanced levels to experts'. Participant 4 explained, 'I dam certainly competent to give a lecture because I would single out what I consider important as we do work with people on the ground and we know what people are interested in and what depth we can go to with some content, whether it has to be at a basic level or we can go a little deeper'. Participant 5 said, 'I consider myself informed about this subject and competent to inform teachers about it'. Participant 1 points to the lack of such education directed at senior advisors for primary education:

'I have to say that we didn't have much education about it, so our knowledge is based on what we read and see for ourselves. No special education has been organised for us'.

3.7. Theme 7: future predictions

Participants made their assumptions for the next 5 years when it came to providing adequate information about media literacy to primary education teachers at CCE. Participant 1 said, 'It is difficult for me to predict what will change about this topic in the next 5 years'. Participant 3 stated, 'The moment it's turns for this topic, in a manner of speaking, it will be discussed. When it comes to the future, the project in which ETTA is now involved, in which I will participate as well, will certainly result in the implementation of media culture content in the educational system, so in this sense, I

expect such inclusions but I cannot predict at this moment exactly how it will go and what exactly will be included'. Participant 4 stated, 'In the future, the attitude towards this topic will be changed depending on how much educational policy realises it is an important topic. So when any topic that, to put it that way, "itches" teachers and when it is realised how important it is, then it is adequately presented, instructions are given by the relevant ministry or by our agency on which topics are, we would say, less represented but essential, and which topics have to be discussed more'. Participant 2 said, 'In the next 5 years that beginning may happen, in other words, some awareness may spread of the value of media literacy. There may be more significant co-operation with universities'. Participant 5 described their future work by saying, 'As far as the future is concerned, I am sure that as an advisor I will insist on this subject. I've insisted thus far, too, but not that it's done at CCE but at school meetings and that these things can be tested more on computers and that teachers can get information, not only to hear it but to try it'. From the views of the participants, it is clear that everyone hopes for positive changes in the future. Their attitudes also bring about a much broader view of media literacy in Croatia, so they hope for recognition of the importance of this topic by the authorities in Croatia; they plan their actions to try to educate teachers more about the importance of media literacy and point to the need for better professional training of primary education teachers on this subject.

Besides, shortcomings of this research should be stated as well. Not all senior advisors for primary education in Croatia were interviewed to obtain more accurate data. Also, it should be considered that the mentioned experiences of the participants are reflected in the fact that they were not present at all CCE in their area, which indicates that they probably did not have a fully detailed insight into all the activities conducted.

4. Conclusion and future directions

The research achieved its goal and provided answers to all the research questions asked. From the perspective of senior advisors for primary education, it is concluded that Croatian teachers of primary education receive information on media literacy at their CCE, but consider this insufficient. Teachers are presented with both theory and examples of practice included in prescribed documents and also the subjects outside them. The focus of activities at CCE is often about film and activities that educate teachers in the media.

Proposals for better media literacy of students in grades 1–4 of elementary school are as follows:

- frequent presence of topics on media literacy at CCE;
- separation of media culture from the Croatian language subject;
- formation of a new subject or cross-curricular theme closely linked to media;
- educating teachers on basic concepts of media literacy in the form of theory and active training in school meetings;
- considering the use and application of media content in teaching; and
- changes to the curriculum created in the curricular reform 'School for Life' due to the absence of film in the third grade.

Most participants consider themselves sufficiently informed and capable of providing teachers with basic information on the importance of media literacy, reflecting the hope that a better approach to this topic will be achieved at CCE. Also, it is necessary to recognise the importance of this topic by the authorities in Croatia. Apparently, there is a need for change. More activities for teachers should be organised to educate them about media literacy. The results of this research should be considered to make progress regarding media literacy education in Croatia.

The presented results contribute to a better insight into the professional training of Croatian teachers of primary education in terms of the level of information they obtain on media literacy at CCE. Therefore, these results can be a starting point for further research and potential necessary

improvements in practice on this topic. Further research could examine the attitudes and experiences of primary education teachers on their practice, professional training on media literacy etc.

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