LITERACY, SKILLS AND PERCEPTION OF YOUNG CHILDREN ON MEDIA MATTERS

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ABSTRACT

Many children today grow up with television, video games, mobile phones, computers, Internet, tablets, iPads and iPods. Using these new media technologies, children are producing texts and images that shape childhood experiences and their views of the world. This paper draws insights of an ongoing study and presents selected findings and snapshots of the lifeworlds of children in Proton City, Malaysia, with a focus on media use, forms of media engagement and the role of media in children's lives. The findings of the study reveal that while children are participating in many different media activities outside school, media literacy remains missing from in-school literacy practices. It is argued here that the media themselves are a form of pedagogy, and that more literacy efforts that generate media skills and knowledge are needed for children's fruitful participation. By way of conclusion, this paper argues for literacy planning in schools to embrace critical and productive media literacy to enable children to confront their real-life daily encounters with new media activities.

Keywords: Media literacy, youths & digital media production

INTRODUCTION:

Digital media and online communication have become an integral part of the everyday lives of children today. Social network sites, online games, video-sharing sites and gadgets such as iPods and mobile phones are deemed as important fixtures of children's contemporary cultures (Boyd, 2007). These fixtures offer new, varied and interactive ways to communicate, learn and play and form connections with other individuals with whom they can relate and share current experiences.(Boyd, 2008a). Livingstone (2002) notes that the lives of children have become so media- saturated. She argues that children establish different forms of relationships, exhibiting and publishing content, such as texts and images in cyberspace environments. Her study reveals that children register voices and expressions of uncertainty, ambivalence and anxiety regarding social networking and yet at the same time, children also seek pleasure in experiencing a sense of freedom and control when playing video or social games in their social and leisure activities.

The ever-evolving new media technologies clearly demand that we re-examine the practices of literacy in schools to enable children to engage with learning activities in creative and productive ways. (Acquisti and Gross, 2006; Buckingham, 2002; Boyd, 2008b). The new opportunities, risks and challenges that come into view with children's engagement with new media are numerous and the domain of literacy comes under close scrutiny where schools will have to engage students with extensive knowledge of the world, multi-modal skills and lifelong learning outlooks for this new learning context (Osgerby, 2004; Ofcom, 2007; Ito et al, 2009).

Like many other countries, Malaysia experiences turbulent moments and changes in literacy practices that demand schools to rethink the nature of their work and pedagogical practices that will contribute to successful teaching and learning as well as constructive connections between children's lifeworlds and schools. This paper presents insights of a study that delves into media use practices and beliefs in the home and in the school that are manifested in the lifeworlds of children aged 10. The paper asserts that the use of media technologies do not necessarily mean that children as users are media literate and competent. By way of conclusion, this paper argues for media literacy which is crucial for achieving critical and creative thinking in this digital era.

PROJECT FRAMEWORK AND DESIGN:

The popularity of new media among children has drawn a lot of attention as it allows them to construct online profiles or personal homepages, and develop an online social network. The profile page functions as the user's own webpage and includes profile information on the date of birth, gender, religion, lifestyles, favourite food, films, celebrities and what they like doing in their everyday lives. In addition to profile information, children design the appearance of their page, and add content such as photos, video clips and music files (Boyd, 2008b). They also appear to create a network of connections and social ties that they can exhibit as a list of friends (Buckingham, 2002). There is a growing public discourse (both hopeful and fearful) declaring that children's use of digital media and communication technologies defines a generational identity distinct from that of their elders. In addition to this generational divide, these new technology practices are also tied to what David Buckingham (2007:96) has described as a "'digital divide' between in-school and out-of-school use." He sees this as "symptomatic of a much broader phenomenon—a widening gap between children's everyday 'life worlds' outside of school and the emphases of many educational systems."

Following the above works, this project work is guided by two key analytic themes in relation to literacy: media practices in the home and media practices in the school. The primary descriptive research question is: How are new media practices being taken up by children and how are these experiences connected to school-worlds?

The purpose of this study is therefore to provide evidence-based insights into the new media phenomenon to inform current understanding of children's communication, learning and play in Malaysia and to help identify some of the current and potential future issues around the new media in the lives of children.

