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Critical Media Literacy in Kindergarten Teacher Training: A Case Study from Austria

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Abstract

Given the critical role that kindergarten teachers play in fostering children's critical reflection and analysis of media at an early age, the purpose of this study was to examine a kindergarten teacher training on digital media education to explore if critical media literacy was integrated into the teaching practices of the training. Using a post-training survey and a critical media literacy framework, the findings reveal that the critical dimension of media literacy, questioning ideology and power, was downplayed and overlooked in the training. As a result, teachers' perspectives on media literacy and education remained the same after the training. They still view media education as merely a means to learn how to use different digital media and protect children from media dangers.

Keywords

Media
Critical media literacy
Kindergarten teacher
Ideology critique

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Introduction

Media literacy is a human and children's right (Bennett et al., 2020; Swertz & Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2021; Geracoulis, 2024) as well as a basic prerequisite of contemporary citizenship (Buckingham, 2019). However, entitling everyone to this right and fostering a media-literate and informed citizenry throughout the education system cannot be achieved merely by teaching with and through media. Rather, it requires empowering individuals to understand "how media operate, how we interact with ICT's, how ideas and culture are socially constructed, and how power is linked to all these process" (Share, 2015, p.123). Building this awareness is possible through teachers and applying critical analysis of media and technology in classrooms. Indeed, "education in media literacy needs to begin with teachers" (Butler, 2019, p.1).

In Austria, the educational plan for elementary educational institutions published by the Ministry of Education states that since information and communication technologies (digital media) determine the everyday lives of adults and children and have become an important means of social participation, elementary education should include the promotion of children's media competence. According to the plan, this enables children to use different media independently and critically. The creative design of media also enables children to express themselves and create their own products (BMBF, 2009). Against the background, the implementation of systematic media education in teacher education programs in Austria also commenced in 2023, alongside with the incorporation of digital basic education (Digital Grundbildung) as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum, effective from September 2023.

To date, there is a paucity of research examining the integration of critical media literacy into teaching practices in teacher education programs, especially those focused on early childhood education. There is also a dearth of research that investigates whether any change has occurred in teachers' perspectives on media education after receiving media education training. This study will address the issues of teacher training programs in media education by investigating a kindergarten teacher training in digital media education in Austria. It will examine if critical media literacy is integrated into the instructional practices in the training. Furthermore, considering that the majority of the relevant research and literature on media education in Austria is based on theories from German language and international approaches are rarely employed (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2013, 2019), the present study aims to fill this gap by applying Kelner and Share's (2019) theory of critical media literacy. This research will benefit students, teachers, educators, educational researchers, Austrian universities and policy makers to develop and improve media literacy education in teacher education programs, especially in the context of kindergarten teacher education.

Media Literacy in Teacher Training

Most teacher training programs in media education are offered for school teachers. Research in this area provides a first orientation for our study for Kindergarten teachers. A large number of studies examining media education in teacher education programs have found that media education in such programs focuses on using media in the classroom rather than teaching about media (Gretter & Yadav, 2018; Salomaa et al., 2017; Tiede & Grafe, 2016;

Tiede et al., 2015).

In Finland, a study by Salomaa, Palsa, and Malinen (2017) found that media education in teacher education emphasizes the educational use of information and communication technologies and digital learning environments rather than media and sociocultural approaches to media. A questionnaire completed by 448 teacher education students at Finnish universities revealed that respondents believed teacher education programs in Finland included too little (48.4%) or much too little (23%) media education.

In the United States, Gretter and Yadav (2018) conducted a study using semi-structured interviews with 19 pre-service elementary and secondary teachers in a teacher education program at Midwestern University. The study revealed a lack of preparation in media and information literacy pedagogy, though the majority of pre-service teachers valued media and information literacy as beneficial to their students' careers and lives. The results of their second study (Gretter & Yadav, 2018), using focus groups with 12 female pre-service teachers who had previously taken an introductory educational technology course that included media and information concepts for approximately two weeks, showed an emphasis on teaching with technology rather than teaching about technology. Most of the participants indicated that they did not know how to teach media and information literacy to their students. In addition, pre-service teachers identified the greatest benefits of teaching media and information literacy as helping students prepare for college, teaching them about internet safety, and preparing them for their personal lives.

In Germany, Tiede, Grafe and Hobbs (2015) find similar results. They examined teacher education programs at 316 U.S. colleges and universities and 64 German ones, using a survey of pre-service teachers. The majority of participating U.S. pre-service teachers reported a focus on teaching with media. The German pre-service teachers showed the same result, but with more emphasis on media education (Tiede & Grafe, 2016).

In Austria, Swertz's (2105) study of secondary teacher education curricula in Austria shows that media literacy is barely mentioned in the curricula and is not currently a teaching subject. Technology-enhanced learning is only considered in a few cases, and then only to familiarize teachers with teaching with media. Teaching about media and media literacy, as well as the ability to teach media literacy, were overlooked in teacher training programs.

A number of studies have demonstrated the positive impact of teacher training in media education. In their study, Ranieri, Bruni, and Kupiainen (2018) examined the E-Media Education Lab project in six European countries with a sample of 279 pre-service teachers. The researchers found that the teachers were satisfied with critical analysis and media production. Through surveys and field notes, the findings disclosed that, although the participants believed group work was the most useful teaching method, there was a lack of clear, transparent pedagogical approaches to media education and difficulties with time management.

Scull and Kupersmidt (2011) also found the development of teachers' beliefs and knowledge about media literacy in a one-day media literacy workshop for elementary school teachers. There were 18 intervention teachers and 23 control teachers. The teachers who participated in the workshop demonstrated stronger beliefs about the

importance of media literacy education and greater familiarity with it. They also scored higher on a direct assessment of media deconstruction skills than the control group.

Yavuz-Konokman (2020) also demonstrated the positive effects of a media and critical literacy course for pre-service teachers. The study evaluated a course titled “Thinking Education” for pre-service teachers at Bartın University's Faculty of Education in Turkey during the 2016-2017 academic year. Forty pre-service social studies teachers participated in the study, which used questionnaires and journals with open questions. The teachers were trained to think critically about media messages and texts. The results showed that the participating teachers' scores increased and that they could read and write critically about media messages and texts.

