



Media Education and School Discomfort: Strategies for Educational Well-being in the Digital Age

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Abstract: This article explores the complex interconnection between school discomfort and the potential of Media Education as a strategic approach for prevention and educational intervention. School discomfort is configured as a complex phenomenon, a constellation of negative experiences that can compromise the student's formative experience. By analyzing the multifactorial etiology and the varied manifestations of student malaise, it is highlighted how media education can foster more inclusive, motivating, and responsive learning environments tailored to students' needs.

Keywords: school discomfort, media education, educational well-being, digital age.

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Introduction

Education is a lifelong and "lifewide" process, encompassing all stages and contexts of an individual's life. However, schools can sometimes become places of distress and discomfort for students. This school-related discomfort is a complex phenomenon, a constellation of negative experiences that can significantly hinder a student's educational journey. It manifests through various indicators such as declining academic performance, apathy, relational difficulties, or avoidance behaviors (Tagliaferro & Formella, 2022). These expressions often stem from unmet needs, rooted in both individual and contextual factors (Formisano, Oliva, Caivano & Vicinanza, 2023). Pedagogical research is placing increasing attention on promoting well-being, recognizing it as a fundamental prerequisite for learning and for navigating the challenges of adolescent development. In this context, the current digital ecosystem, where adolescents (also called 'Super-Millennials' or 'Generation Z') spend a significant part of their time (Iavarone, 2022), introduces new challenges but also new opportunities. It has become crucial to design educational environments that are sensitive to different developmental phases and learning styles, and are able to mitigate distress factors such as isolation, demotivation, and feelings of inadequacy. These often arise from a misalignment between individual resources and environmental demands.

This is where Media Education becomes a vital pedagogical tool. The concept of Media Education encompasses various aspects and refers primarily to fostering critical engagement with media among a diverse range of users, including students, educators, civil society

activists, and different social groups in general (Potter, 2010). It's not just about using technology; it's about understanding its impact and navigating it effectively.

Media education aims to promote the development in individuals of the necessary competencies to navigate the media ecosystem with critical thinking, knowledge, and responsibility. Through the use of languages and tools close to the world of young people and the implementation of project-based activities, Media Education can directly intercept school-related distress by acting on multiple fronts: it increases motivation and engagement, enhances crucial soft skills (problem solving, teamwork), facilitates inclusion and socialization, offers alternative channels for emotional expression, and provides tools for managing online risks and deconstructing negative models (Bulger & Davison, 2018).

This approach is particularly crucial given that 'Generation Z,' having grown up in the digital era, has acquired a different way of learning, working, and having fun. Indeed, these "digital natives" react quickly to visual and auditory stimuli, such as those offered by television, computers, and video games. However, while this brings an innate familiarity with technology, it doesn't automatically translate to critical media literacy (Ferri, 2011). Therefore, integrating Media Education is essential for preparing young people to be informed, engaged, and resilient citizens in today's complex media landscape.

A fundamental requirement for contemporary education is the integration of solid digital literacy, a competency that must transcend simple operational skills with technological tools (Bär, Tews & Rößling, 2005). It is imperative that students develop the



capacity to critically assess information, comprehend the nuances of digital privacy and security, and utilize digital media in an ethical and responsible manner.

Media Education Strategies

School-related distress is recognized as an etiologically complex and phenotypically heterogeneous phenomenon. Its negative impact on student learning outcomes and psycho-physical well-being is widely documented, manifesting through behavioral, emotional, and cognitive indicators such as academic disaffection, performance decline, anxiety, and socio-relational difficulties (Astorri, Clerici, Gallo & Pellai, 2022). The digital ecosystem presents a double-edged sword: on one hand, it provides unparalleled opportunities for accessing knowledge, exploring identity, and connecting socially; on the other hand, it simultaneously introduces distinct risks. These include cyber-threats, the strain of hyperconnectivity, cognitive overload, and the pressures of online social comparison (Bonaiuti, 2005). From this viewpoint, Media Education (ME) moves beyond purely technical or overly protective stances, presenting itself as a crucial blend of theory and practice. Rooted in foundational principles of critical pedagogy and multiliteracies, ME focuses on cultivating a wide range of skills—spanning cognitive, critical, ethical, creative, and practical domains. The goal is to empower individuals for active