At the outset of this study it is useful to note that this paper reports selected findings of a bigger study aimed to look at children's media practices during the year 2012-2014. The present paper draws on quantitative and qualitative data for the empirical framework – who has what, how and when they use it and for what purposes. Questionnaire surveys were implemented to examine patterns of new media use among young children in a face-to-face to all 60 ten year old children who were in Standard Four in a primary school in Malaysia. The study was conducted in a semi-urban school in Proton City, in the state of Perak, Malaysia.

CHILDREN OF PROTON CITY PRIMARY SCHOOL:

Proton City is a new township which houses the Proton car assembly plant. It was once tagged as City of the Future Malaysia with hopes of growth of the industrial component, commercial and residential sites. The vision

of this city was one that would witness modern technology with smart home systems, intelligent traffic control, telemedicine, e-commerce and other "k-society" amenities and services. However, due to political and economic changes as well as setbacks in the national Proton Car industry, much of the proposed development has been delayed indefinitely.

Sekolah Kebangsaan Proton City (SKPC) is young school which started admitting children for schooling in 2010. The children of the schools are mostly Malays with very few Chinese and Indians. A large number of the children here are children of residents who work in the nearby industrial and commercial sites and the academic and administrative staff members of Sultan Idris Teaching University, Perak. The school adopts the Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools (ICPS) that emphasises a holistic approach in human development covering all domains – cognitive, affective, and psychomotor (Rahimah Hj Ahmad, 1998). Learning in the school is still book-dominated. Children rely heavily on books, work-sheets and other print based materials in classroom activities. It is also useful to state that children are not allowed to bring hand phones or other media like laptops, cameras and iPads to schools. Children need special permission from the school if they need to bring any devices for their learning or co-curricular purposes.

Children attend classes on Information Technology that impart technical skills like word processing, creating power points, browsing the Internet, designing greeting cards and photo albums and playing online games. The utilisation of information and communication technologies (ICT) to facilitate learning in schools is encouraged and children are expected to access information in the Internet, read articles and research papers in English. The use of ICT is also encouraged in other subjects depending on its suitability and the creativity of the teachers. For instance, children are asked to access the Internet for information on certain topics in Science and Local Studies.

It is helpful to note here that children's experience of the world is stratified in every respect, not just in terms of their experience of new media but also in terms of age, class, ethnicity, religion, gender and geographical location nationality and access to place. Children of different social-economic backgrounds have markedly different cognitive abilities, learning styles and different degrees of access to space and technology.

A total of 60 Standard Four children participated in the survey where face-to-face sessions were held in the school. There were 31 boys and 29 girls. Fifty-nine children were Malay and one child was an Indian. Most of the parents of the children had completed tertiary education with a college diploma or a university degree. A few children were living with guardians who had completed secondary school education (see Table 1)

Table 1: Education levels of parents

	Primary School (%)	Secondary School (%)	College/ University (%)
Father	-	20.7	79.3
Mother	-	34.5	65.5
Guardian	-	100	

Generally, the children described themselves as happy both at home and at school when asked about their lifestyle patterns as seen in the next table. Nearly 45% of the children suggested that they spend a lot of time on physical activities while 55% of them don't. About 55% of the children stated that they spend a lot of time on media related activities after schooling hours. Nearly 68.3% of the children said that they get bored easily when they are not using media like television, computers, Internet or media games. Interestingly, many of the children indicate that they sleep more than 7 hours every night as shown below in the Table 2.

Table 2: Children's lifestyle patterns

	Yes (%)	No (%)
I am happy when I am in my house	98.3	1.7
I am happy when I am in school	98.3	1.7
I spend a lot of time for physical activities (football, basketball, etc) after schooling hours.	45.0	55.0
I spend a lot of time for media-related activities outside my schooling hours.	55.0	45.0
I get bored easily when I am not using the media (TV, computer, "game", Internet, etc)	68.3	31.7
I sleep for at least 7 hours every night	65.0	35.0

As seen in the Table 3, there were many media devices in the homes of the children. A high percentage of the children stated that they have television (96.7%), computer/laptop (91.7%), hand phone/smart phone (88.3%), satellite TV (88.3%) and Internet (76.7%). Considering that this is a school located in a semi-urban area of Malaysia, it can be suggested here that many of the respondents have access to key media devices. It also seems that the households saw key media devices like computer, television, Internet and radio as important devices in the everyday lives of children and families. This presents opportunities for the children to engage in media related activities.