Botturi's (2019) study of a digital and media literacy course for in-service primary and secondary teachers at a Swiss professional university also discloses a shift in teachers' perspectives, from a protectionist approach to a critical approach to digital and media education. Quantitative pre/post survey data and qualitative follow-up interviews demonstrate that teachers incorporate digital and media literacy into their classroom practice.

Dolanbay's (2022) investigation of a European Union (EU) project on media literacy for pre-service teachers from different fields at a public university during the 2021-2022 academic year shows a difference between their initial and final levels. Data were collected from 160 pre-service teachers using a media literacy level scale, student activity sheets, observations, and interviews with 25 participants. The prospective teachers gained awareness about media literacy. They learned about subjects and abilities that enhance media literacy, such as using media more cautiously, beginning to critically analyze it, and becoming more aware of its individual and social implications

In the context of media education for kindergarten teachers, Silawati (2019) studied 30 early childhood education students in their sixth semester at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia who were taking courses related to new media literacy. The findings showed that, while the pre-service teachers understood some aspects of new media literacy very well, such as being familiar with different types of media appropriate for children, most did not understand other elements of new media literacy or its teaching strategies as well.

The review of the literature on media literacy and education in teacher education programs reveals gaps in some areas. It shows that there is a dearth of teacher education programs in critical media literacy around the world. Additionally, there is insufficient knowledge and research on the integration of critical media literacy, particularly the critical dimension, into teacher training in media education.

Furthermore, there is very little research on media literacy in kindergarten teacher education. Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps by examining a kindergarten teacher training in digital media education in Austria to determine whether critical media literacy is integrated into the training's teaching practices. This study will also contribute to the literature by examining a teacher training program from an international perspective on media education, as there is a lack in this area in Austria (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2013, 2019).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Media Literacy

There are different approaches to media education and literacy. We provide an overview of four main approaches, mainly using the classification of Buckingham (2019) and Kellner and Share (2005, 2007), and also discuss the perspective selected as the theoretical framework for the study.

The instrumental or technical approach, as one of the mainstream perspectives, considers media education as merely teaching technical skills and teaching through and with media rather than teaching about media. It lacks a critical understanding of technology and its social, economic and political implications. The next approach, the protectionist or defensive approach, arises from fear of media and aims to protect or inoculate students from the dangers of media manipulation and addiction" (Share, 2009, p. 8). By considering media in isolation from broader social, cultural, and economic developments (Buckingham, 2019; Kellner & Share, 2007), this approach oversimplifies the social issues and views media audiences merely as passive consumers who automatically internalize every idea presented in the media (Hobbs, 1999).

The third approach, media arts education or creativity (Kellner & Share, 2007, Buckingham, 2019), focuses on creativity and the creation of art and media, overlooking the critical analysis of power and structures of oppression (Kellner & Share, 2009) and seeing creativity as a good thing in itself, regardless of what is created or for what purpose (Buckingham, 2019). The fourth perspective, the media literacy movement, downplays ideological critique and issues of power (Livingstone, 2013). It has found its way into schools and education systems in many countries by viewing media as apolitical and free of ideology and bias, thus weakening the transformative potential of media education to challenge oppression and strengthen democracy (Kellner and Share, 2007).

The last perspective, the *critical approach*, also includes different views and not many media literacy scholars are clear on the definition of criticality. In Buckingham's (2019) view, critical thinking is a reflexive process that "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). The main concerns of critical thinking in media education are the issues of economics, politics and ideology, representation and social justice but also are aesthetics, pleasure and fantasy (Buckingham, 2019, 2022).

Dieter Baacke's media competence is widely known in the German-speaking world. In his view, media criticism has three dimensions. One aspect is the analysis of problematic social processes such as corporate concentration in the media market. Another is reflection on one's own actions, including one's choice of media. The third aspect deals with the ethical reflection of social processes and one's own actions, such as not hurting others (Swertz, 2022).

Another view is Kellner and Share's (2019) critical media literacy, which is used as a theoretical framework in this study. They define "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). In this regard, critical media literacy aims 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 the questioning of power, bias, and ideologies such as sexism, racism, classism, etc. in the media are central concerns (Hammer, 2009, Kellner, 2021).

Critical media literacy is a political project for democratic social change that develops skills that will support the process of democratization and civic participation (Share & McBride, 2022). As Masterman (1997) points out, “the democratization of institutions, and the long march toward a truly participatory democracy, will be highly dependent upon the ability of majorities of citizens to take control, become effective change agents, make rational decisions (often on the basis of media evidence) and to communicate effectively perhaps through an active involvement with the media” (p. 60). It empowers students not only to resist media manipulation, but also to actively participate in social and political processes by using media in constructive ways and creating alternative media production (Kellner & Share, 2007, 2019).

Critical media literacy is not merely challenging problems and negative consequences, and recognizing media bias, it also celebrates positive representations and beneficial aspects of media (Share, 2022) by developing skills for media creation, critical engagement and participation in society, and taking action to challenge and transform society to be more just and democratic (Share & Beach, 2022). In other words, “when young people can produce their own media, they also produce their own realities.” (Gennaro and Kellner 2023:166).

Indeed, 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 taking action and demanding change (Buckingham, 2019). Criticism alone can lead to cynicism and despair. “If we ask children to critique the world but then fail to encourage them to act, our classrooms can degenerate into factories of cynicism” (Bigelow, 1995, p.5).

The aforementioned approaches to media literacy and media education are applied to analyze the participating teachers’ perspectives on media education. In order to answer the research question regarding the integration of critical media literacy into the training of kindergarten teachers in media education, we deploy Kellner and Share’s theory of critical media literacy because it is a political project for democratic social change. In addition, the concept of “social and environmental justice” was developed by Kellner and Share to emphasize the critical and social justice aspect of media literacy. By developing the concept, they also bring the issues of environmental concerns and climate crisis into media education to analyze them from a critical media literacy lens, which are overlooked in most media literacy perspectives and education. Moreover, critical media literacy applies an intersectional perspective to analyze classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination in media messages. They developed the following core concepts and guiding questions from the Center for Media Literacy (Kellner & Share, 2019):

Social Constructivism: All information is co-constructed by individuals and/or groups of people who make choices within social contexts. Who are all the possible people who made choices that helped create

this text?

