

When Children Make Media: A Visit to the Hugh Cole School

By Marketa Zezulkova

I have been researching media education in primary and lower elementary schools around Europe and the United States for over a year, when I visited the Hugh Cole Elementary School (HCS) in Warren, Rhode Island and had the opportunity to observe how a successful media program can be developed when people bring creativity and commitment to the process of engaging with all the members of a school community.

A Creative Force for Good

Katie Reaves became a Parent Volunteer at the Hugh Cole School to support the development of her 9-year-old daughter Crickett and her peers. She began her work by volunteering to make a short movie for her daughter's elementary school in 2009. With no background in education, Katie explains that she was honored to enter teachers' classrooms as part of the production of the first project. It was here that she gained an appreciation for the role of the teacher as a major influence and a role model to a child. She began to realize that video production was something that could enhance teachers' classroom efforts. "All I have to do is to show them how it can be done," said Katie.

Katie then developed HCS Productions as an afterschool program, which was accepted with enthusiasm by the former assistant principal, the fifth grade teachers, and the local superintendent. During the program's first year, she created an afterschool club where children produced weekly news announcements and monthly assemblies. They filmed special presentations and concerts. Katie helped organize in-class video making activities for the express purpose of bringing to life curriculum-based scripts.

Origins: A Movie-Making Club

Movie Making Club was developed as an afterschool program for students who desired to learn more about filmmaking and video production. Movie Making Club was attended and run by the 4th and 5th graders, who learned more in-depth production techniques. These students then worked on specific long-term projects and were sometimes called upon during the day to run crew, direct and produce other in-classroom projects.

In the club, students created short videos using in-camera editing. They created short films to explore the difference between how a human eye focuses attention and **how a camera focuses attention**. They learned how to **tell a story visually** in only 30 seconds. Students participated in "Movie Making Challenges" where they had to develop a creative film under a particular set of constraints. For example, children **created a video** that included a book as

a prop and the line, “What did you say?” Katie observed children develop problem solving skills and confidence, feeling an “excitement to learn, to try something new... creating, participating, and thinking outside of box.”

Katie collaborated with Rhode Island organizations, including a local historical reenactment organization, The Federal Blues to create a historical re-enactment video that was featured on “**Confessions of a Teen Critic**,” the media literacy initiative developed by Jeanine Charters, head of **Very Special Arts Rhode Island**. Two students, Grace and Madison, screened their two short films at a statewide project, the **Give Me 5 Teen Film Festival**. Children had the thrill of being able to see their films shown in the movie festival intended for much older kids. Madison’s film about a day in the life of a kindergarten student is still used by school leaders at the Hugh Cole School as an orientation video for parents.

According to Katie, in Movie Making Club, a certain emotional maturity and independence is equally important as cognitive and motor skill development. Entering the HCS Productions Studio in the school, you see pro lighting, green background and the tiniest chair in front of the biggest Apple computer screen. Similarly its creative logo, chosen through a student contest, reflects professionalism within which the program operates. Children’s use of terms such as ‘quiet on the set’, ‘action’ and ‘cut’ demonstrate how the professional norms of working collaboratively on a video production are embedded in the program.

For Katie, participation in video production activities improves children’s media literacy, because they start looking at things around them differently. She explained, “Children who participate become knowledgeable about the messages they are daily bombarded with. It allows students to deconstruct them so they become critical and analytic consumers. They know the tricks of the trade, so they are not at the mercy of the media. If they can watch it and play with it, they are also able to know how to work and create with it.”

Video Production Strengthens Classroom Learning

During the second year of the program, Katie continued the afterschool Movie Making Club but also began to volunteer at the school in a near-full time capacity. She was available to help teachers integrate video production into the classroom. School librarian Mrs. Cappadona helped fifth graders participate in creating video book reviews, which would be imbedded on the statewide school library blog. Third graders created a series of Readers Theatre videos to develop fluency and expression in their reading. Other in-class activities

included: filming *The Boston Massacre* and *Newton's Laws* with fifth graders; making a film about jellyfish with third graders from Mr. Brown's class; and making a film about litter called, "The Litter Monster." First and second grade students **performed short poems** in a charming monthly learning experience that documented the development of their literacy skills.

Thanks to this structure, Katie has had an opportunity to film with all age groups in the elementary school as a parent volunteer. She explained that working with the 1st graders means to simply "point and shoot," as Katie said, "They can push the button, they can take the film, they can walk around with it, but you're still going to get a lot of shaking. If you put it on a tripod they are little bit better with it, and they are excited, but they are still limited in their eye-hand coordination."

Second graders can make more strategic decisions such as following the speaker and catching the action and they are more attentive to what they are shooting. Third grade is when it all comes together: children can now fully deploy their imagination as young filmmakers. Katie remembers that when children were working on the Jellyfish video, "the students came to me and said, 'That is not what we wanted, we got to do it over, this is what we wanted.' So they knew what they wanted. All I said was that we need to do some research on jellyfish, to have some educational content and they did that and afterward came up with jellyfish songs, jellyfish dance, and other ideas.'" Children had a clear mental image of their creative goals and were able to create a variety of expressive forms of communication to convey ideas and information.

Each year, Katie celebrated the work of her students by organizing a premiere event at the end of the school year in the gymnasium, where they showed all the movies made that year. Renee Hobbs attended the event and remembers being overwhelmed by the attendance at the charm of this public exhibition: more than 200 children, parents and family members walking down the red carpet, entering the auditorium, and eating popcorn. The level of attention to the children's films was high and "the mix of pride and delight was infectious," Hobbs recalls.

A New Era Begins

Katie accepted a full-time position as the Media Studies teacher at the Beacon Charter High School for the Arts starting September 2012. There have also been changes in the Hugh Cole School administration. New principal, Cynthia Sadler, brings fresh and even bigger support,

so Katie has been able to come back from time to time to help with video editing and other related activities. One of the projects she has currently participated in was the Silly Pet Video contest, where children created short videos featuring their pets using cameras or smartphones. The videos were judged by Beacon Charter High School students, who announced the winners through a live video stream. Katie explained, "We are trying to get intergenerational education and cooperation going on." While the content of this particular collaboration was, as Katie puts it, "silly stuff," it does show elementary and secondary teachers how easy it is to integrate technology to create cross-generation communication in the classroom.

When I talked with one student, Grace, I realized that her filmmaking experience has impacted her media consumption and contributed to her understanding of media. As Grace admits, she is now actively watching moving pictures and analysing the ways in which they have been made. Grace said, "When I watch a movie, I think that someone is actually recording it and I use to imagine how I would do it, maybe once if I ever become a director," and she continued, "I love filming and it would be cool if kids in all schools could try it."

Katie knows how important it is to convince policy makers that it is important and possible, so that programs like this can move from the informal learning setting to something that is part of the school curriculum. Katie's work in media literacy education exemplifies her leadership in the field. But she recognizes the need for more new leaders like herself, saying, "We need people who believe in it and will promote the importance of media literacy and show opportunities that media education brings.'

About the Author

Marketa Zezulcova is a doctoral student researcher at the **Centre for Excellence in Media Practice** at Bournemouth University, England. Her main interest is in the development and implementation of suitable media education for primary and elementary school children of different nations and cultures. She came to Media Education Lab as a Visiting Scholar in November 2012, which led to her research in Hugh Cole School. She holds an M.A. in Advertising and Marketing Communications from **Bournemouth University**, and an M.A. in Marketing Communications from Tomas Bata University, during which she studied Creative Advertising at Sub De Pub Paris. Marketa is an alumna of the **Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change**.