Table 3: Media devices in the home

	Yes (%)	No (%)
Computer/Lap Top	91.7	8.3
Tablet/ iPad	28.3	71.7
Television	96.7	3.3
Hand phone/ Smart phone	88.3	11.7
Audio Devices (MP3, MP4, iPod)	35.0	65.0
DVD Player	66.7	33.3
Game console	45.0	55.0
Radio	70.0	30.0
"Kindle"/ "Nook"/ E-reader	5.0	95.0
Internet Access	76.7	23.3
Satellite TV (ASTRO)	88.3	11.7

Early media exposure for most children emerged mostly in the form of television and many of them remember watching television when they were as young as 5 years or below (see Table 4). Most of the children started using the media devices like MP3, MP4 and the iPod, computer/laptop when they were between 5-7 years old. The children also appeared to operate with recent media gadgets like tablet/ iPad and social networking sites around the age of 8 - 10 years.

Table 4: Use of media devices according to age

	< 5 years old (%)	5-7 years old (%)	8-10 years old (%)
Audio devices (MP3, MP4, iPod)	24.4	53.7	22.0
Television	71.4	17.9	10.7
Computer/Lap Top	21.8	54.5	23.6
Game console	9.8	39.0	51.2
Tablet/ iPad	-	30.0	70.0
Hand phone/Smart phone	12.2	55.1	32.7
Internet Access	11.1	46.7	42.2
Social Networking Sites	11.4	17.1	71.4

The study also revealed that children learn to use media devices mostly on their own or from their parents and siblings. As seen in Table 5 below, the home becomes an important site for learning and engaging with media activities. It is also important to stress that the children indicated that teachers provide very little learning about the new media. This suggests that children are growing up with more learning of media technologies taking place at the home than the school. The findings reveal teachers play a very insignificant role in teaching about media in schools. This is indeed an important finding as the school or teacher is seen as not providing discussions and learning practice related to media, even though, the children seem to be living in a digital age, encountering media messages, images and user experiences in their daily lives.

Table 5: Children and the learning of media devices

	Myself (%)	Parents (%)	Teachers (%)	Siblings (%)	Friends (%)
Audio Devices (MP3, MP4, iPod)	26.8	26.8	2.4	26.8	17.1
Television	78.6	14.3	-	7.1	-
Computer/Laptop	27.3	49.1	5.5	16.4	1.8
Game console	36.6	7.3	2.4	39.0	14.6
Tablet/ iPad	35.0	35.0	-	20.0	10.0
Hand phone/Smart phone	28.6	61.2	-	10.2	-
Internet Access	20.0	62.2	2.2	11.1	4.4
Social Networking Sites	20.0	28.6	-	37.1	14.30

Table 6 shows the places where the children use various media devices. The findings here support the view that most media activities take place outside school. The home becomes the major site where children are found to be using media devices to conduct media activities. Several children indicated that they use media devices at a friend's house or take mobile devices like tablets/iPad and game consoles when they go to other places like tuition centres, shopping malls or in the car. The school, however becomes a place that does not encourage children's engagement of media. Though Internet access is noted as available in school, only 6.7 % use this facility. This clearly indicates that Internet based activities take up a very small place and prominence in the school.

Table 6: Place and uses of media devices

	Home (%)	School (%)	Friend's House (%)	Cyber Café (%)	Other places (%)
Audio Devices (MP3, MP4, iPod)	51.2	-	12.2	-	36.6
Television	94.6	-	3.6	-	1.8
Computer/Lap Top	87.3	-	9.1	-	3.6
Game console	65.9	-	19.5	-	14.6
Tablet/ iPad	60.0	-	10.0	-	30.0
Hand phones/ Smart phone	89.8	-	4.1	-	6.1
Internet Access	80.0	6.7	6.7	-	6.7
Social Networking Sites	88.6	-	8.6	-	2.9

Table 7 below shows the time children spend in a day on various media. It appeared that social networking sites like *Facebook* is very popular among the 10 year old children. About 48.6 % of the children spend at least 1-3 hours daily on *Facebook*. Television is the other media that occupies an important part of children's lifeworlds. There are also a few children who consume media for longer hours - mostly on television, game consoles, iPad/tablet and on social networking sites.

