Quality Media Literacy Education
A Tool for Teachers and Teacher Educators of Italian Elementary Schools

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Abstract

The dissemination of good practices in MLE requires a more rigorous definition of their characteristics, including criteria and indicators to measure their quality. This article – after reflecting on the meaning and function of identifying good MLE practices – presents a systematic framework of 35 indicators for good MLE activities in Italian elementary schools. These indicators are grouped according to five general criteria of quality: adequacy of the teaching methods; competence and involvement of the actors; structuring and coherence of the activity's organization; awareness of the underlying MLE theories as well as their appropriateness; and originality of the project. The framework emerged from a four-level process, which is also presented in the article: Based on an initial review of features attributed to quality MLE in scientific and institutional literature, a preliminary draft of criteria was elaborated and submitted to scholars and experienced teachers, whose comments were sought in semi-structured interviews. This input fed into the final version of the framework, which may serve to support teacher trainings as well as the monitoring and (self-)evaluation of teachers' MLE work.

> Quality is not a *thing*. It is an *event*. […]
> It is the event at which the subject becomes aware of the object.
> (Pirsig 1999, 239)

In the field of media literacy education (MLE), as well as in other areas of schooling and life-long learning, there has been much talk about "good practices" for about twenty years now. Usually, these are referred to with the explicit aim to improve the quality of educational processes by highlighting experiences that deserve to be taken as a model by practitioners. This trend can be observed, for example, at teacher training seminars or academic conferences as well as in a number of journals, which – like this one – devote entire sections to the presentation of "voices from the field" that distinguish themselves by originality and innovation.

The subject of good practice, then, in combination with the issue of educational quality, has become a common topic in political discourse, and pedagogy has often drawn on it uncritically. On the other hand, the question of good practice is also linked to the evaluation of MLE, which maybe is not a flagship of our field, being the subject of only few pioneering investigations, which – above all – have aimed at defining and testing

learning outcomes to be expected in students at the end of MLE units (the components of so-called "media competence," expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and habits) (Scrimshaw 1992; Worsnop 1996; Christ 1997; Hobbs and Frost 2003; Aglieri 2005; Parola and Trinchero 2006; Hobbs 2007; Rivoltella 2008; Martens 2010; Calvani, Fini and Ranieri 2011). The issue of evaluating the quality of MLE projects – understood as complex processes implemented by educators within an organization, entailing specific constraints, a budget and certain goals – remained in the shadow.[1] This has led to the paradoxical situation that, in the field of MLE, we talk about best practices, but often lack the criteria or precise benchmarks that would enable us to say which practices are actually good, and why. Many times, we simply rely on our gut feeling – which I personally trust a lot – but with the risk of falling into a dangerous subjectivism, which may lead us to over- or underestimate the educational experiences that we

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[1] Note that, in English, the two words *evaluation* and *assessment* refer to two separate concepts, while in the Romance languages both learning assessment and educational process evaluation are referred to by the same term – *évaluation* in French, *valutazione* in Italian, *evaluación* in Spanish, to mention just three examples. This, in turn, also results in a less rigorous conceptional difference in these languages.

witness or have come to know.

In this paper, thus, I would like to address the issue of quality in MLE, with the aim to outline what is good practice and how we can identify it; moreover, I will propose a systematic framework of criteria and indicators for assessing the quality of MLE in the specific context of Italian elementary schools.

1. Revising the concept of good practice in MLE

In a penetrating and, in some respects, very ironic article, which appeared a few years ago in the *British Educational Research Journal*, Coffield and Edward (2009) critically reflect on the widespread use of the concept of good practice in the jargon of pedagogy, politics and economics of education, especially in the area of vocational training. They highlight how, within a few years, the term "good practice" was replaced by "best practice" and then "excellent practice", which leads the authors to wonder: "what next? perfect practice?". Still not satisfied, British policy makers subsequently went on to advocate the ideal of "uniform excellence", which refers to the goal of having first-rate practice for all, in every educational center of the country. While, from an ideal point of view, such an objective is certainly understandable, it is realistically impossible to achieve through the dissemination of standardized procedures, given the fact alone that every teaching situation is different; uniform excellence in education, therefore, would require robots instead of teachers and students in flesh and blood.

Reasoning on the quality of MLE and the use we can make of good practices entails, in my opinion, finding answers to three interconnected questions: 1) who determines which practices are good; 2) according to which criteria; and 3) what is the function of identifying good practices in a field like ours.

The neo-positivist assumption that it is possible to indisputably determine the quality of a process by simply referring to absolute standards is false. As recognized by the classical philosophical tradition, from Aristotle's *De Anima* onwards, any evaluation is mainly based on a judgment, i.e., the action by which someone says something about something. Evaluation and assessment, in other words, are human, personal, subjective or inter-subjective acts based on criteria that are accepted by the reference group; evaluation cannot be thought of as the result of an impersonal or automatic process. Thus, it is crucial to ask by whom MLE practices should be evaluated to determine which of them are

good and which are not. Obviously, to avoid the risk of falling into complete arbitrariness, such a judgment cannot be left to a single individual; on the contrary, it requires the consideration and integration of a plurality of points of view. Scholars, in particular those from academia, have always been considered as "experts" in the different fields of knowledge, their expertise being more of a theoretical and abstract nature. According to the tenets of the so-called "new educational research" (Wittrock 1986; Tochon 2000; Houssaye et al. 2002; Damiano 2006), however, we should not forget that knowledge of practice also resides in practitioners and that our understanding of education is best when theoretical knowledge and practical experience meet. This is even truer when it comes to good practices, which always need to be seen in their respective contexts (Alexander 1997). It is impossible, in other words, to say what is good and what is not in absolute terms, and this is the reason why, according to Coffield and Edward, we prefer the term *good practice* to that of *best practice*, since the second "also implies that there is only one approach which, if used, will solve any difficulties" (Coffield and Edward 2009, 375). As a consequence, direct knowledge of the real contexts in which MLE projects take place is essential in order to determine quality characteristics.

