NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

World Summit on Media for Children and Youth: Media literacy education on the rise

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jul. 1, 2010 NCR Today

From June 14-18, 2010, more than 1,000 delegates from seventy countries gathered at Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden, to celebrate media literacy education at the World Summit on Media for Children and Youth. ?Celebrate? is my word, and the best way to describe the 180 sessions and enthusiastic networking that happened over the course of five days.

I was part of the SIGNIS, delegation; SIGNIS [1] is the world Catholic organization for communication. SIGNIS has been a part of the World Summit movement since 2004 in Rio, and had a significant presence at the Johannesburg World Summit in 2007 during which Cardinal John P. Foley, then president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, presented a message from Pope Benedict XVI. Alas, there was no message for this year but there was a strong Catholic presence and SIGNIS was one of the sponsoring organizations for the summit meeting.

Dr. Patricia Edgar, a teacher from Melbourne, Australia, founded the World Summit movement in 1993. The first summit was held in Melbourne in 1995, and every three years following, in London, Thessaloniki, Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, and now Karlstad. Karlstad is a university town of 84,000 people located about three hours north of Stockholm by train. Follow this link [2] for more information on the World Summit Movement, visit.

I found the people of Sweden most welcoming and they all speak English; children begin studying English at the age of six or seven. The food was on the salty side, but served with graciousness and a smile. The World Summit was very well organized. The city of Karlstad was all ready to welcome delegates with bus service and cultural events on some of the evenings. Television in the hotel was almost all American (with Swedish subtitles). The ?culture? of Ikea-style furniture was everywhere and I liked it very much. Karlstad is the hub of Sweden?s paper and pulp industry and is known for its commitment to environmental responsibility and renewable, sustainable energy.

The aims of this World Summit, in my own words, were: to offer teachers more in-depth information on media education content and best practices from around the world, to examine governmental policy in regard to curriculum development and inclusion of media literacy education, to look at health issues and media, consider early sexualization of children by media, consider ways to give children a voice through media participation and production, promote advocacy and monitoring of media for representation of children and follow-up with media organizations, to look at media literacy education and peace-making and plan initiatives for this, to examine the media industry and consumerism, to evaluate the influence of digital media and its link to marketing and consumerism, to offer a critique of media and social justice issues, to promote creativity and to consider media literacy as a bridge between religion and culture (my workshop presentation [3])- and so much more.

I also participated on a SIGNIS panel describing various Catholic media literacy programs and initiatives in the Philippines (Delia Hernandez), Fiji (Agatha Ferei), Malaysia (Lawrence John Sinniah) and the USA . I spoke

about the Pauline Center for Media Studies and the Advanced Certificate in Media Literacy program for catechists and pastoral ministers.

The United States was well represented by delegates from the National Association for Media Literacy Education [4]. Get a complete look [5] at the World Summit, including a list of speakers.

My personal view of the World Summit is that it was a very important meeting toward the institutionalization of media and/or cultural literacy within and across curricula of the school and life, formal and informal learning. It noted that teachers and parents need this learning as well, that advocacy for authentic policy regarding media for children and youth is important, that the rights of the child are still not being observed, and media literacy education can contribute toward the protection and empowerment of children.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this World Summit was looking around and seeing so many people who have been working, researching, and promoting media literacy education for more than twenty years. It has taken this long, and even longer, through summits and conferences (I recall the wonderful events planned by John Pungente, SJ, in Canada that gave me my first organized experience of media literacy education back in the early ?90?s in Guelph) to organize this concern and interest in the influence of media in today?s world ? not just knowing about it, but understanding this mediated world as the dominant culture locally and globally.

I am encouraged, too, that many new people, educators, health professionals, academics and to some extent information and entertainment media professionals as well, are now involved ? so many more than twenty years ago. Media literacy education, that is, the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, communicate, and produce media, is an educational imperative for the 21st century. I was pleased, actually surprised a little, by the interest in considering the role of media literacy as a way to talk about religion and culture.

Four concerns were paramount at the World Summit: the sexualization of children by advertising and programming, as presented by Jean Kilbourne from the U.S. and Julie Gale from Australia, digital and mobile ?push? marketing to children and frustrations about regulation, the marketization of content and neuromarketing presented by Vickie Rideout, formerly with the Kaiser Family Foundation, and that globally, education is not a high priority and in many countries, (particularly the USA) military spending so far exceeds what is spent on the education and well-being of children to be considered moral. This was referred to by both Professor Hans Rosling, Professor of International Health from Stockholm (far and away the best presenter at the Summit) and Chandra Muzaffar, of the International Movement for a Just World from Malaysia (far and away the most inspiring speaker, for me anyway.)

But although there were new people and new understandings and research on media and media literacy education, there was much that was the same as it was twenty years ago. Those who have been involved since 1985 when media education hit the scene with Len Masterman?s Teaching the Media, continue the same mantra: teach critical thinking, the ability to think for oneself, to judge, choose, act, and make meaning that is not imposed; for children to understand their world not just learn in view of testing and assessment. And, its not an issue of advocacy vs. education, but both dimensions are needed. Finally, it is still vital for the human family that we work so that the rights of children (and adults) are respected and promoted through media.

The hopeful and positive commitment to the idea that each person can make a difference in a mediated world by speaking our and participating in the educational (both for information and entertainment) social, economic, and political dimensions of the media culture, was reinforced throughout the summit.

My photos of the World Summit are on Facebook [6]

The next World Summit is planned for 2013 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

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