Table 7: Time spent in a day on usage of media

	None (%)	<1 hour (%)	1-3 hour (%)	4-6 hour (%)	7-9 hour (%)	10-12 hour (%)	>12 hour (%)
Audio Devices (MP3, MP4, iPod)		39.0	34.1	7.3	2.4	2.4	-
Television	-	19.6	44.6	7.1	16.1	5.4	7.1
Computer/Lap Top	3.6	32.7	43.6	12.7	1.8	-	5.5
Game console	7.3	31.7	36.6	14.6	2.4	-	7.3
Tablet/ iPad	5.0	25.0	45.0	15.0	-	5.0	5.0
Handphone/ Smart phone	6.1	63.3	18.4	4.1	4.1	-	4.1
Internet Access	-	40.0	37.8	11.1	4.4	2.2	4.4
Social Networking Sites	-	31.4	48.6	8.6	5.7	2.9	2.9

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION ON MEDIA PRACTICES AND MATTERS:

Information on children's media activities was obtained through focus group interviews with 26 students in this school. Again, it seems useful to note that the case study presented here aims to offer snapshots of Malaysian children, media activities and the role of schools and homes in enhancing media engagement. The qualitative data offers stories, views, hopes and fears of young children in approaching media matters.

Children noted that school is fun, but that it is also stressful. Children spend a lot of time on homework, revision and other study related activities like extra tuition outside school. The discussions revealed that children are very excited and eager to connect with new media technologies today. The main uses of the new media fall on three overlapping dimensions: learning, communication and play which are seen as important in everyday living today. Many children spend a lot of time on their own surfing websites related to music, games, video clip, You Tube and *Facebook*. Websites which are entertainment based and interactive are very popular. As noted earlier, a very large part of the media activities take place at home. The findings of the focus group discussion can be summarised according to specific themes as below.

MEDIA IN THE HOME:

Conversations with the children reveal that many of them are growing up in homes that have television, computers, laptops, mobile phones, Internet access, media game consoles, iPads/tablets and iPods. Most of the children accessed the new media technologies more frequently at home than in school or cyber cafes. It is within the home that the respondents conduct most of the new media activities. The home is also the place where many children feel free to learn about the Internet. Some children share the media devices with their parents and siblings while some others have their own media devices. Most of the times, the children are working on these media technologies on their own with little monitoring from their parents who are usually away on work. Children also tend to use media for listening to songs or are watching television when they are doing their schoolwork. The discussions with the children reveal that even those as young as 10 years old are beginning to do multitasking as they have the computer, *Facebook*, TV or iPod on while reading, doing homework or household chores. The views on media activities fell on four aspects: learning, communication, media games and privacy, bullying and harassment.

A point to note here is that the real identity of the children are not disclosed due to ethical reasons. As such all names used in the following section are pseudonyms.

LEARNING:

The new media technologies expose children to new experiences. The Internet and television allow children to learn new information and new materials. Most of the children said that they learnt and shared a lot of resources. Children stated that the new media tools are helpful for doing and sharing school work. Children use the Internet, specifically when they want to look for information to finish their school work. The Internet, according to them, provides them with a lot of information which they can use for school work or general knowledge. Children said that searching for information is a lot easier in the Internet compared to more traditional sources like books, magazines and newspapers.