Languages/Semiotics: Each medium has its own language with specific grammar and semantics. How was this text constructed and delivered/accessed?

Audience/Positionality: Individuals and groups understand media messages similarly and/or differently, depending on multiple contextual factors. How could this text be understood differently?

Politics of Representation: Media messages and the medium through which they travel always have a bias and support and/or challenge dominant hierarchies of power, privilege, and pleasure. What values, points of view, and ideologies are represented or missing from this text or influenced by the medium?

Production/Institutions: All media texts have a purpose (often commercial or governmental) that is shaped by the creators and/or systems within which they operate. Why was this text created and/or shared?

Social & Environmental Justice: Media culture is a terrain of struggle that perpetuates or challenges positive and/or negative ideas about people, groups, and issues; it is never neutral. Whom does this text advantage and/or disadvantage?

Method

The study answers three questions: 1. Is critical media literacy integrated into the kindergarten teacher training in media education? 2. Does the participating teachers' perspective on media education change after the training? 3. What are the successes and challenges of the training. To answer these questions, data were collected via an online survey at the conclusion a training for kindergarten teachers offered by a private university of teacher education in Austria entitled "Sprachförderung mit digitalen Medien"[language development with digital media]. One goal of the training was to develop teaching and learning strategies for media education in order to deal critically and reflexively with digital media and technology (Sprachförderung mit digitalen Medien , 2023).

The data presented in this paper were collected via a post-training survey completed by 30 in-service kindergarten educators in three semesters during the 2023-24 academic year. All participants were female. Applying the core concepts of critical media literacy and the guiding questions (Kellner and Share, 2019), a questionnaire was created to investigate whether critical media literacy is integrated into the kindergarten teacher training in media education. The questionnaire also included questions about the trainees' views on media education and the training's successes and challenges. The questionnaire consists of 21 items, 7 open-ended questions and 14 closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions included 5 multiple-choice questions and 9 questions using a Likert scale with a choice of responses from never, 1 time, 2-3 times, 4-5 times, more than 5 times. The content validity of the questionnaire was evaluated by two experts in the field of media literacy and education.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data. Content analysis (Mayring, 2004) was applied to analyze the qualitative data collected from the three open-ended questions. Using the aforementioned four perspectives on media education, the instrumental, protectionist, creative, and critical approaches, a codebook was created to code and categorize the qualitative data regarding the trainees' views on media education. The findings were then compared with the pre-survey results (Mohammadpourkachlami & Kogler-Velich, 2024) to

demonstrate changes in the trainees’ views on media education and literacy after the training. Any text that could not be categorized using the predetermined codes was considered a new code. These new codes were then analyzed to determine if they represented a new category or perspective on media education. Qualitative data about the training’s challenges and successes were analyzed using open coding only.

Results

The results provide an overview of the competence acquired by the trainees in the training, teaching with media, and the integration of critical media literacy into teaching practices. The results also offer insight into the teachers’ perspectives on media education and literacy after the training, as well as the implementation of media literacy in language development, and the challenges and successes of the training.

Acquired Competence

In response to the question concerning the skills that the kindergarten teachers acquired during the training, technical skills (use of devices) and pedagogical skills (methods for teaching media skills) were reported by the majority of respondents (83.3%). By contrast, a minority of respondents indicated gaining the ability to criticize ideology (the ability to recognize media representations of different ideologies such as racism, sexism, classism, capitalism, ...) and standard software skills (operating system and office software) with the same percentage (16.6%).

Figure 1 illustrates that a great part of respondents reported they had acquired creative software skills (video editing, sound editing and image editing) and theoretical knowledge (scientific justifications for media education) with 80% and 73%, respectively.

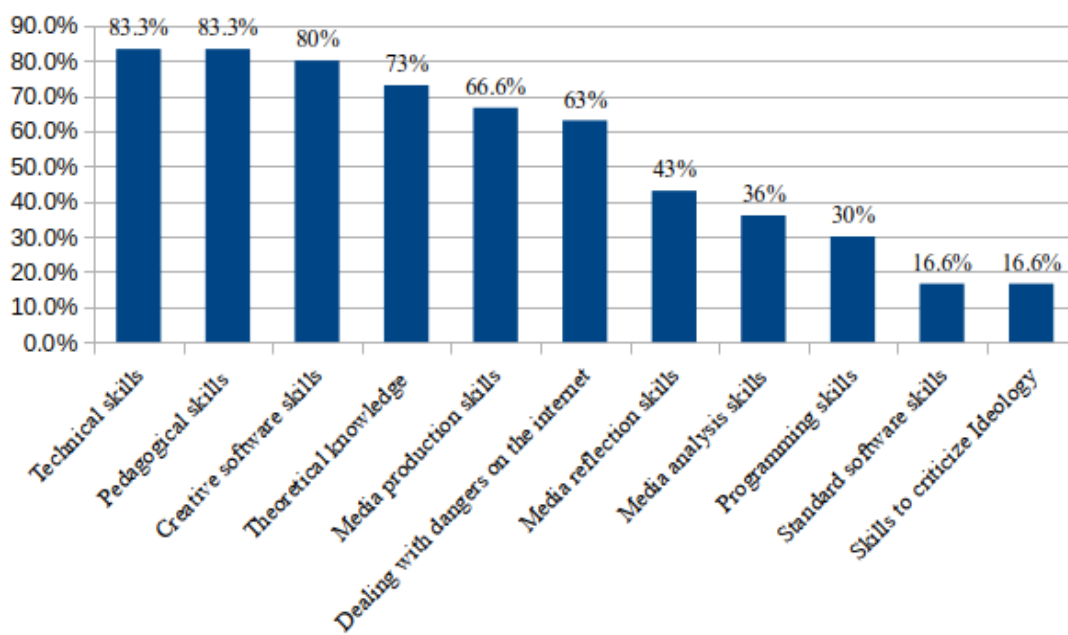


Figure 1. Competence Acquired in the Training

Nearly two-thirds (66.6 % and 63%) said they had acquired media production skills (content creation), and skills for dealing with dangers on the internet (cyberbullying, sexting, stalking, etc.). Media reflection skills (media system, attention control, news value, etc.) were mentioned by less than half of the teachers surveyed (43 %). Media analysis skills (symbols in video games, film genres, etc.) were indicated by nearly a third (36%) of respondents, and programming skills (coding, algorithms, modeling) were reported by 30% of respondents.