To make comprehensible and acceptable value judgments that lie behind good practices, it is necessary, however, that the criteria they are based on are, first of all, explicit. Then, to decide which MLE practices are good and which are not, we cannot solely rely on economistic criteria of effectiveness (what makes students learn more?): firstly because effectiveness is not an absolute value, but related to a certain context; secondly, and mostly, because we may consider other values as equally or more important, such as equality of opportunity, or participation of all students in class. Therefore, we need to recognize that the quality of an MLE experience – just like the quality of all social actions in general (Pirsig 1999) – is shaped by a whole range of factors that cannot always be precisely quantified, but nevertheless must not be neglected: teachers' ability, organization of time and space, teaching methods, involvement of external experts, availability of technical facilities, and so on.

Finally, it is important to ask to what purpose we need to define good practices in MLE. Beyond the mere evaluative use of this construct – for instance, in the context of awards or to determine whom to

invite to a conference or which article to publish in a professional journal – today's insistence on good practice, as mentioned before, is above all due to the tendency of policy makers to support policies outlining future developments of a certain sector based on examples of good practice that can serve as a model for practitioners. According to this logic, good practices are a tool for practitioners to improve the quality of certain educational services.

It is primarily from this angle that the tool presented in the following pages has been conceived. Its aim is not to rank projects or teachers (sometimes a brief, intelligently designed MLE unit taught in a small school with few resources can be as admirable as one done in a more privileged context involving many material and human resources) nor to provide a lengthy list of activities to be implemented passively and uncritically (thus putting additional weight on the shoulders of already over-taxed teachers). Instead, the key objective is to provide an instrument for the development of educators' competence in teaching MLE, geared towards implementing activities of "feasible quality." Thus, this is a tool of self-evaluation, especially useful for questioning and examining our own experience, either individually or in a community of practice (Wenger 1998).

This self-evaluative aim of the tool is the main difference distinguishing it from other approaches to the evaluation of good practices in MLE, such as the model put forward by Parola and Ranieri (2010).[2] Within the context of an international project on MLE practices in six European countries, they evaluated 309 experiences in different educational settings, according to a theoretical framework very similar to the one I am proposing (i.e., paying attention to diverse contexts and focusing on multiple aspects of educational processes) and based on the following indicators: "educational relevance, teaching approach, media use, sustainability of the experience, product, documentation quality, evaluation system and tools" (ibid., 91-92). According to the general objectives outlined by Parola and Ranieri, their evaluation model is meant to serve the testing of MLE programs rather than to be used for (self-)evaluation. This is reflected by some of the indicators and criteria, which cannot be applied by the teachers whose experience is being evaluated. For assessing the "evaluation system and tools", for

instance, the criterion "appropriateness of assessment tools" (ibid., 98) is proposed, "appropriateness" being a rather subjective category for self-evaluation. Also, the teaching approach is described by only four general indicators ("planning appropriateness; effectiveness of methods; content accuracy and appropriateness to the student level; and student engagement"; ibid., 96). These may be useful for external evaluations, which tend to be based on written documentation, but they do not help teachers in improving self-awareness of their teaching methods.

Moreover, while I consider the model by Parola and Ranieri a good example of MLE practice evaluation, it cannot avoid the logical short circuit I described before: the authors make the evaluation criteria very explicit, but do not explain *how* and *why* they decided that these criteria are relevant to understand whether a practice is good or not.

2. Features of MLE good practice in international literature

At international level, there are a number of indications and guidelines suggesting characteristics of what may be considered quality MLE. These can be found in official resolutions of international organizations, documents prepared by research institutions or professional associations, and overviews compiled by eminent scholars in the field (UNESCO 1982; Aufderheide 1997; Masterman 1997; Buckingham 2003; European Centre for Media Literacy 2005; French National Commission for UNESCO 2007; European Association for Viewers Interests 2008; The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program 2010; Bonomi Castelli 2006; National Association for Media Literacy Education n.d.). In a previous paper, I have already given a detailed analysis of these texts with a view to comparing their recommendations (Felini 2010a). Here, I will limit myself to summarizing some of the conclusions that guided the subsequent research path.

First of all, the analysis of the above documents confirms the aforementioned lack of appropriate tools for evaluating MLE projects. In fact, the European Association for Viewers Interests (2008), the French National Commission for UNESCO (2007) as well as the European Centre for Media Literacy (2005) all call for the elaboration of evaluation systems at central and/or local level. Moreover, all of the texts consider MLE as key in the education of new generations, not

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[2] A comprehensive review of evaluation and assessment models in the area of MLE has recently been conducted by Martens (2010).

as a marginal exercise (to be relegated to some limited contexts or target groups) or an elective activity (to be chosen only by those who are interested). In the documents, also the idea prevails that media education can be better implemented in contexts of cooperation among people with different competence areas, with the external collaboration of media professionals and the involvement of families, as well as in interdisciplinary or cross-curricular units (Masterman 1997; Buckingham 2003; The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program 2010; National Association for Media Literacy Education n.d., 2.4). Finally, another set of recommendations that recurs insistently concerns the use of active, participatory and discovery-based teaching methods, such as group discussions or the creation of media products (videos, posters, journalistic work etc.) (Masterman 1997; European Centre for Media Literacy 2005; Ceretti, Felini and Giannatelli 2006). The NAMLE's *Core principles of media literacy education*, in particular, highlight the importance of teaching methodologies, stressing that "HOW we teach matters as much as WHAT we teach", and that "MLE is most effective when used with co-learning pedagogies" (National Association for Media Literacy Education n.d., 4.8, 3.4).

Three issues, however, seem to emerge from the comparison of the examined papers and resolutions. Firstly, the highly abstract and general level of these texts leads to suggestions that are very far from school reality (UNESCO 1982; French National Commission for UNESCO 2007; European Association for Viewers Interests 2008). Obviously, documents issued by international organizations give priority to policy guidelines and related recommendations (teacher training, elaboration of national curricula, creation of networks, research development etc.), but the gap between what is outlined in these texts and the concreteness of everyday MLE is, in my view, a clear sign of the inability to understand that the quality of the latter is equally, if not more, affected from the bottom up: by the choices of individual schools, the actual availability of small equipment in each classroom, the relevance attached to MLE issues by the school community, educators' competence, and families' requests, to mention just a few.