One respondent, Aniza commented that they were asked to prepare a project paper on different types of houses found in Malaysia for their Local Studies subject. She noted,

> *"Internet has been my first source of information, it is very useful. I can use it for many things like searching for facts, pictures, photographs, clip art and how to do reports. When I have an assignment, or when I need extra information for my school work or learning, then I will search for them through Google. I searched for different types of houses, terrace, bungalows, village house and condominium."*

Another boy, Taufiq noted that,

> *"Internet allows me to find test papers from other schools, model essays and video on many things. I also can improve my English."*

According to another respondent, Fitri, his parents have subscribed to online tuition for him. He has exercises and tests to complete and submit every week. If he fails to do so, a SMS will be sent to his parents. He asserted,

> *"Ithink this is very good - we can use the Internet for studies and not waste time doing other things. We also can save time as my parents don't have to send me for tuition outside and then pick me back again."*

The Internet was also seen as an important learning tool as it enabled users to do a lot of creative things that can express their ideas and feelings. Marina said that she has discovered a lot of things by exploring various tools and applications. She stated,

> *"I use search engines for finding new knowledge and information, and downloading or uploading music or videos. I am able to use CD-ROM and Multimedia and I am able to put pictures in school reports... Sometimes I make videos of myself singing and I upload it or share it with my friends on Facebook. I think this makes me popular."*

The above conversations also revealed that the children are thinking about self-expression and identity issues and are using the new media technologies as learning and creative tools. It appears that 10 year old children are beginning to define and negotiate meaning around various social ideas like popularity, gender and identity. Children are approaching pictures, photographs, texts, symbols, graphics, emoticons, music and special effects in the home in different ways. Some get help from parents, siblings or friends. More than often, they explore feature of new media technologies on their own. They using and re-using, re-mixing popular culture materials like music and dance videos in very creative ways and uploading it for national and international audiences. They are also developing technical skills, new modes of expressions, new forms of literacy and new styles of learning through their interactions with new technologies. Given that this is done in a very informal and unstructured way where many children who are unaware about the opportunities and risks related to media issues like privacy, safety, ethics and law.

COMMUNICATION:

Respondents use mobile phones and the social platform in the Internet to connect with their friends from school, relatives or new acquaintances. Social networking and downloading materials from the Internet and sharing them with friends is done extensively. *Facebook* is most popular among them. They chat with their friends and express themselves through comments, likes, tag photos, videos, puzzles and games. Children place a high value on friendship and *Facebook*. Many of the children suggested that facets of these new media technologies are important in conducting their everyday lives, for communicating, for learning about themselves and others, for establishing family ties and friendship and even connecting with others for play and entertainment. The children also plan events and activities, share jokes and matters of interest to them and keep in touch with their best friends, talk about homework, the things they did in school, in the home or in other places. Children use the Internet to manage their friendship. Apart from chatting on the Internet, respondents also tried to solve friendship issues if they quarrel.

Melissa, a 10 year old girl stated the following:

> *"Most of the time we see friends in school and share ideas and comments...and it is nice to continue this even when we go home...we can text or talk to them or go to Facebook. Our conversations are about everything, I feel so excited when I keep contact with friends and we get advice and friends views if we want to do something."*

Rafik added:

> *"Sometimes, I am so happy when I use the Internet. We can do many things that are fun...play games...best...chatting., send and receive messages."*

Another respondent, Siti noted that she gets in touch with her friends on Facebook to get help and advice about problems she faces in school and at home.

> *"It helps me with my friends. After we quarrel, we can still talk and then we apologise using the net. Sometimes I get angry if my brother or sister upset me or if I am scolded by my parents. When, I go to Facebook, my friends will help me be happy again and I feel better."*

Shahira noted that she likes to have many friends added to her friend list in *Facebook*:

> *"Facebook brings lots of friends to me. It is fun and exciting...I can chat with my friends no matter how far the distance between us. A few friends from New Zealand, England, USA and some from Malaysia. I think if I have friends from many places in the world, if I have a problem, I can talk to them and I can discuss... maybe someday they would help me."*

Many of the children stated that they would be happy to post photos from being out with their friends or from their outing. They would be eager and excited to post information about what they are doing or how they are feeling. Amelia, a girl respondent noted:

> "*I put pictures of my friends and my family on Facebook. I learnt to upload photos from my sister and I like to see my friends comment or post like on it. "*

MEDIA GAMES AND GAMING:

The respondents were excited when talking about media games and it was clear that games are one of children's most enjoyable experiences with technology. They found fun, adventure, friendship, knowledge, language and social activity in gaming. They were learners and teachers - guiding each other how to play. The multimedia content and interaction brought new modes of learning, enjoyment and engagement that children are building around gaming.