Teaching with Media

In response to the question about the types of media they engaged in the training, the results demonstrated the highest engagement with photos (63.3%), followed by search engines (53.3%) and smartphones (43.3%). In contrast, radio, newspapers, office software, magazines, and blogs were reported as having the lowest engagement (3.3%). Teaching with social media, tablets, and Padlet were indicated by 20%, 20%, and 16.6%, respectively. The same percentage of those surveyed mentioned engagement with books, movies, and apps (10%). A small number of respondents reported engagement with TV, video streaming, and audio streaming at an identical frequency of 6.6% (see Figure 2).

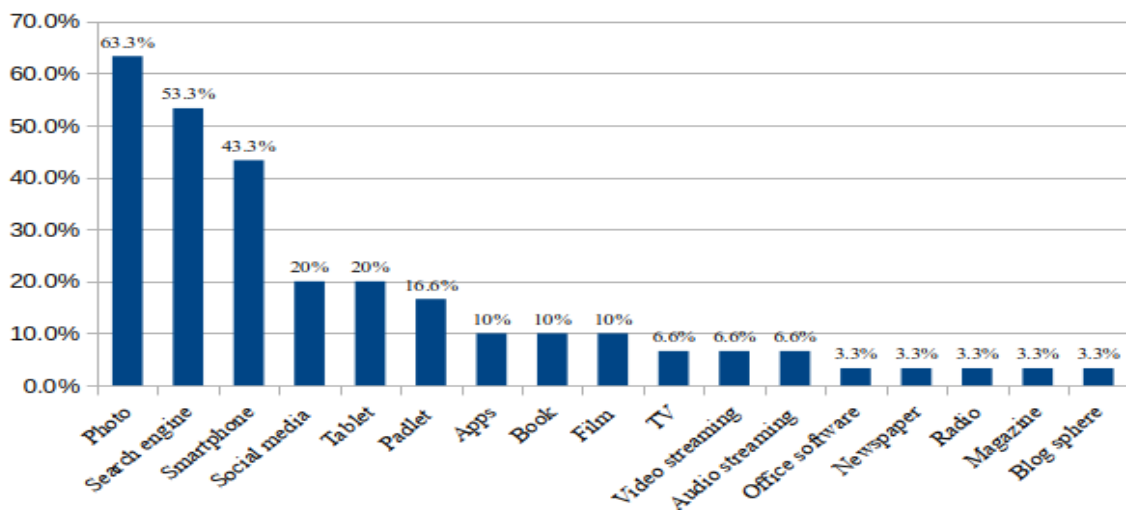


Figure 2. Types of Media the Kindergarten Teachers Engaged with in the Training

With regard to the incorporation of media into the training, the findings suggest a high degree of media integration. The majority of respondents (77.7%) reported engaging with media more than 5 times, while a smaller percentage (11.1%) indicated engaging with media 2-3 times and 4-5 times. Notably, none of the respondents mentioned never and 1 time integration of media into the teaching practices in training.

Integration of Critical Media Literacy

Media Analysis

We examined how often kindergarten teachers had the opportunity to engage in media analysis. Just over a third (32%) of respondents reported doing so more than 5 times. 28% of them reported 4-5 times, and 24 % 2-3 times.

Only 8% of the teachers surveyed said that they had been involved in media analysis 1 time and never. Although media analysis was sometimes integrated into the training, it is unclear what types of media analysis the teachers were engaged in.

Figure 3 visualizes the discrepancy between the frequency of teaching with media and engaging with media analysis. The highest frequency reported for both was more than 5 times, but a significant difference exists between the two. While media use occurred most often (77.7% more than 5 times), media analysis occurred less frequently, with only 32% reporting more than 5 times. Also, the figure shows that while teaching without media did not occur in the training, 16% of respondents reported Never and 1 time having engaged with media analysis.