Secondly, the definitions and theories of MLE in several documents seem superficial or even trite, often marked by stereotyped catchwords. "Language skills", "critical thinking", "digital citizenship" or "literacy"

are expressions that keep coming up, but seem to betray a lack of awareness that, behind these formulas, there are diverse pedagogies of MLE and different conceptions of media. In other words, my criticism is that at times these texts lack in-depth reflection on what MLE is, what is its purpose, and what is the connection between teaching goals and methods. This apparent lack of awareness and reflection, then, seriously blurs the clarity of the results one would need if the ultimate objective is indeed to improve the quality of MLE practices.

Thirdly, the literature review on quality MLE gives us – besides individual indications (all valid, but in need of systematization) – one useful basic insight: that quality cannot be reduced to any single aspect. In fact, the documents deal with, at least, four aspects of quality to be considered in MLE projects:
- the quality of the policies to support, develop and disseminate MLE;
- the quality of the individuals and/or institutions providing MLE;
- the quality of the organizational and infrastructural aspects of MLE activities;
- the quality of the theoretical MLE background (i.e., both the underlying pedagogy as well as the conception of media and their role in society).

3. The empirical research
3.1 Objectives, research plan, and methodology

Starting from these preliminary results, I developed an integrated system of criteria to identify quality MLE in Italian elementary schools.[3] The specification of the educational and geographical context (elementary schools in Italy) has been made necessary to respect the principle of contextualization of good practices. In line with the argument presented in Section 1, the focus of the research was to identify quality criteria, but also to address the issue of who defines which criteria are characteristic of good practices in MLE. In other words, if assigning the label "good" to a certain practice is related to making a value judgment,

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[3] According to Italian laws, MLE is not mandatory in all schools, even though the *Indicazioni nazionali* (National Curriculum Standards) currently in force provide a number of learning outcomes that could be easily included in this area (Felini 2010b). In elementary schools, MLE is currently taught on a voluntary basis by motivated teachers, generally as part of interdisciplinary courses or in workshops offered in the afternoon to enrich the basic curriculum; sometimes, these are co-taught by two teachers or a teacher and a technical instructor.

the underlying problem is to understand beforehand *who, and on the basis of which criteria*, evaluates that practice as it has been designed and conducted.

Therefore, the research plan used to develop a framework of quality standards for MLE practices in Italian elementary schools consisted of four phases:

1. scientific and institutional literature, both Italian and international (see Section 2), was analyzed with a view to identify recurring criteria and indicators by which good practices of MLE are defined. These criteria were grouped and integrated into a preliminary draft of an organic framework;

2. this first list of indicators was submitted to three Italian MLE scholars, whose comments and recommendations regarding the draft framework were recorded. They were selected because of their expertise in the field, confirmed by their publications, participation in research groups, and their work as consultants for national or regional boards of education. Obviously, these scholars' opinions are not free of subjectivity, but they are nonetheless informed by their knowledge of recent educational research done in MLE;

3. the same list of indicators was submitted to five elementary school teachers with significant professional experience in MLE. All of them have worked as elementary teachers for at least twelve years and as MLE teachers for at least five. In addition, four of them have experience as trainers of other educators in the field of MLE. Their comments (which were also recorded) have been particularly valuable in order to bridge the gap between theory and the everyday school reality mentioned before;

4. the synthesis of the information gained from the literature review and the suggestions gathered during the expert interviews were incorporated into a comprehensive proposal of quality criteria, which is presented below (see Section 4). This work of systematization is also based on both my theoretical knowledge and field experience of nearly fifteen years, including the co-ordination of the design and development of a MLE curriculum for elementary schools (Ceretti, Felini and Giannatelli 2006).

As one can see, the entire research path is based on a critical, constructivist and inter-subjective epistemological paradigm (Habermas 1985; Gadamer 1986; Caronia 1997; Mortari 2007), which rejects the notion of an *objective* view that exists regardless of the subject; this is particularly crucial in this case, where setting criteria as absolute values could hide either an insufficient theoretical elaboration or an ideological vision. Moreover, since quality criteria potentially affect the choices and practices of a large number of individuals, they need to be shared through a transparent process in which the personal positions of everybody involved are made as explicit as possible, and which is open to scrutiny and criticism. Under these conditions, it should be possible to build a framework based on the synthesis of a large range of views. The aim of this is not to establish a *true* list of quality criteria, but to create something that is *reliable* because it has been given value through a methodical and documented process.

The academic experts consulted during the research were:
- Alberto Agosti, Professor of Education at the University of Verona;[4]
- Floriana Falcinelli, Professor of Education at the University of Perugia;[5]
- Roberto Farné, Professor of Education at the University of Bologna.[6]

They participated in semi-structured interviews (Fontana and Frey 1994) conducted between September and December 2011 (see protocol in Annex 1); during the interviews, respondents were given sufficient time to carefully read the draft list of criteria. The audio files containing the recorded interviews as well as the draft list of indicators that the interviewees were shown can be found at: http://qualityMLE.wordpress.com (with the permission of the respondents).

Using the same method (see protocol in Annex 2), in July 2012 I interviewed five elementary school teachers – selected according to the criteria outlined above –, and presented them, too, the draft framework of quality criteria and indicators. The teachers interviewed

[4] Agosti has worked on film education for more than 20 years and published books as well as several academic articles in this field.

[5] Falcinelli has published books and articles on educational media and MLE for more than 20 years. She coordinated a large research project on MLE in elementary schools in the region of Umbria (funded by the regional Office of Education) as well as a national research project on teaching practices involving media (funded by the Ministry of Education).