Shafee, a 10 year old boy, remarked:

> *"I like PSP games because I can play as I wish. I also like to play Ameba Pico, Farmville and YoVille and I can learn many things through these games. I also like games because it helps to relieve stress."*

Azeem observed that gaming takes up a big part of time and keeps him occupied and safe in the house, especially when both his parents are out at work. According to Azeem,

> *"Every day, when I finish my school, I will go back home and play games first. I don't play for a very long time as I have to finish my homework. But if I have finished my school work or if I feel bored, I can play games for about 2 hours. Sometimes I play with my brother and we can really have so much fun as my brother teaches me and gives me tips. In the weekends I can play for a longer time."*

Shahid noted the following:
> *"Once you start a game, it is difficult to stop it. You just want to continue playing until you reach a certain score. I think I spend a lot of time on games and sometimes my parents are scolding me. I know, I am wasting time and I can do some studying but I enjoy playing games."*

PRIVACY, BULLYING AND HARASSMENT:

The study revealed that there is much uncertainty in the ways children view privacy and moral issues. Many respondents put pictures of themselves and of other people on a blog, social network site or a personal page without the permission of other relevant persons in the photographs. In the interviews, it appears that children do not see posting pictures of themselves in different contexts and poses as problematic. The dangers with bullying and harassment through voice, text and image are prevalent in the lives of many children, but many respondents do not reflect this as a serious problem. Interestingly, the perception of risk is not really deep among the children of the study; in fact many appear unsure or confused.

Bullying and harassment are not uncommon in the Internet. Taken as a whole, these experiences are not pleasant and must be dealt with carefully by the users of Internet. Some children mentioned receiving calls from people whom they do not know. The calls sometimes came late at night and it disrupted their sleep. The callers at times insisted to befriend them but usually the children would ignore the callers. A few children mentioned they would pass the phone to their mother or brother to fend off the callers.

Siti stated as follows:

> *"When I received many calls, again and again from online strangers, I just ignore them…If they look suspicious I don't add them…"*.

Aniza echoed Siti's statement and said:

> *"In skype if they add me... I just block them. If they call, I just reject the calls If still got strangers, I will pick up but let my mother talk it. And I don't dare to talk with strangers. "*

A few children noted that some of them tend to be a little relaxed and are not too worried:

> *"I talk to many friends online. For me, always I play around with them also, although I don't get to know them. Sometime we joke around. I don't really know them. Usually they add me to their list. So from there, I got to know them more"*

> *"I look into them at their photos. If not ok, I don't accept, I don't delete but I just ignore them. Making new friends is good I got to know many people from different schools. Actually when I add them, they either say thank you…"*

The views of students unveiled some of the difficulties that are linked with new media technologies that need to be sorted out with the help of parents at home or teachers at school. These are very real facets of growing up with new media where there are many more issues that children need to learn to keep themselves save from risks and other difficulties in the cyberspace.

MEDIA IN THE SCHOOL:

In this study, we were particularly interested in media literacy activities that children might be learning in the schools. Specifically, the children were asked how often they had classes on media, what they had learned and what kind of assignments that they produced in the classroom. This was a difficult task as many of the children asserted that there were very few media activities in the school to talk about in the first place.

Malaysia is interested in engaging with new media technologies in schools to prepare children for participation in a knowledge society. Education policies speak of Information literacy that enable children to search, access and use the information. Each school is usually equipped with a computer lab, but it is common to find difficulties in maintaining a smooth operation of computers. There is very little technical support. In addition, it is helpful to re-assert here that all pupils in Malaysian public schools must get permission from school authorities to bring hand phones, thumb drives, CD-ROMs, lap tops and iPads. Hand phones are not allowed in schools unless there are special co-curricular activities during the weekends.