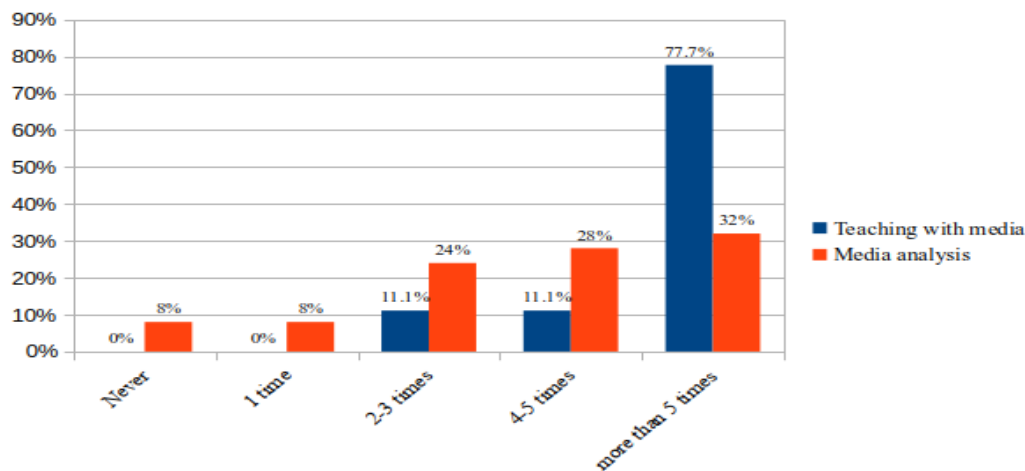


Figure 3. Comparing the Frequency of Media Analysis with Teaching Using *Media*

Ideology Critique and Analysis of Bias

To determine how frequently media analysis addresses critical aspects, we inquired about their involvement in analyzing bias and criticizing various ideologies, such as racism, classism, sexism, religion, and consumerism, in media representation. The highest frequency of analyzing bias in media was reported almost by one third of the respondents (34.6%) as 2-3 times, followed by 19.2% as 4-5 times and 11.5% as 1 time. Only 7.6% of respondents analyzed bias more than 5 times, and 26.9% reported never having the opportunity to do so. Having engaging with ideology critique, the data revealed that the highest percentage, 40%, was for never engaging. Only one respondent (4%) mentioned engaging more than 5 times. Criticizing different ideologies occurred most frequently 2-3 times (32%), followed by 16% for 1 time and 8% for 4-5 times. Since ideology critique is a central component of critical media literacy, in Figure 4 we visualize the comparison of frequency between media analysis and critique of different ideologies in media representation. It illustrates a large difference between them when it comes to never occurring. While 40% of the respondents reported never having engaged with ideology critique, only 8% mentioned never having analyzed media. There are also significant differences for 4-5 times and more than 5 times when media analysis and ideology critique occurred. In addition, while the highest frequency for media analysis was for more than 5 times (32%), for ideology critique it was 2-3 times (32%).

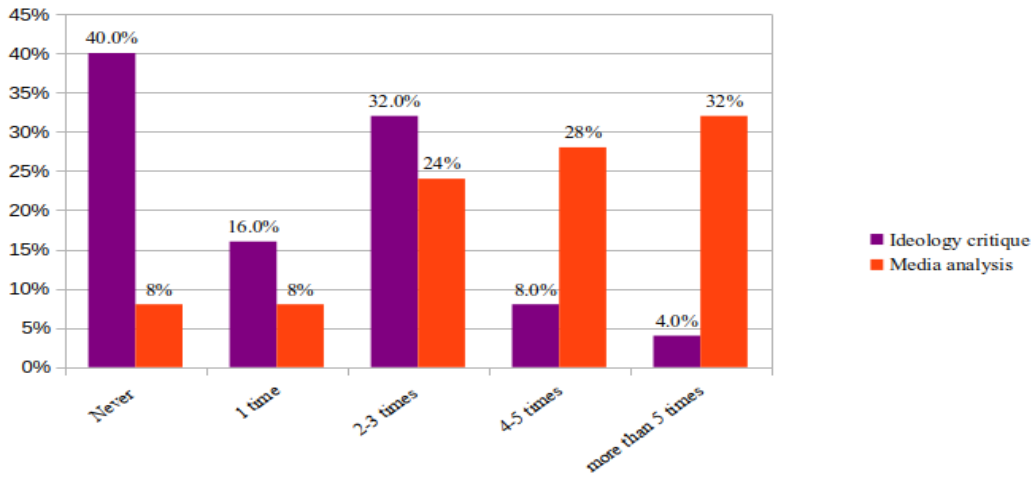


Figure 4. Comparison of the Occurrence of Ideology Critique and Media Analysis

Two major differences emerge when teaching with media is compared with criticism of different ideologies in media representation (see Figure 5). The more media integration that occurred (77.7% reported more than 5 times), the less criticism of different ideologies was reported (4% reported more than 5 times). Additionally, none of the respondents reported never engaging in media, whereas 40% mentioned never analyzing different ideologies. Furthermore, the highest frequency of engaging in ideology criticism was never (40%). In contrast, the highest frequency of teaching with media was more than 5 times (77.7%).

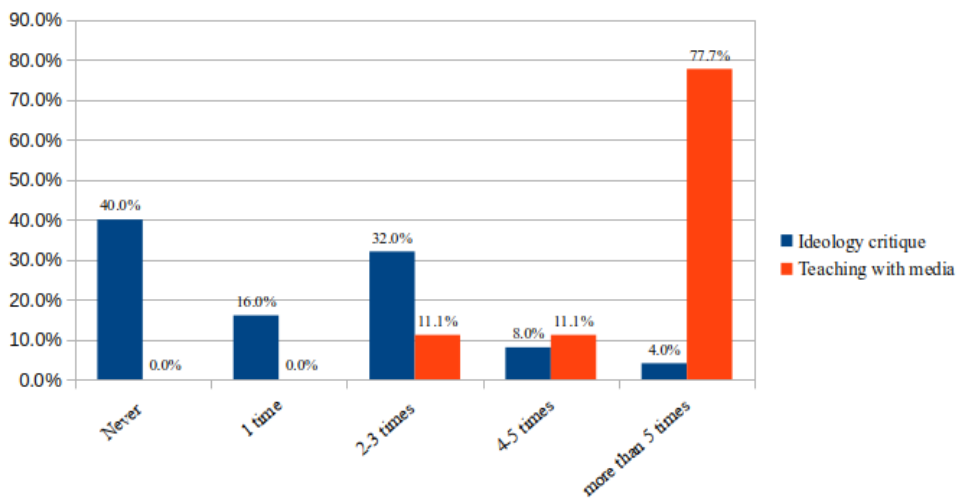


Figure 5. Comparison of the Frequency of Ideology Critique and Teaching with Media

Criticizing Advertisements

Given the importance and prevalence of advertising on digital media platforms and the fact that children are one of the main target groups, we asked about the frequency with which advertising is critically analyzed. The teachers surveyed reported the following frequencies: 25% for 1 time, 20.8% for 2-3 times, 12.5% for 4-5 times, and 25% for more than 5 times. 16.6% of the respondents said that they never critically analyzed commercials.

Analyzing the Interests of Media System

Regarding the analysis of the media system in Austria in terms of their interests, 43.3% of the respondents said they had never engaged in such an analysis. Of the four types of interests, scientific interests were analyzed most frequently at 33.3%. Notably, only 13.3% of respondents reported analyzing the economic interests of the Austrian media system. Political and religious interests were mentioned by 6.6% and 3.3% of respondents, respectively (see Figure 6).