[6] Farné has published books and articles on image, film, and television education for more than 30 years. He coordinated a national survey on MLE in Italian elementary and middle schools (funded by the regional Communication Commissions).

were:

- Susanna Lemmi, "San Rocco" Primary School, Portoferraio (Livorno);
- Paola Mastronardi, "Giovanni Pascoli" Comprehensive School, Quattro Castella (Reggio Emilia);
- Liana Peria, "Giuseppe Giusti" Comprehensive School, Campo nell'Elba (Livorno);
- Emanuela Pucci, "Gianni Rodari" Primary School, Nettuno (Rome);
- Manuela Valenti, "Arturo Toscanini" Comprehensive School, Parma.

The audio files containing the recordings of these interviews can also be found at: http://qualityMLE.wordpress.com.

The interviews were examined carefully using qualitative content analysis and, specifically, the summary technique (Mayring 1988, 53), which consists in the reduction of the material "in such a way as to preserve the essential content and by abstraction to create a manageable corpus which still reflects the original material" (Titscher et al. 2000, 62). By this approach, the interviewees' input was summarized, concept by concept, in bulleted lists. Recurring ideas were underlined in different colors, as were original thoughts, hesitant and confident answers, doubts and questions raised. In this way a long series of elements emerged, that formed the critical basis for revising and elaborating the initial draft of indicators.

3.2 Findings

While the recordings used for the qualitative content analysis can be accessed online, I would like to summarize here the main ideas and conclusions drawn from the interviews, substantiated by some meaningful excerpts. It is important to remember, though, that the aim of my research has not primarily been to collect general ideas about good practices in MLE – which nonetheless emerged and were recorded –, but to review, amend and improve my draft list of criteria and indicators. Therefore, the findings outlined here are those prior to the elaboration of the final list, which is presented in the next section.

Feedback from the scholar interviews led me to increase the number of quality indicators and revise their order. In particular, criteria regarding parental involvement, teacher training and the quality of the media products created during an MLE unit were added to the framework.

Moreover, Professor Agosti highlighted the importance of two ideas: 1) the need of using active teaching methods, which allow children to express and compare their ideas as well as to work individually; 2) the difficulty in applying the concept of good practice and the necessity to take into account, in a research project like this, the sensitivity and actual possibilities of teachers. As Agosti pointed out:

> *Placing the word "good" before "practice" constitutes a pre-judgment, which is why we [as scholars] put ourselves in a dangerous position. What does it trigger at the emotional level to be asked "what is a good practice", especially in a practitioner? One cannot immediately put oneself in the role of a judge; especially, one cannot ask a practitioner to do so, if it's you, an academic, to ask the question. The risk is that what practitioners really want to say will never emerge, mainly because they want to look good*[7] (interview with Alberto Agosti, Dec. 9, 2011).

Professor Falcinelli, on the other hand, elaborated on the "cycle" of good practices (adequate planning → careful execution → constant documentation → reflection on the experienced practice) as well as on the overlap between the objectives of MLE and those of other disciplines: "In addition to the specific aims of MLE," she said, "I would also identify intersections with other competence areas, both cross-disciplinary and in terms of citizenship"[8] (interview with Floriana Falcinelli, Sept. 30, 2011). Moreover, she stressed that children should be given the opportunity to use technological tools themselves during activities. In her view, "it's quality if children use the media themselves, not the teacher. The children should be the protagonists using the tools"[9] (*ibid.*).

Prof. Farné, finally, focused on the meaning of

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[7] "Il fatto di anticipare la parola 'buone' davanti a 'pratiche' costituisce una pregiudiziale, perché ci si pone in una posizione pericolosa. Cosa può suscitare a livello emotivo, specialmente a un pratico, il sentirsi chiedere cos'è una buona pratica? Non ci si può porre immediatamente in una posizione di giudizio, né soprattutto chiedere a un pratico di farlo, se sei tu, accademico, a porre la questione. Il rischio è che non emerga ciò che realmente i pratici vogliono dire, soprattutto perché vogliono fare bella figura."

[8] "Oltre alle finalità specifiche della media education, individuerei anche le intersezioni con altre competenze, disciplinari e di cittadinanza."

[9] "È qualità se i bambini usano i media, non l'insegnante. I bambini devono essere protagonisti nell'uso degli strumenti."

good practices, stressing that their elaboration should lead to new knowledge about teaching. He also insisted that good MLE should contribute to the development of critical thinking skills, alongside objectives such as fostering relational and communication competencies as well as self-confidence. As he elaborated:

> *If I should think of an element that determines the quality of MLE in elementary schools, I would say it's the ability of the experience to attain the acquisition of appropriate critical thinking skills in children (i.e., the ability to make comparisons, observations, linguistic operations, evaluations etc.). These are things that nobody teaches but school. Schools must include media in their activities, thinking of them as texts, with the same dignity as a poem. However, they must choose good things, things that have value. It's not true that bad movies work. This is the teachers' responsibility, a huge responsibility[10]* (interview with Roberto Farné, Nov. 3, 2011).

Unlike the feedback provided by the academic experts, the teachers' input was far more homogeneous. All of them stressed the following points:

- The methodological aspects of good MLE, in particular, active teaching, effective use of group work, and children's active involvement. Manuela Valenti, for instance, said: "I'd focus more on the organization within the classroom: MLE cannot be taught as a lecture. Teachers should work more with groups and in workshop settings, with the aim of fostering skills [instead of transmitting mere knowledge]. [What is also important is] the capacity to handle the class in different ways, each specifically chosen for a certain situation and the particular type of learning that is to be achieved"[11]

(interview, July 3, 2012). Liana Peria, speaking of her past experiences, also asked herself: "What was good about those experiences? First of all… the newness… the children's involvement, and the fact that they got to produce something concrete"[12] (interview, July 18, 2012).

