MILA RESPONSE TO CURRICULUM REVIEW CALL FOR EVIDENCE
November 2024

The Media and Information Literacy Alliance (MILA) is a new charity, registered in late 2023, whose purpose is to promote media and information literacy (MIL) in the UK, across all sectors and for all age groups. We work in partnership with a range of organisations, many of which have a particular focus on school education. In particular, for the purposes of responding to this call for evidence, we have received valuable input and advice from the Association for Citizenship Teaching, the Media Education Association, Parent Zone, Internet Matters, SP4IL, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the CILIP Information Literacy Group, all of which have an interest in MIL education. Most of these organisations are providing detailed responses from their own relevant perspectives, which MILA will not duplicate; instead, we provide a high-level, broad view to set out the importance of MIL for a rounded education.

MIL is the ability and confidence to engage fully and critically with media and information in our connected daily lives. Although MIL refers explicitly to media literacy and information literacy, it is closely aligned and overlaps with a range of other pertinent literacies including critical, digital, health, data and statistical.

MIL is a fundamental building block for a healthy, inclusive society — a society in which everyone is empowered to engage safely and critically with information, and with how information is mediated. It helps people to be discerning in the way that they use, share and create information, thereby contributing to civic engagement, social cohesion, and democratic participation. As such, MIL is more than just about protecting against online harms such as misinformation and disinformation, which is how it has tended to be framed in UK public policy; MIL is fundamentally about developing a critical understanding of information and media environments [1]. It helps to develop an understanding of where information comes from, how it is mediated and of crucial developments such as AI - and more broadly, to understand how the world works. Decades of research and practice tells us what works in MIL education [2]. We know from this work that MIL both protects citizens *and* benefits society [3].

It follows that MIL education needs to form an integral and recognised part of the school curriculum, across all key stages. The preamble to the call for evidence states that "the curriculum and assessment system must ensure that young people leave education prepared for life and work, equipped with the knowledge, skills and attributes they need to thrive and become well-rounded citizens". These attributes must necessarily include MIL, in recognition of the fundamental importance of skills and competencies that prepare young people for their digital futures and nurture their ability to make sense of the complexities of rapidly evolving information and media environments, including their critical thinking ability.

Currently, there is minimal MIL education in schools in England, with many schools doing little or no work in this area. MIL may feature in the national curriculum for Citizenship and subjects such as Media Studies and Citizenship, but it is addressed in a fragmented and uneven way, with little or no assessment, no oversight and no clear guidance for teachers and school leaders. Ofsted has pointed out, for instance, that the curriculum offer in citizenship does not typically match the scope and ambition of the national curriculum [4], and we

would argue that this shortcoming contributes to the lack of comprehensive and substantial MIL education. It's worth noting that the International Baccalaureate addresses and assesses MIL, but it is only offered in this country in a tiny number of schools.

We are encouraged by the views expressed by the Secretary of State for Education when she suggested, in August, that critical thinking, and the associated ability to show discernment towards what appears online, should be embedded in taught subjects [5]. We note with interest also the views expressed by DCMS and DSIT Ministers, in oral evidence to the House of Lords, about the importance of ensuring a place for media literacy in the school curriculum [6].

MILA proposes that:

- The curriculum must give due recognition to how MIL relates to young people's daily informational and digital experiences, and to their future needs as active, engaged members of society.

- MIL should be properly incorporated across and within the curriculum consistently, coherently and in a well-planned manner, with greater clarity about what is expected from teaching it. This would give MIL its due prominence, at all key stages, so that it is better recognised as an indispensable part of all young people's education, not just in secondary schools but primary schools too – as is the case across much of Europe and for instance also in the US, in states including Texas, New Jersey and most recently, California. This means not only reinforcing the place of MIL education in key subjects where it has traditionally been taught, such as Media Studies, Citizenship and English, but recognising the relevance of MIL (including its relationship to critical thinking and information discernment) in a wide range of subjects where it either does not properly feature at present, or does so in an ad hoc, uncoordinated way.

- MIL should be judiciously incorporated into the formal assessment of knowledge and skills, and included in school inspections as an essential day-to-day competency taught by teachers and learned by students. In due course, Ofsted could be asked to make a thematic review of MIL.

- The training of both existing and new teachers, particularly in subjects where MIL features little and therefore where teachers have had little exposure to it, needs to be fully considered.

- The role of school librarians (and, to some extent, public librarians too) in supporting MIL education needs to be much better recognised. Librarians, as information professionals, can make a key, cross-curricular contribution, but this requires their teaching or teaching support role, and their own training and/or upskilling needs, to be properly acknowledged and supported by their teaching colleagues and their school management.

- The evidence base for MIL education should be developed through means such as adding MIL to the Department for Education's Areas of Research Interest and including MIL among the Education Endowment Foundation's evidence-based resources.

We propose this because the research tells us that:

- MIL education can improve the academic performance of secondary school students, notably by developing their critical analysis skills and comprehension abilities [7].

- MIL education has been shown to lessen the vulnerability of young people to misinformation, conspiracy, radicalisation, and fake content, and to help them to use AI responsibly [8].

- MIL education can help to foster civic engagement and increased exposure to diverse perspectives, as well as promoting more cohesive societies [3] [9].

- 'Quick fix' responses such as fact-checking tools and online resources are less effective and sustainable for MIL than longer term educational programmes [10].

- MIL activities which take place out of school, as opposed to being integrated in the curriculum, rarely reach the poorest children who are the most vulnerable to misinformation and online harms, as evidenced by the summer riots [11].

- MIL has a positive impact on young people's wellbeing, mental health and their behaviour in the digital environment. Over time, this makes the media and information ecosystem a healthier place for us all [12].

- When children are media and information literate and can use AI responsibly they take this home. This creates intergenerational MIL which has clear benefits for families and for the communities which schools serve [13].

A drive by the Department for Education to give greater prominence to MIL would utilise the skills and experience of education and information professionals already working in schools, including primary teachers, and secondary teachers of Media Studies, ICT and Citizenship. In turn, they can work with teachers of other subjects, and importantly also with school librarians, to integrate MIL better across the curriculum. Teacher training programmes will also need updating. Of course, there are costs associated with this, but the cost to society of *not* equipping young people with media and information literacy will be much greater [14] [15].

References

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