

MIXED MESSAGES

ABOUT MEDIA FROM OUR MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Writing in this *journal* in 2002 Sue Swain, Executive Director of the National Middle School Association (NMSA) expressed her support for media literacy and the need to “provide timely and practical professional guidance to middle level educators and parents.” Media Literacy, Swain said, “isn’t an isolated special class or a three week unit of study.” She called it, “an important topic to be integrated throughout the curriculum” with students “becoming actively engaged in learning about it.”

Teaching students to think critically about media messages is also compatible with NMSA publications like *This We Believe* and James Beane’s *From Rhetoric to Reality*, which recognize the commercial pressures confronting young people today. Media Literacy has also been identified as one of the 21st Century skills schools need to nurture.

Unfortunately, recent NMSA conferences and publications have included statements that appear to be hostile to media, to condemn rather than critique, which complicates attempts to integrate media literacy in middle school curriculum. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the phrase “know thy enemy” which is the way popular culture and “the media onslaught” is characterized in *Keep Cliques and Bullies from Invading Your School* (Gianetti and Saragese 2007).

Hyping their book at the 2007 NMSA conference in Houston, the authors continued their loaded language

and assault on mass media and popular culture. The program description for their session (Middle School Celebrities: Rich Girls, Bad Boys and the Cult of Cool. Help!) referred to “toxic tabloid thinking,” “the brainwash of *People* magazine... *Entertainment Tonight* and the need to “steer your students from the edge” of a culture that promotes “acting out, arrogance and shallow values.” Wow! So it’s all bad then?

What’s wrong with this? Well, as I told NMSA’s editor, Ed Brazee in Texas, it demonizes media (a source of enjoyment for young people) with the result that teachers and parents picking up on this language potentially enrage rather than engage their students and children. It offers a victim and a villain model which does little to empower students.

While bullying is a real concern and while values clarification is crucial for early adolescents, the type of language used in this publication and presentation is inconsistent with the best practices of media literacy. Further, by addressing popular culture and mass media in a somewhat biblical manner, this type of language makes it harder for teachers and schools to promote media literacy as a meaningful skill and subject with some parents and administrators. After all, if it is the enemy why are we bringing into the classroom? The kids get enough exposure to that junk at home, right? If we bring it into the classroom to condemn it—to teach kids how harmful it

is—we embrace a pedagogy that we already know does not work.

Which is why **MEDIA LITERACY BEST PRACTICES** identified by the Office of National Drug Control Policy at the White House—must become front and center in these classroom encounters. Here are some of the more pertinent practices:

- * Do not talk down to kids. Respect their intelligence and use a co-learning approach.
- * Acknowledge the pleasure they get from media use. Validate their media experiences.
- * Don’t “bash” the media or blame it for society’s problems.
- * Acknowledge different context. Race, culture and SES will result in different media tastes, preferences and the way students think and feel about media.
- * Treat kids as decision makers. Young people should be recognized as active participants in the construction of their own values and beliefs, not as vulnerable dupes who are victimized by powerful media messages (ONDCP 2001).*

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