- The need to adequately document activities so as to ensure reproducibility. One teacher said, for instance: "I would insist on documentation, because in this way, other colleagues can see what has already been done"[13] (interview with Emanuela Pucci, July 13, 2012). And another one explained: "We always see documentation as a burden; we don't have a project-oriented culture. But it is necessary and helpful for our work… [Documentation] is not only a formal goal; in fact, it is essential to make the process reproducible and constitutes a wealth of expertise for the whole institute. Otherwise, MLE will not become something one would normally do, but something that is carried on by only a few motivated teachers. The aim, however, is to make MLE everyday"[14] (interview with Manuela Valenti, July 3, 2012).

- The effectiveness of co-teaching, which is becoming increasingly rare nowadays.[15] "Today we have the problem that there's only one teacher at a time [in the classroom], since co-teaching has come to an end. This is an obstacle to involving the children one by one, because sometimes we can't do much more

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[10] "Se devo pensare a un elemento che faccia la qualità della media education nella scuola primaria, direi la capacità dell'esperienza di raggiungere l'acquisizione di adeguate capacità critiche nei bambini (ovvero, la capacità di fare confronti, osservazioni, operazioni linguistiche, valutazioni…). Queste sono cose che se non fa la scuola non fa nessun altro. La scuola deve portare i media dentro le sue attività, considerandoli come dei testi, con la stessa dignità di una poesia: deve però scegliere le cose belle, le cose che hanno valore. Non è vero che i film brutti servono… È questa la responsabilità degli insegnanti, una responsabilità enorme."

[11] "Io punterei di più sull'organizzazione all'interno della classe: la media education non può essere una lezione frontale, bisogna lavorare di più per gruppi e in laboratorio, e per competenze. La capacità di gestire la classe in diversi modi, ciascuno specifica-

mente scelto per quel momento e per quel tipo di apprendimento che si vuole fare raggiungere."

[12] "Cosa avevano di buono queste esperienze? Prima di tutto… la novità… il coinvolgimento della classe e il fatto di arrivare a produrre qualcosa di tangibile."

[13] "Insisterei sulla documentazione, perché così altri colleghi possono vedere cosa già è stato fatto."

[14] "La documentazione la vediamo sempre come un peso, non abbiamo la cultura del progetto. Ma è necessaria e funzionale al nostro lavoro… [Documentare] non è però un obiettivo solo formale, perché si tratta di qualcosa di indispensabile per rendere il percorso riproducibile e un bagaglio di competenza per tutta la scuola. Altrimenti la media education non diventa qualcosa che normalmente si fa, ma resta qualcosa che solo alcuni insegnanti motivati portano avanti. Lo scopo, invece, è trasformare la media education in quotidianità."

[15] The Italian elementary school lasts five years, and each teacher follows a group of children over the entire period from grade 1 to 5. Between 1985 and 2008, teachers predominantly worked in pairs in two parallel classes; they taught all the main subjects, and there was the possibility to co-teach in the classroom for some hours a week. This possibility is very effective from an academic point of view, but, obviously, it is also very costly; thus, it has been severely limited by the latest educational reforms (Law 169/2008).

than lecture"[16] (interview with Paola Mastronardi, July 3, 2012).

In line with this, the interviewees were also asked to elaborate on what else they considered obstacles to teaching MLE at elementary school level, which was necessary to avoid the inclusion of indicators referring to an "unattainable quality". It turned out that, apart from the already noted scarcity of co-teaching, the main obstacles are related to teachers' resistance and lack of motivation and training, on the one hand, and to limited time, space and technological equipment, on the other. As Susanna Lemmi pointed out: "First of all, there's a problem regarding our training, as teachers; then, there's a financial problem, affecting the acquisition of equipment"[17] (interview, July 13, 2012).

Finally, all teachers interviewed expressed strong doubts about considering the institutionalization of MLE at school level, which would entail the inclusion of MLE into the POF[18] as a quality criterion. As one teacher explained:

> *I would put this idea of institutionalizing MLE in brackets. It's already a daily battle in the School Committees, and certain things just go on by inertia. On the one hand, the inclusion of MLE in the POF is very hard to achieve and, on the other, it does not even guarantee that things will actually be done. Of course, it would be desirable to include MLE in the POF, but I don't see this as something indispensable*[19] (interview with Manuela Valenti, July 3, 2012).

And another teacher confirmed: "I don't know how the institutionalization could be agreed on by all members of the School Teachers Committee – it's not even

necessary"[20] (interview with Paola Mastronardi, July 3, 2012). As a result of these comments, the criteria relating to the institutionalization of MLE, on which the international literature and the scholars interviewed so strongly insisted, were removed from the final version of criteria to identify good practice in MLE.

Overall, the teachers' input led me to review or delete certain criteria and indicators, which appeared disproportionate compared to the actual possibilities at school, and to put more emphasis on others. Regarding the relationship with students' families, for example, one teacher remarked: "This is very interesting: I've never really cared much about it, never even thought of this. But it's true: it's important"[21] (interview with Paola Mastronardi, July 3, 2012). As for the importance of originality as a criterion of MLE quality, I recorded different opinions. Most of the interviewees agreed that "of course, originality is important, not only in MLE, but in everything we do"[22] (interview with Susanna Lemmi, July 13, 2012), or that "it certainly constitutes an element of quality"[23] (interview with Emanuela Pucci, July 13, 2012). Some practitioners, however, had "doubts about this originality thing. First of all, because we always start from familiar ground; only then one can introduce something more unusual and special"[24] (interview with Manuela Valenti, July 3, 2012). As a result, the originality criterion remained part of the final framework, but was substantially revised.

4. Criteria and indicators for quality MLE in Italian elementary schools

As a result of the research outlined above – i.e., the analysis of scientific and institutional literature as well as the interviews with scholars and practitioners – I would like to present a systematic proposal of criteria and indicators for quality MLE in Italian elementary schools (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

Formally, the features of good practice have been grouped according to five main criteria of quality (teaching methods, actors, organization, theoretical

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[16] "Oggi c'è la difficoltà di essere solo un insegnante alla volta, per colpa della fine delle compresenze: ciò è di ostacolo al coinvolgere i bambini uno per uno, perché talvolta non si può far molto altro che una lezione frontale."