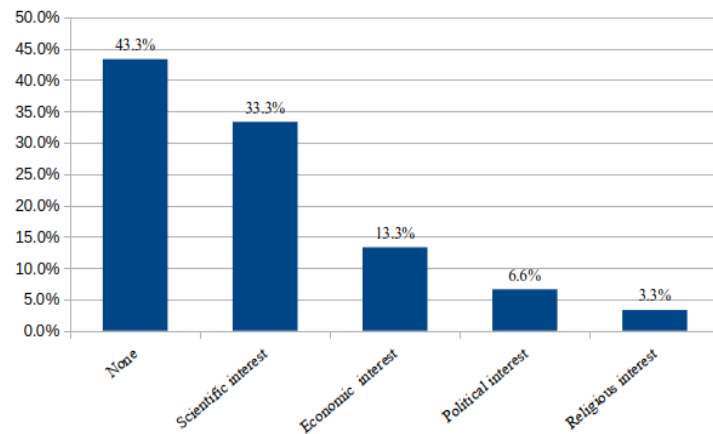


Figure 6. Types of Interest in Media System Analyzed by Teachers

Analysis of Media Representation of Climate Change

As climate change becomes one of the biggest crises facing the planet, Kellner and Share (2019) suggest addressing and challenging the issue through the lens of critical media literacy. This approach involves critically analyzing how the media represents climate change and how this representation shapes norms and people's actions regarding climate change (Share & Beach, 2022). In this regard, none of the respondents reported engaging in activities that analyzed climate change and environmental issues in media representations.

Analysis of Media languages and Techniques

Having engaged in any activities to analyze media languages and techniques, the results showed that the highest rate occurred 2-3 times (45%). 1 time and 4-5 times were reported with the same frequency (12.5% each). Only one respondent (4.1%) mentioned engaging with media languages and techniques more than 5 times. Meanwhile, 25% of respondents reported never engaging with media languages and techniques.

Media Creation

One of the central elements of critical media literacy is creating and producing media. In this regard, just over half of the respondents (55.5%) indicated that they had created media 2-3 times. Only 3.7% of the respondents said they had never created a media text. 18.5% reported creating media 4-5 times in training, and 1 and more than 5

times were reported at an identical rate (11.1% each). The most common type of media created in training was games (76.6%), while podcasts and commercials were not created at all (0%). About two-thirds of the respondents (66%) reported creating a digital story, followed by video (50%), photos (46.6%), newspapers/magazines/books (43%), cartoons/animations (13%), and Padlets (6.6%) (see Figure 7). Although the kindergarten teachers criticized advertisements, they never created them. In other words, the results show that their critical engagement did not extend to creating advertisements.

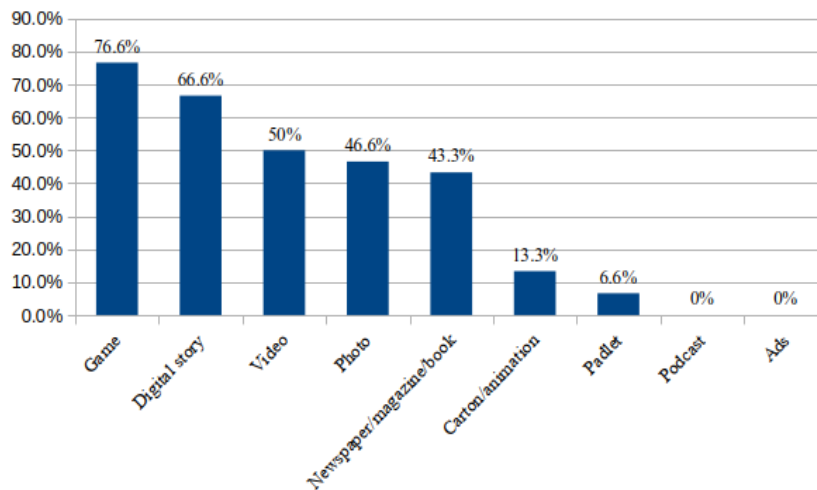


Figure 7. Types of Media created by Kindergarten Teachers

Kindergarten Teachers’ Perspectives on Media Education

Quantitative data revealed that the primary reason for teaching media literacy to children is to promote the correct use of media (86%). The least important reason is to help children become active citizens in a just and democratic society (30%). Notably, a significant number of respondents indicated that developing critical thinking skills was the second most important reason (76.6%), followed by protecting children from negative influences (70%). Slightly less than half of the surveyed teachers (46.6%) mentioned preparing children for the job market as a reason for teaching media literacy (see Figure 8).

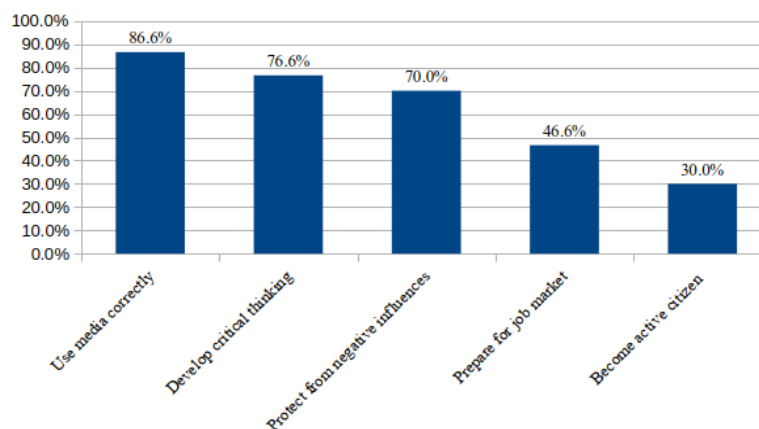


Figure 8. Reasons to Teach Media Literacy to Children

While the quantitative data shows that the correct use of media is the first important reason to teach media literacy to children, the analysis of the qualitative data demonstrates that protection is the primary theme. According to the trainees surveyed, media literacy should be taught to prevent unhealthy behavior, prepare children for the dangers of media and internet, teach children how to safely use internet, teach children a healthy approach, and to set rules to avoid long-term consequences.

