

Learning to see beyond the image

Students taught media savvy in pilot project

BY JENNIFER BROWN
Staff Writer

They're only in Grade 4, but a group of students at Doncrest Public School are possibly the most discriminating media watchers around.

In a world of mass media, kids have to be alert to what is truth and what is fiction, said Doncrest teacher Micheline Joseph.

Joseph said the media surrounds children almost every moment of their lives, and the ideal time to educate them about the messages they receive on a daily basis, through television and newspapers, is now.

"The media completely engulfs them almost from the moment they are born and we want them to understand this is not real life," Joseph said.

And, with more violence on television every day, they internalize it.

That belief was found to be true when Joseph's students talked about the impact of gender and violence in a pilot project about the media.

"They put violence on TV because violence makes TV shows more exciting. You sometimes get influenced by watching TV. Some people are rude in public because they got influenced by violence on TV," said student Christie Li.

Bombarded by ads selling toys, television shows promoting violence and magazines with beautiful people, students in Joseph's class said the project has taught them not to be fooled by the media.

The people that make commercials look



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

The Grade 4 class of Micheline Joseph, centre, was schooled in the art of seeing past media hype when it comes to TV, movies and magazines.

for people that are thin, active and very beautiful. I think that is not fair because those people think that we are going to be like them. But we are not going to try to be like them, we will stay ourselves," said student Tristan Stern.

Joseph's Richmond Hill class was one of four in Ontario chosen to pilot the unit created by the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario, Media Watch and the Ontario Women's Directorate.

Joseph said students often have a hard time understanding exactly what they're seeing and the unit addresses concerns about the impact the media has on children, taking a careful look at violence, gender inequities, racism and body image.

More and more, children are going on diets and having eating disorders at a very

early age. We don't want to wait for high school — there are so many things kids are internalizing," Joseph said.

"Awareness is key. We hope they will be more savvy about what's going on and hopefully not be influenced by what they see."

Joseph said the unit also supports the new Ontario curriculum, especially in language, data management, drama, art and social studies.

Last week, the class let their parents in on their findings in the form of a television news report with students delivering reports "from the field" on issues such as stereotyping and gender bias.

Using poetry and skits, students demonstrated how they have developed media literacy skills so they can become critical viewers and make decisions about the media they

are exposed to every day.

The class examined techniques used in advertisements and commercials, learned how to become aware of physical and verbal violence on television, movies, video games, the negative body images portrayed in the media and their effect on the viewers' self-esteem. Stereotyping, as well as the negative and positive role models in the media, were also analysed.

"I was impressed with how well, even at such a young age, the children were able to grasp these complicated issues," Joseph said.

And, as part of the unit, the children were to count the hours of television they watched every day for one week.

The average viewing time was 14 hours a week, with *Pokemon* declared the most watched show, followed by *The Simpsons*.

Students determined that the World Wrestling Federation was the most violent show on television, with 92 violent acts in one episode.

Advertisements were also reviewed for their content, and students were asked to comment on the overall message in individual advertisements.

An ad for a Fisher Price medical kit was deemed fair by the students because it depicted a boy and a girl playing together, and indicated either one could grow up to be a doctor.

But for all their serious analysis, students found a way to have fun with the lessons learned through poetry they created for the unit.

Commercials are very funny,

I laugh like a crazy bunny.

But don't think they are just funny,

They want you to spend your money.

They use tools to entertain you,

But don't you be a fool.

Even if you might think that they are cool.

—Matthew Cheng

Students take first step in standing up for their rights

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

Daniel Arvide and Andrea Flores have learned all about their rights and are anxious to pass the information along to others.

Two years after the students in Mexico City cast their ballots in the first ever National Election for the Rights of Youth, the Mexican government last week adopted children's human rights into the country's constitution.

And yesterday, the pair shared their triumphs and experiences with students at King City Public School during a campaign rally before the local children cast their ballots today to choose the most important right in their life.

A joint project of UNICEF Canada and Elections Canada to mark the 10th anniversary of Canada's endorsement of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, students will vote on one of 10 rights: education, family, food and shelter, name and nationality, protection from harm, non-discrimination, culture, health, rest and play and shared opinions.

"We learned many things, especially about the democratic process and the way elections work," said Arvide, 16, who was one of 3.7 million Mexicans to vote in the July 1997 election. "Most of us voted for education because we realize how important that is for us. Your vote is going to count and all rights are important."

In Mexico and Belize, students voted for the right to an education, while the right to a safe environment was endorsed in Colombia and Mozambique chose the right to an identity.

King City Grade 4 students Mark Fernandes and Adam Bloom have been

studying human rights for the past three weeks and helped to create a series of posters scattered throughout the school.

Grade 8 student Sean Hebert believes staying free from harm is an important right, since no child should suffer from physical abuse in the classroom or at home, while classmate Lisa Kileeg delivered a speech yesterday concerning health issues.

"I am now more connected with today's rights and I am also a part of it because I am voting," said Kileeg, 13.

"We have to know how good we have it in Canada, while children in other parts of the world don't have the same rights we do."

"I feel really lucky to live in Canada. I know people that live in the United States and they live in fear every day, even though they are in a really nice area."

In Canada, students under 18 are allowed to vote in the rights campaign. During voting, students bear in mind there are still 130 million school-aged children around the world who do not go to school, 160 million kids who suffer from malnutrition and another 12 million children under the age of five who die every year from preventable causes.

King City principal John Lester called the election "authentic learning that mirrors the process of what occurs in a normal election."

"Kids are learning knowledge in a real way. They have discussed in class different aspects of their rights and how things are different in various countries," said Lester.

"This is an important part of being an adult member of society."

Beginning tomorrow, results from across Canada will be tabulated and downloaded on the web by Elections Canada.

Students and parents can analyze the results at www.itsyourvoice.com



Tiffany Chan votes while Austen Chiu, Adam Cote and Jamie Daniel wait in line at William Berczy Public School in Markham. The Grade 1 students took part in the National Election for the Rights of Youth this week, along with other students across York Region.