[17] "Anzitutto, c'è un problema di formazione nostra, dei docenti; poi c'è un problema economico, di reperimento degli strumenti."

[18] POF (= Piano dell'Offerta Formativa) is a public document, annually updated, which contains the mission statement and the educational activities offered in each Italian school institute.

[19] "Questa parte dell'istituzionalizzazione la metterei un po' tra virgolette: è una battaglia quotidiana nei Collegi, certe cose vanno avanti per inerzia. Il fatto che la media education venga messa nel POF, da un lato è molto difficile da ottenere e, dall'altro, non garantisce che poi le cose vengano fatte davvero. Chiaramente è auspicabile che la media education sia nel POF, ma non la vedo come cosa indispensabile."

[20] "L'istituzionalizzazione non so quanto possa essere condivisa dal Collegio Docenti: non è nemmeno indispensabile."

[21] "Il tema del rapporto con le famiglie è molto interessante, anche se io non l'ho mai curato molto; non ci ho mai pensato. Ma è vero, è importante."

[22] "Certamente l'originalità è importante, non solo nella media education, ma in tutto."

[23] "L'originalità è sicuramente un elemento della qualità."

[24] "Ho dei dubbi su questa cosa dell'originalità. In primo luogo perché si parte sempre da un terreno conosciuto: solo dopo ci si può lanciare in qualcosa di più inconsueto e particolare."

background, and originality), each of which is further refined by several sub-criteria (or areas of investigation) and corresponding sets of indicators. The terms "criteria" and "indicators" are used as proposed by Castoldi (1998); thus, "criteria" are the aspects of a given phenomenon (in this case MLE activities) which define its value. Criteria may be found in different "areas of investigation". (The organization of a given educational activity, for instance, is a quality factor which we may consider in different areas: at school or class level, in terms of the use of equipment or human resources, with regard to the degree of interconnection with other schools or institutions in the area, etc.). Finally, for each criterion and area, the framework suggests sets of "indicators", i.e., observable pieces of evidence defined in operational terms, which indicate if (and to what degree) the quality criteria are met.

At the content level, on the other hand, the research process outlined before led me to propose five quality criteria, which can be applied to MLE activities in Italian elementary schools (see also Figure 1):

a) the adequacy and effectiveness of the teaching methods;
b) the competence and involvement of the actors in the MLE activity, as well as the forms of support provided by the school or other institutions participating in the project;
c) the effectiveness, structuring and coherence of the project's organization;
d) the awareness of the underlying MLE theories as well as their appropriateness;
e) the originality of the MLE activity.

Figure 1 – Criteria of quality for MLE in Italian elementary schools.

Considering each of these criteria and different areas of investigation, I developed and systematized 35 quality indicators, on the value of which both the scholars and teachers interviewed had given their feedback. This system is presented in Table 1 (please see Appendix) and will be commented on further below.

Regarding the first quality criterion (teaching methods), I have identified six indicators relating to the methods used in teaching MLE to children: all techniques encouraging students' active participation, exploration, discovery, discussion, personal reflection and enrichment of their media experience were considered significant within the context of quality in MLE.

Quality, for the most part, depends on people. This is why the second criterion (actors) refers to those involved in an MLE process: children, teachers, parents and media professionals. As for children, their direct participation as well as activities specifically designed for the group the teacher is working with (heeding, if necessary, but not slavishly following what guides or professional journals suggest) are considered crucial with regard to quality in MLE. Teachers' training is another quality factor, which may include specific courses, but also participation in peer discussions. Parental involvement, then, is considered significant as well, in particular because children's media use mostly takes place at home, and many parents are quite concerned about what their children may see on television or the internet. Finally, media professionals can provide MLE teachers with valuable input both in the preparation of and during the activity, thus enriching the teachers' explanations with their practical knowledge and experience.

Regarding the third criterion of quality (organization), three areas have been identified, each of them specified by a number of indicators:

1. structuring of the MLE unit: including the existence of a written project plan, interdisciplinary links between MLE and other subjects (in line with class, school or national curricula), learning assessment as well as forms of (self-)evaluation regarding the activity, all of which are considered quality indicators;

2. equipment: the students' possibility to use the tools (cameras, computers etc.) themselves as well as the suitability of the equipment for the purposes of the respective activity are considered indicators of quality;

3. documentation and dissemination of results: the continuous documentation of all activities with the aim to increase media awareness and knowledge among families, schools, local communities and teachers through meetings, conferences, competitions or teacher trainings is considered an important quality indicator as well.

Concerning the underlying theoretical background of MLE practices, two aspects were considered crucial quality factors: on the one hand, a clear awareness among all the teachers involved in the project about the expected outcomes for the children, both with regard to MLE objectives and objectives linked to other disciplines as well as in terms of key-competencies qualification (relational skills, self-confidence, respect for equipment and workplace, accuracy, team working skills etc.); on the other hand, the existence of an explicit reference theory regarding the role of media in today's society and the role of MLE in educating tomorrow's citizens. These two elements were considered indicators of quality MLE, since they can help to avoid impromptu teaching.

Finally – and although there were different opinions about this among the teachers I interviewed – a fifth MLE quality criterion was added: originality. This refers not only to the innovative character of the activity's content, which needs to relate to the current, "liquid" (media) reality, but also to the originality of the teaching methods, to be adapted to contexts and addressees, as well as to the originality of the media message (video, journal, poster, photo book etc.) that is produced by the students during the unit. In this sense, a lack of originality has been considered symptomatic of a limitation to the most common and worn-out teaching routines, which can hardly respond to a media world in constant flux nor to the changing needs of new generations of students.

Overall, compared to other frameworks analyzed in Sections 1 and 2, the methodology used to develop the framework outlined above differs substantially, in particular because it emerged at the crossing of the different points of view by the scholars and practitioners. In terms of content, however, many items in this framework can also be found in others – with two significant exceptions.

Firstly, it does not contain criteria pertaining only to the political level, such as international cooperation policies or actions to mobilize stakeholders.