In contrast to the quantitative data, in which critical thinking development was cited as the second most important reason for teaching media literacy, critical thinking does not appear in the qualitative findings and was mentioned by only one respondent. The second theme is the ubiquity of media. Respondents believe that teaching media literacy is necessary since media is pervasive in every aspect of our lives now and in the future. The third theme is using media to benefit from it and prepare children to work with media in everyday life.

The analysis of the qualitative data on the elements of media literacy for children and young people reveals that protection is the primary theme. According to the participants, media literacy should include knowledge of risks and dangers, as well as how to correctly deal with and avoid them. It should also include regulation of behavior, time management, and the healthy, age-appropriate, and time-limited use of media. The next theme is media use. Educators stated that media literacy for children should include teaching them how to use different types of media, such as PCs, mobile phones, and the internet, as well as how to use media to generate and transfer knowledge. Critical analysis is another theme that some respondents highlighted. It includes critical evaluation, reflection on media use, and critical use of media. However, it is unclear what they mean by "critical".

Another finding regarding kindergarten teachers' understanding of media education is that protection is the dominant theme, followed by media use and critical analysis. Protection refers to using media correctly to ensure safety. Regarding media use, they understood media education as familiarizing oneself with and working with different types of media, such as in learning and language development. A noticeable theme in their understanding of media education was critical analysis. They see media education as learning with and about media, as well as self-reflection and stimulating critical thinking.

The most notable finding from the qualitative data on teachers' perspectives regarding media literacy and education is that ideology critique and analysis of bias are absent from their critical media analysis. Media creation and creativity were also overlooked in their views on media education.

Implementation of Media Literacy in Language Development

Two questions were related to teachers' engagement in how to implement media literacy and media analysis in language development. In this regard, more than half of the respondents (54.1%) reported engaging in these activities more than 5 times. Meanwhile, 33.3% reported doing so 4-5 times, and 12.5% reported doing so 2-3 times. No one mentioned never or 1 time. Data on the frequency of activities related to implementing media analysis in language development show that 30.4% of respondents did so 4-5 times, 26% did so more than 5 times, and 13% did so once or 2-3 times. 17.3% of the surveyed teachers stated that they had never engaged in such

activities. This demonstrates that they frequently engaged in activities on how to integrate media literacy but not as often in activities on how to integrate media analysis.

Challenge and Success

Qualitative data reveals that the main challenge kindergarten teachers experienced during training was technological, including access to media and technology. Consequently, they were unable to practice using and working with the technologies. They also lacked knowledge about how the technologies worked and how to use them. Another challenge was the limited time allotted for learning and practicing new skills. Since the teachers were already working in kindergartens, some mentioned the difficulty of integrating new things into their classrooms. A few respondents mentioned scientific challenges, such as theories and scientific foundations. However, it is unclear what kind of problems they meant by scientific issues and theories. The most important benefit they gained from the training was learning how to use media. They learned about the various new media and technologies available for use in kindergartens, as well as how to use them. Another benefit was expanding their knowledge of media and technology. Some teachers mentioned exchanging ideas with their colleagues as a successful outcome of the training. Some teachers said that new media and technologies were expensive before the training, but they received them as part of the training package at a lower price. Very few respondents mentioned learning about the protection and safe use of media.

Discussion

This study examines the integration of critical media literacy into teaching practices in media education at a private teacher training university in Austria. Using a post-training survey completed by 30 trainees, we found that the most important competence the kindergarten teachers gained from the training was technical skills. The results showed a high amount of teaching with media, particularly through the use of photos, smartphones and search engines in the training.

Although media analysis occurred frequently (60% of respondents reported 4–5 times or more), only one-third of the teachers surveyed reported learning media analysis skills in the training (36%). It is unclear what type of media analysis the teachers engaged in. Integrating media into teaching practices occurred more frequently (88% of trainees reported doing so 4–5 times or more), and the majority of trainees (83%) mentioned learning technical skills in the training. These findings are consistent with previous research in this area (Gretter & Yadav, 2018; Salomaa et al., 2017; Tiede & Grafe, 2016; Tiede, et al., 2015; Swertz, 2015), indicating that media education in teacher education programs primarily emphasizes using media more than teaching about it.

Although it is unclear what type of media analysis they engaged during the training, a significant finding is that the ability to analyze different ideologies in media representation was downplayed. Findings regarding engagement in analyzing media bias and questioning ideologies (e.g., sexism, racism, classism, consumerism, capitalism, religion) reveal that a significantly smaller amount of media analysis included ideological critique. 40% of respondents indicated that they never engaged in analyzing different ideologies, and only one respondent

reported doing so more than five times. The highest number of responses was 2-3 times, at 32%. An interview with one respondent revealed that she had confused consumerism with media consumption. She said that they never analyzed ideologies in the media during the training. Due to the main emphasis on teaching with media, the data show that analyzing bias and ideology in media representation, the central component of critical media literacy (Hammer, 2009), was the least developed skill they acquired in the training.

With regard to the prevalence of advertising in digital media and the fact that children are one of its main target groups, the results show that kindergarten teachers sometimes engaged in critical analyses of advertising. However, it is unclear what kind of critical analysis of advertising was implemented in the teaching practices of the training. The results demonstrate that much of their engagement with media lacked critique of bias and ideology. Advertising is the center of the capitalist system in creating a consumer society and as an important institution that plays a key role in individual socialization and social reproduction. It requires delineation of the ways in which it “helps control media content and helps constitute a commercial media environment that creates a world in its own image: a consumer paradise” (Harms & Kellner, 1991, p. 12). It is relevant to note that although the trainees had some opportunities to criticize advertisements, they did not create any in their activities, which could have deepened their analysis and given them the opportunity to create their own alternative ones (Share & Beach, 2022).