In the case of this Proton City primary school, like many other primary schools in Malaysia, children began their information technology (IT) class when they were in Standard Three (age nine). These classes would go on until the children reached Standard Six (age 12). The children in study highlighted that they learnt about the different parts of the computer, word processing, painting, gaming, making power point slides and blogging. They also learnt to use search engines to look for information, images and music. They had worksheets and followed the exercises given to them in operating various computer-based activities. The children said that they were able to use thumb drives and CD-ROM and were able to put texts, pictures and tables in their project reports. The IT classes also taught children to send and receive email.

However, the children were not taught critical inquiry into the types of information that are available on the websites. Many of them believed that all information found on the websites were true. They also had little knowledge on phishing scam; malware and stolen password and ID; cyber bullying and privacy features for social media and online games. they even assumed that information that was posted online was not permanent and that their entries could be taken back or deleted. The children also noted that they didn't know much about media matters related to privacy, bullying and harassment. Many children had put pictures of themselves and of other people on a blog, social network site or a personal page without the permission of their parents or the relevant persons in the photographs. The children remarked that topics on safety and risks online and protection of children were not discussed in the schools. The absence of classroom conversations on media matters when the media forms a major part of children's life worlds contribute to what David Buckingham (2007:96) indicates

as a 'digital divide' between in-school and out-of-school use.

NEW MEDIA LITERACY:

Children of this study stated that they felt moderately competent to face the opportunities and challenges offered by the new media. Yet the study also noted that they were not too aware of the opportunities for meaningful participation or mindful of the potential dangers and risks present in the new media world. They noted that the media technologies are powerful tools that allow them to learn things quickly and easily. They also asserted that they used the new media more at home than at school and that there was a big gap between learning in the school and learning that takes place outside the school. They played online media games, spent time on Facebook, sharing pictures and posting comments, surfed the web for entertainment news and watched Y-Tube, very often these activities took place when both parents were out working.

The children that were interviewed in this study said that they would share information about the media matters and problems with their parents only if the parents are receptive to them. When the parents showed interest in children and the media activities, the children shared and consulted them on matters related to their participation in media actions. On the other hand, if the parents were least interested in their views, the children turned to their friends.

Generally, the children didn't share new media issues with their teachers in school. This was because the current curricular system and IT classes do not create platform for media literacy that involves conversations on media access, representation, ethic, media analysis and productive media works. One 10 year old pupil in the study said:

> *"We usually did not share anything with teachers… we prefer to share more with friends."*

The thrills, fun, fears and problems that they face in relation to matters in the media were not approached in the school. They were many opportunities, risks and experiences
that they encountered with media and shared it with their friends. The study revealed that a lot of media activities were not happening in school and that the school should open spaces for critical and creative thinking to children's media usage and consumption. The children noted that the school should teach them more about new media skills like creative work as well as to keep themselves safe from strangers that contact them through social media, email and games. The children felt they need a lot more knowledge on digital and new media literacy skills, especially those related to media games. The study also found that the children believed many things that they see and read on the Internet and that there was a lack of critical thinking and critical judgement when working with new media.

Clearly a situation arising in this case is the digital gap between in-school and out-of-school use as noted by Buckingham (2007). A challenge to schools to prepare their students with the necessary skills and knowledge to make use of media, the Internet and other media technologies. The school should open more opportunities for the children to access various form media interaction and to use it in effective ways. This is not about doing school projects in the form of power points, short video or doing essays on a word document. Rather the school can contribute to knowledge on children's capacity to access, analyse, evaluate and make informed decisions about the media and the role it plays in their everyday lives.

This is where media literacy comes into play. Media literacy is becoming a major issue at a time when the media are making their presence felt as an essential component of our contemporary societies. The use of media technologies do not necessarily mean that users are media literate and competent. In this digital era, media literacy is crucial for achieving critical and creative thinking as well as active citizenry. Parents, schools and policy makers need to come together and address the needs of children, provide support and grant platforms for children to air their hopes, fears and wishes to learn to use new media productively.