These are considered relevant, for example, by the French National Commission for UNESCO (2007), the European Association for Viewers Interests (2008) and the European Center for Media Literacy (2005); in the present list of criteria, having a different goal and audience, such political aspects are excluded, as the framework is targeted towards elementary school teachers with the aim to help them improve their own MLE activities.

Secondly, if we compare this framework to other documents developed to guide educators and based on pedagogical theories, there are some apparent differences as well, mostly because these texts are not expressly designed for elementary schools in one specific country. Moreover, they tend to be much less detailed. Masterman (1997), for example, lists only five general guidelines (concerning active teaching, school-family collaboration, involvement of media professionals, and cross-curricular design); and as observed in Section 1, Parola and Ranieri's model (2010) also has certain limitations. Bonomi Castelli (2006), on the other hand, presents a more comprehensive list of recommendations, but does not consider factors such as underlying theories of media and MLE, learning assessment, or originality. Finally, the *Core Principles* of the National Association for Media Literacy Education (n.d.), while designed for the specific context of the United States, also bear significance for educators in the rest of the world, since the principles are rooted in sound educational values, such as critical thinking, expanded literacy, participative citizenship, and life-long MLE. Many of the guidelines are very theoretical, however. They can help educators to clarify their conception of MLE – which is also a very important goal – but do not support them in evaluating the organizational aspects of their practical activities (school/family relationship, teacher training, course structuring, involvement of media professionals, originality, documentation and dissemination of results).

For all these reasons, the list of quality criteria and indicators presented in this paper can be a specific tool for Italian teachers who want to improve their own MLE activities as well as for teacher trainers working in the field.

5. Implications for practice and future research: The framework as a tool for teachers and teacher educators

After ten years of experience in training

MLE teachers, I can say that, at least in Italy, this kind of training is frequently faced with a number of challenges. To begin with, there is always a spasmodic interest in technology on part of the teachers, as if teaching MLE automatically becomes easier when you learn how to edit a video or find a new tool on the web. The theoretical aspects are usually perceived as unnecessary chatter, and some training participants will not even accept methodological and didactical suggestions because they prefer to continue to teach in the way they have long grown accustomed to in their daily work. Mental rigidity, thus, is the greatest enemy of educators. In addition, training interventions are chronically constrained by limited time frames, in which the trainer would like to make the participants find out many things – too many, sometimes, compared to what can realistically be achieved.

This is why the framework of quality indicators presented in this article might be used in such situations, since it has the advantage of providing a one-page only check list of indicators. This conciseness, however, is not bought at the cost of a broad perspective on MLE practices at school; on the contrary, as recognized by some of the teachers interviewed,[25] the framework allows them to consider a wide range of aspects: organizational issues; the relationships among students, teachers, parents, and professionals; teachers' activities in the classroom as well as before and after class; the production of media messages by the children, the relationship between theory and practice, the links between MLE and other disciplines, and so on. Therefore, this grid of indicators lends itself especially to teachers who have already had at least one MLE experience and, thus, can do a self-evaluation of their

own work. This can be done either individually or within a group of peers, as the framework can be used as an effective tool to guide both (self-)reflective analysis and discussion, which again can trigger – and this is the function of good practices as patterns of action – a process of improving MLE by the practitioners themselves.

In line with this thought, Castoldi (1998, 37) reminds us that the indicators are to be understood as "alarm devices, useful to indicate the proper functioning of an education system". So, also in the case of the framework presented here, good practices are not necessarily those which exhibit all indicators listed, as the proposed tool mainly serves to provide evidence indicating, basically, what went well and constituted the value of the MLE activity. For this reason, the absence of some of the features outlined above does not necessarily indicate a negative experience.

The added value of this tool, moreover, is that it signals the strengths and weaknesses of a MLE project not based on just one individual's judgment, but – within a paradigm of inter-subjectivity – on the basis of the results gained through four levels of shared elaboration: the scientific literature that served as a basis for the first draft of criteria, the comments made by the scholars, the input based on the teachers' practical experience, and my work of synthesis and systematization. The quality criteria presented here, thus, have value because they *were given value*, in a methodical, documented process.

The next step in the near future is to test the educational effectiveness of this framework in the context of actual MLE trainings for elementary school teachers. Aspects to be looked at in particular will include: the clarity of the indicators as they are formulated, the amount of information necessary to apply the grid to a project implemented by others, and the grid's potential to lead to a more critical analysis of MLE experiences that goes beyond the usual conglomeration of mere impressions on children's satisfaction and participation. In fact, only a greater awareness of what one does can guide teachers – and all of us – to continuously improve the practice of MLE.

[25] Manuela Valenti, for instance, said that the framework is "very detailed and well-structured. It considers a wide range [of aspects] that allows you to look at projects from different angles: and this is vital" ("[la griglia, in generale, mi sembra] molto dettagliata e strutturata. È un ventaglio talmente ampio che dà la possibilità di guardare ai progetti da molti punti di vista: questo è fondamentale") (interview, July 3, 2012). And as Susanna Lemmi commented, the framework "is definitely useful, but it can also frighten people, because everything that requires more work is frightening. However, if a teacher wants to work seriously, this framework can be a useful tool. Some indicators can help during the initial planning phase, others in the course of the project, and others again during the evaluation" ("[la griglia] è senz'altro utile, ma può spaventare, perché tutto ciò che ci chiede di lavorare di più spaventa. Ma se uno vuole lavorare, questo può essere un buon strumento. Alcuni punti servirebbero prima, nella fase di progettazione, altri durante lo svolgimento del progetto e altri ancora nella fase di valutazione") (interview, July 13, 2012).

Appendix

Table 1 – Systematic framework of criteria and indicators of quality for MLE in Italian elementary schools.