With respect to the analysis of media interests, it is worth noting that nearly half of the respondents indicated that they had never engaged in any activities to recognize the interests of the Austrian media system. Furthermore, although media are produced by individuals and organizations, often by powerful and profitable commercial industries with diverse economic interests at stake (Buckingham, 2019), economic interests as the main interest of digital media have been largely overlooked in the analysis of the interests of the Austrian media system.

A very notable finding is the lack of activity regarding the representation of climate change in the media. As climate change becomes one of the biggest crises affecting life on this planet, especially the future of children, they need “guides to facilitate their learning to understand and challenge dominant ideologies that are threatening their very future” (Kellner and Share, 2019, p. 98). In the case of digital media, it is necessary to analyze how algorithm-driven digital media damage the environment and reinforce the ideology of consumerism. Additionally, there is a “need to acknowledge the role that advertising plays in creating a set of cultural conditions that makes us less inclined to deal with climate change” (Lewis & Boyce, 2009 p. 8).

Media creation is an important element of critical media literacy that provides students with opportunities to take action, rather than merely criticize. As Bigelow (1995) notes “If we ask children to critique the world but then fail to encourage them to act, our classrooms can degenerate into factories of cynicism” (p.5). The findings show that kindergarten teachers are involved in media creation, albeit infrequently, primarily through games and digital stories. However, the findings also demonstrate that questioning bias and ideology critique were downplayed in the training. In fact, media creation did not include a critical understanding of media.

Making media does not necessarily produce critical understanding. In fact, a dynamic relationship between the

critical and creative dimensions of media literacy is necessary (Buckingham, personal communication, 2019). While integrating media creation and production into media education can make learning more experiential, hands-on, creative, expressive, and fun, media literacy loses its transformative dimension for the development of democracy and social justice without critical analysis of structures of oppression, awareness of ideological implications, and social critique.

Another striking finding is that kindergarten teachers' perspectives on media literacy and education did not change after the training. When the results of the pre-training survey (Mohammadpourkachlami, & Kogler-Velich, 2024) were compared with the results of the post-training survey in this study, the same themes emerged in the trainees' perspectives. The dominant approaches among kindergarten teachers remained instrumental and protectionist. This differs from previous findings by Botturi (2019), where there was a change in the teachers' perspectives from a protectionist approach to a critical one after a course on media and digital literacy.

Furthermore, their approaches to media education and literacy lack an analysis of bias and ideology critique, both before and after the training. This is due to their lack of engagement with the analysis of ideology and power relations in media representation. Although the majority of surveyed teachers identified developing critical thinking skills as a key rationale for teaching media literacy, this is not a dominant theme in their perspectives on media education. Another notable finding regarding kindergarten teachers' views on media education is that media creation and creativity were overlooked despite the trainees engaging in media creation during their training.

The results also show that kindergarten teachers were somewhat engaged in integrating media analysis into language development, but not as much as in integrating media literacy. Considering the above results, it could be assumed that their engagement in how to integrate media literacy into language development was more about how to use media, especially digital media in kindergarten, or how to protect children from the harmful influences of digital media than teaching media literacy, critical reflection, and critical analysis of media.

Since the training focused on teaching with and through media, it is not surprising that the current study found the most important outcome of the training was becoming familiar with new technologies and media, as well as learning how to use and apply them in kindergartens. Furthermore, as the use of new media and technologies was the main part of the training, the main challenge the kindergarten teachers experienced was related to technology. For example, they did not have access to media and technologies during the training, so they could not practice using them. They also lacked knowledge about how to use the technologies and how they work. Similar to Ranieri, Bruni, and Kupiainen's (2018) findings, time management was another problem experienced in the training.

Conclusion

Kindergarten teachers play a crucial role in cultivating critical media literacy in children at an early age. The Center for Teacher Education was one of the few higher education institutions in Austria that aimed to prepare kindergarten teachers by developing teaching and learning strategies for media education, as well as critically and reflexively addressing digital media and technology (Sprachförderung mit digitalen Medien, 2023).

The main findings of the research indicate that kindergarten training focuses more on using media than teaching about it and critically reflecting on and analyzing it. Although media analysis and creation were integrated into the training, critical aspects of media literacy, such as challenging ideologies like sexism, racism, classism, and consumerism, were downplayed. As a result of focusing on using media and protecting children from its dangers, kindergarten teachers' perspectives did not change after the training. Teachers see media literacy as a means of maximizing the benefits of new media while addressing the risks and some of the problems they pose (Buckingham, 2019).

Using new media and technology does not equate to practicing critical literacy. Simply using new technology in the classroom does not mean engaging in critical literacy (Vasquez et al., 2022). Children do not acquire media literacy, critical thinking, or reflection simply by using digital media (Rogow, 2022). Media literacy involves much more than integrating technology or informing children about the dangers of the media (Rogow, 2022). While dangers exist and children have the right to live free from fear and violence and need protection (Share, 2015), but not to make these issues central to media literacy practice and education (Rogow, 2022).

Fostering children's critical reflection and analysis of media requires "challeng(ing) a positivist conception of children as voiceless passive entities that need to be controlled and regulated by adults" (Share, 2015, p. 101). Teachers need to learn that the best way to protect children is to empower them with critical autonomy and prepare them to participate as active citizens in critical solidarity with the world around them by cultivating a critical and reflexive understanding of media (Share, 2015).

Recommendations

The findings of this study have several implications for the preparation of kindergarten teachers in media literacy education. They could help teacher training programs develop media literacy education by integrating critical aspects of media literacy and shifting teachers' perspectives from an instrumental and protectionist approach to a critical one. The findings also have the potential to improve kindergarten teacher training by addressing the challenges revealed by the research results. It must be acknowledged that this study has its limitations. Few participants completed the post-survey, and the study focused on a single kindergarten teacher's media literacy training. Therefore, it is not possible to generalize the results. Furthermore, self-reported data collected via survey is not an adequate tool for evaluating the integration of critical media literacy into teaching practices. Observing the training and interviewing participating teachers and trainers could provide more insight. Future studies that collect data through observation and interviews are recommended.

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