Children today are growing in a media-saturated world and are wandering on a digital landscape that involves web pages, videos, music, photography, colour, interactive digital imagery and animated texts. This study saw 10 year old children in Malaysia today consuming a lot of time on media related activities in the home. Watching video and listening to music were top leisure actions where most of them spent many hours every day on these activities. The main uses of the new media fell on communication, education, entertainment and play which were seen as integral parts of living today. Clearly, children have more access to all kinds of digital media, and were spending more time with them during the day and night.

Most of the respondents first started using new media games, mobile phone and Internet between the ages of 5 - 7 years. Very frequently, Internet use, gaming and mobile phone usage and other digital related activities were

taking place at the home where children were taking on in a number of actions mainly through self-learning.

Most of the respondents indicated that though they are only aged 10, they belong to *Facebook,* making it the most popular cyber community among children. Social networking is an important communication tool for connecting and interacting with friends, forming identity and shaping their ideas on various aspects of their daily living experiences. They comment back and forth sharing jokes, videos, music, games and others creative texts. Media games are very popular among respondents and a large portion of their time was used for playing games mostly for fun.

While children were found to be moderately competent in new media technologies, they had little knowledge on analysing digital content or engaging in critical questioning of new media materials. They also noted that they had little knowledge on online risks and opportunities and matters related to privacy and ethics.

The crux of this study has observed that children who were managing media technologies in many ways like updating their *Facebook* status, taking photographs, uploading and downloading music and videos, using mobile phones to send and receive messages and playing interactive media games were coming to school to books, whiteboards and print materials in teacher-centred classrooms with very little spaces for critical and creative media work.

In other words, the study found that there was a huge gulf between what children do with new media in real life and what they do in school. Schools are very slow in responding to the 21st century skills and there is very little discussion on new media matters in schools.

While schools are interested in transforming pedagogical practices, much of this effort means additional work and commitment from principals, teachers, parents, curriculum developers and educationists who develop policy. Often, schools are expected to do teaching and parenting work in the school settings, forming relationships with children, organising learning and teaching activities as well as managing pupil behaviour in the classroom. Also as noted in many other studies, there are intricate difficulties in addressing issues on diversified talents, abilities and competencies in large classrooms from rural and urban areas in Malaysia. More importantly, much as schools are interested in initiating change, they lack resources and technical support for maintaining media technologies, teacher and parent support and are very apprehensive about putting more time for more structured forms of media literacy.

With time constraints and pressure to produce good academic results, Malaysian schools are trapped in the examination oriented education system that does not encourage or allow much media creativity and innovation in the classrooms. Furthermore there is a rush to complete the syllabus and mass photocopying of notes and work sheets as many teachers tend to "spoon-feed" their children by copying notes on the board and giving model answers to examination questions.

As noted by Buckingham (2007) the above situation calls for media literacy that make us aware of how media construct meanings, influence and educate audiences, and impose their messages and values.

For a start, there is a need to arrange programmes and intervention strategies in the form of more media and cultural openings in the formal and informal curriculum in schools. This new media reality calls for new school cultures, where teachers can get involved and learn how to find, use and manage new mechanisms and attitudes in the school domain. Media literacy programmes must also be developed to engage teachers and students in more extensive and productive ways. It is recommended that an educator's/teacher's guide and online resources about the new media uses, giving attention on its potential risks and challenges is cultivated. These sites and portals should present related activities for media literacy in fun, engaging and critical ways for different levels of children groups.

Schools should appreciate that children may have positive and valuable experiences with new media such as games consoles, MP3 players and mobile phones and design educational activities that advance children's experiences, critical thinking and applications in their new media cultures. Focus must also be given to issues on new media laws, rights, responsibilities and ethics. Further, it is essential to raise awareness of teachers on new media practices and encourage teachers to share online activities with their pupils. Communication on media matters between schools and parents must also be strengthened.

Malaysia is mindful of the priorities needed to improve the problematic nature of literacy practices but excessive politicising of schooling matters have witnessed setbacks to the pathways of enhancing literacy in Malaysia. The perception that media literacy is a threat to mainstream media and ideas of the ruling class has to re-considered in the present times. Instead we need to stimulate conversations about new media research and media literacies with schools and make serious efforts in engaging in good practices of learning, communication and play that connect to real-life experiences of children.

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