and mindful citizenship in our media-saturated world. Consequently, a systematic approach to ME offers a powerful strategy for preventing and managing school-related distress, serving as both a protective factor and a catalyst for resilience (Formisano & Caivano, 2022). Media education addresses demotivation – a core symptom of distress – through the implementation of active teaching methodologies that leverage the affordances of digital environments. Media education directs adolescent socialization needs towards collaborative and inclusive practices. Particular attention is paid to education for virtual empathy (cognitive and affective), a complex construct but crucial for preventing conflict and exclusion. Media Education (ME) promotes critical reflection on online identity and relational dynamics, educating for respectful interaction that can translate into an improved overall school climate (Buckingham, 2019).

The curricular integration of Media Education appears not as an accessory option, but as an inescapable pedagogical necessity to face the challenges of school-related distress in the 21st century. Through a holistic and critical approach, ME can transform the digital ecosystem from a potential amplifier of vulnerability into a strategic resource for learning, inclusion, and well-being (Ausubel, 1968; Formisano, 2023).

Strategy / Approach	Description	Key Goal(s) Addressed	Example(s) from Text / Practice
Critical Media & Information Literacy (CMIL)	Teaching students to analyze, evaluate, and deconstruct media messages, sources, biases, and their impact.	Empower individuals, foster critical thinking, combat misinformation, understand media influence, reduce anxiety related to information overload.	Teaching how to identify "fake news," analyzing advertising techniques, discussing stereotypes in films or games, evaluating online sources.
Project-Based Media Production	Engaging students in the active creation of media content using digital tools and multimodal languages.	Increase motivation & engagement, build self-efficacy, develop creative & practical skills, offer alternative expression channels.	Creating videos, podcasts, blogs, digital storytelling projects, coding simple games or websites.
Fostering Digital Citizenship & Empathy	Educating on ethical, responsible, and safe online behavior, including privacy, security, and understanding diverse perspectives online.	Promote respectful interaction, prevent cyber-risks (cyberbullying), build resilience, develop virtual empathy, improve social skills.	Role-playing online scenarios, developing class netiquette rules, analyzing case studies of cyberbullying, discussing online privacy settings.
Collaborative Online Learning & Communities	Using digital platforms to facilitate teamwork, co-construction of knowledge, and building positive online communities.	Enhance teamwork skills, promote inclusion and socialization, reduce isolation, foster supportive peer networks.	Working together on a shared digital document/presentation, participating in moderated online forums, virtual cultural exchanges.
Leveraging Digital Affordances & Active Learning	Utilizing the specific features of digital media (interactivity, gamification, multimodality) within active teaching methods.	Address demotivation, increase engagement, cater to diverse learning styles, enhance understanding of digital environments.	

The systemic integration of Media Education (ME) – understood as that interdisciplinary pedagogical field aiming to develop the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act critically through media in all its forms (Buckingham, 2020) – within educational paths requires a profound transformation of its pedagogical vision and instructional organization.

It is necessary to design media education paths within digital learning ecosystems that combine tools, resources, platforms, and pedagogical strategies to support and enrich the learning experience.

ME promotes responsible participation in social, cultural, and political life, exercised with full awareness of one's rights and duties—also through digital spaces—by providing the tools to participate actively in public and social debate (Formisano, 2019).

Conclusion

In summary, the multifaceted nature of school-related distress, amplified by the complexities of the digital age, demands innovative and strategic educational responses. Media Education stands out as a particularly potent approach. It directly addresses key issues like demotivation, social exclusion, and critical thinking gaps by employing active, engaging methodologies (Marzano & Tammara, 2011). By fostering digital citizenship, virtual empathy, and critical analysis skills, ME helps students navigate both school and online environments more safely and effectively. While implementation challenges remain, particularly concerning teacher training (Admiraal et al., 2017) and resources, the potential benefits for student well-being, engagement, and future-readiness make the systemic adoption of Media Education not just advisable, but imperative.

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