Criteria of quality	Sub-criteria (areas of investigation)	Indicators
a) Teaching methods	Methods and techniques used in working with students	1. Inclusion of both media analysis (texts, language use, consumption behaviors etc.) and media production by students; 2. use of both individual and group work; 3. teacher's stimulation of critical reflection on what students discover or produce in class; 4. teacher's stimulation of discussions among students, giving everybody the possibility to form and express their opinions; 5. use of active and participatory methodologies, followed by reflection on the experience; 6. inclusion of different media products than those the children normally consume: in particular, products of relevant narrative, aesthetic, social, or historical quality.
b) Actors	Centrality of children	7. Educational design based on teachers' knowledge of children, their media experience and consumption as well as their socio-cultural context; 8. children's active and personal participation in the various activities.
	Teachers' training	9. Assessment of teachers' competence before their assignment to MLE courses/units; 10. if needed, organization of specific teacher training courses before launch of a planned MLE project; 11. exchange with other teachers involved in MLE activities, and peer-to-peer evaluation.
	School/family relationship	12. Sharing with families the meaning of MLE for their children; 13. creation of forms of parental involvement to achieve the educational outcomes; 14. training for parents on family media management.
	Involvement of media professionals	15. Participation of media professionals in the design of MLE projects; 16. meetings of students with media professionals.
c) Organization	Structuring of the MLE course	17. Existence of a written syllabus stating all relevant information regarding the planned MLE activity; 18. interdisciplinary links between the MLE unit and students' other educational activities; 19. integration of the project within a school-wide MLE plan, and its possible inclusion into the POF; 20. assessment of students' learning; 21. teachers' self-evaluation of the course, based on the evidence collected and conducted individually or with colleagues.
	Use of equipment	22. Availability of technological equipment appropriate for the aims of the project; 23. use of equipment by the children themselves, as often as possible.
	Documentation and dissemination of results	24. Continuous documentation of all activities (syllabus, diary of activities, videotaping of lessons, media products produced by the students etc.) and archival of these documents and all relevant information in a specific file/folder; 25. presentation of results to the school and/or town community; 26. participation in competitions; 27. presentation on the activity at conferences and/or teacher trainings.
d) Underlying MLE theories	Awareness of the goals of the activity	28. Clear formulation of the purpose and objectives to be achieved by students, both in terms of MLE outcomes, outcomes linked to other disciplines, and outcomes related to key skills qualifications.
	MLE concept	29. Existence of an explicit concept of the media and their role in contemporary society; 30. reference of the activity to explicit concepts of MLE and media competence.
e) Originality	Originality of the MLE activity and its contents	31. Attention to current media reality and recent trends in the ever-changing media world.
	Originality of the media message produced by students during the activity	32. Originality of the language chosen by the students or of the creative solutions adopted in the message; 33. aesthetic value of the media message or of the creative solutions adopted in it; 34. communicative effectiveness of the message in view of the target audience.
	Originality of the teaching methods	35. Originality of the adopted teaching methods, especially in terms of their adaptation to the needs of the student group and its context.

Annex 1:

Protocol for the interviews with scholars in the area of MLE at school

Goals of the interview
a) Verify the usefulness of the tool;
b) verify the structure of the framework, both from a formal and content point of view;
c) verify the significance of each part of the framework, in particular with regard to the criteria and sub-criteria;
d) verify the significance of the indicators identified and determine the possible lack of other relevant indicators.

Script for the interviewer
<u>Part 1 (before showing the draft)</u>[26]
1. In your opinion, how can teachers and schools improve the quality of MLE projects? What is needed to achieve this goal?
2. Can a frame of indicators be useful? What could be the added value of such a framework?
3. In your opinion, what are the elements that contribute to the quality of MLE in elementary schools?

<u>Part 2 (after showing and explaining the draft)</u>
1. What do you think about the five general areas that compose the framework?
2. In your view, does it make sense to consider originality as a quality criterion for MLE projects?
3. In your view, does it make sense to consider the institutionalization of MLE as a quality criterion for MLE projects?
4. What concepts exist for evaluating the quality of individual activities carried out by the teacher during a MLE unit?
5. Is evaluation appropriately considered by the framework?
6. Do you think that the indicators identified for the first criterion (underlying MLE theories[27]) are meaningful? Which of them are not? Are they all appropriately operationalized?
7. Which other indicators would you suggest with regard to this criterion?

[Questions 6 and 7 are repeated for the remaining four criteria.]

8. What do you think about the structure of the framework, in particular with regard to the three columns (criteria of quality, sub-criteria, and indicators)?
9. In your view, is the framework clear from the way it is presented? Is it applicable?
10. What kind of (other) documents and tools would an evaluator need in order to apply the frame to actual MLE activities carried out in elementary schools?

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[26] The draft can be found at http://qualityMLE.wordpress.com.
[27] In the draft list of indicators I showed the experts, the criteria were differently ordered from the final version of the framework presented here.

Annex 2:
Protocol for the interviews with elementary school teachers experienced in teaching MLE

Goals of the interview
a) Explore which features are perceived as essential with regard to good MLE practice in elementary schools;
b) verify the adequacy of the framework with regard to the actual situation of MLE in Italian elementary schools;
c) verify the usefulness and the possible use of such a tool.

Script for the interviewer
Part 1 (before showing the draft)[28]
1. Can you think of an experience of MLE in elementary schools that you would consider a good practice? If so, could you please tell me about it?
2. In your opinion, what are the elements that contribute to the quality of MLE in elementary schools?
3. Are these elements feasible in today's schools?
4. What are obstacles to the implementation of good MLE practices in elementary schools?

Part 2 (after showing and explaining the draft)
1. What do you think about this framework?
2. What do you think about the five general areas that compose the framework? What other indicators would you suggest to add?
3. Are there items that you think could be expressed better or need further explanation?
4. What concepts exist for evaluating the quality of individual activities carried out by the teacher during a MLE unit?
5. In your opinion, what means originality in MLE? Is it a criterion of quality?
6. Are the indicators appropriate with regard to the situation of today's schools?
7. In your view, could this tool be of help for teachers or would it cause problems for them?
8. In your view, is the framework clear from the way it is presented? Is it applicable?
9. Can such a frame of indicators be useful? What could be the added value of such a framework?

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[28] The draft can be found at http://qualityMLE.wordpress.com.

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