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Media Literacy in Kazakhstan: Educators' Perspectives and Policy Implementation

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to examine media literacy in schools in Kazakhstan from the perspectives of schoolteachers and principals with a focus on diverse school settings. Conducted during the 2023-2024 academic year, the research involved three secondary schools located in rural, city, and regional levels in the southern part of Kazakhstan. The qualitative research utilised (1) focus groups with teachers, (2) interviews with principals, and (3) a research journal. Purposeful sampling included schools from regional, urban, and rural areas, with 34 participants comprising 31 English as a Foreign Language teachers (hereinafter, EFL) and 3 senior school leaders (hereinafter, SLT). The study's findings reveal disparities in media literacy education, including a lack of clear regulations and ethical guidelines concerning media literacy and media usage in classrooms, as well as the lack of resources and capacity. The results highlight the need to integrate media literacy across all grades and subjects in schools in Kazakhstan. This integration requires support through clear policies, equitable access to Information and Communication Technologies (hereinafter, ICT) tools, teacher professional development, and well-defined national policies. Such measures are essential for preparing students to navigate the media landscape effectively.

KEYWORDS
Media literacy; updated curriculum; policy implementation; educators' perceptions; educational inequalities; English as a Foreign Language.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, children are exposed to unfiltered media messages with widespread internet access at home and beyond (Murray, 2023; OECD, 2015). A major concern is that many children access media platforms and social media in violation of age limitations (Setyarini et al., 2024). This, in turn, requires the development of media literacy (hereinafter, ML) among both teachers and students (Hobbs et al., 2022). In educational settings, media literacy must foster the development of critical thinking and information literacy skills, which are key to lifelong learning (Potter, 2018). By incorporating media literacy education, schools enable students to identify misinformation and, hence, make informed decisions in today's complex media landscape (Gjerazi, 2024). Teachers are identified as the most important factor in improving students' learning (Ingvarson et al., 2005; Fullan, 2016). Hence, their understanding of ML can significantly influence the effectiveness of classroom practices (Saptono, 2022; Simons et al., 2017). Particularly, teachers' ML competencies, socialisation, and intercultural interaction can play a key role in integrating ML into curricula. Facilitating teachers' ML can have a positive impact on strengthening connections between educators, institutions, and society (Almakaty, 2024). Despite the growing support for improving teachers' ML skills over the past decade, few teachers consistently apply these competencies in practice, especially when it comes to curriculum development and lesson planning (Korona, 2024; Skantz-Åberg et al., 2022; Villacrez-Cuadros et al., 2023).

Objectives

This study aims to explore (1) the educators' perceptions and practices in relation to media literacy and (2) its implementation into curricula in the developing context, of which Kazakhstan is one. While much of the existing research focuses on ML in western educational contexts (Hobbs, 2017; Knowles et al., 2023), there is a notable gap in understanding of how ML is perceived, implemented, and supported in Central Asia, especially across its diverse school settings, such as urban, rural, and regional schools. In Kazakhstan, advancing ML across different school settings aligns with global educational trends and supports equitable access to quality education (Yeleussiz, 2024). Addressing disparities in resources and educational tools between different school types and locations is essential (Zainuddin & Halili, 2016). Establishing conditions for ML can enable students to develop critical skills necessary for their academic achievement and lifelong success regardless of their economic backgrounds (Bulger & Davison, 2018). This study seeks to fill the gap in literature by examining the perceptions of educators and school leaders in Kazakhstan, which can provide a localised perspective that has been largely absent from the broader discourse. Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of integrating ML into teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to facilitate socialisation and intercultural communication (Meehan et al., 2015). Consequently, this study aims to address the following research question (hereinafter, RQ):

RQ 1: How do educators perceive ML across diverse school settings in Kazakhstan?

RQ 2: To what extent do the existing policies and practices promote ML diverse school settings in Kazakhstan?

Education system in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan provides free and comprehensive education from primary to upper secondary levels, emphasising preparation for vocational or higher education pathways. Primary education (Grades 1–4) focuses on foundational skills in literacy, mathematics, and basic sciences, while lower secondary education (Grades 5–9) broadens the curriculum to include subjects such as history, foreign languages, and natural sciences, with national exams guiding students toward further education or vocational training (Pons, 2015; Sharplin et al., 2020). The curriculum integrates academic knowledge with civic values, which may align with Kazakhstan's objectives of fostering national identity and global citizenship (Kopeyeva, 2020).

According to the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reform of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2024), there are approximately 7,500 schools in the country, with around 5,000 located in rural areas and 2,500 in urban regions. The student population is approximately 3.7 million, with 2.2 million in urban areas and 1.5 million in rural regions. Kazakhstan employs around 385,830 teachers, a significant proportion of whom work in rural schools where infrastructure and resource constraints are more pronounced (Bureau of National Statistics, 2024). These statistics highlight the challenges of ensuring equitable education across urban and rural contexts in Kazakhstan, particularly in terms of human resource distribution and the provision of adequate educational support (Duman, 2024).

Kazakhstan's educational system is considered highly centralised, with the National Academy of Education named after Ybyrai Altynsarin (NAE) responsible for developing and implementing national educational standards. The NAE oversees curriculum design and provides methodological support to schoolteachers. During the 2021-2022 academic year, students were offered global competencies or elective courses aimed at developing 21st-century skills, including ML as an elective for 8th-grade learners. This course emphasised skills such as information management, evaluation, and material analysis to foster a critical understanding of media and its potential harmful effects on democratic societies (Kerimbayeva et al., 2024). In 2022, Kazakhstan approved the Model Curriculum for the Global Competences course, aligned with state educational standards (NAE, 2022). This curriculum highlights the importance of ML and its integration into classroom practices (Shaikenova & Morozova, 2019). It serves as a key document promoting the basics of ML in schools across Kazakhstan (Barlybayeva, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' perceptions of media literacy

Media literacy (ML) is conceptualised as an interdisciplinary field bridging communication studies and education, emphasising competencies such as critical thinking, media production, and self-expression. It represents the convergence of theory and practice, fostering skills for

analysing, evaluating, and creating media content (Turin & Frisen, 2020). Potter (2022) identifies six key dimensions of ML: skills, knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, motivations, and macro elements, each characterised by distinctive traits. Additionally, the European Union defines ML as encompassing advanced competencies in critical thinking, judgment, and analysis, as well as the ability to distinguish opinion from fact, transcending basic familiarity with tools and technologies (Weinand, 2018). Hobbs (2018) emphasises competence development as a core component of ML, which includes technical, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions (Yeh & Swinehart, 2022). Technical competencies involve practical skills such as using, creating, navigating, organising, and sharing content on social media (Daneels & Vanwynsberghe, 2017). Cognitive competencies focus on the ability to understand, evaluate, and critically analyse the relevance and credibility of media content (Christ & Abreu, 2020). Sociocultural competencies, also referred to as sociocultural pragmatics, require an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural norms that affect behaviours, values, beliefs, language, and discourses within media environments (Abdraimova & Dyankova, 2024; Yeh & Swinehart, 2022). Teachers' perceptions play an important role in understanding the complex relationships between their beliefs, instructional practices, and student outcomes (Akram et al., 2022; Korthagen, 2016). Teachers' beliefs about pedagogy, practice, and media literacy can have an impact on their instructional choices, classroom interactions, and effectiveness as educators. Recognising these beliefs is essential for informing educational practices and policies, designing impactful professional development programmes, and creating supportive school environments that foster student learning (Schmitz et al., 2024).

Teachers' perceptions of curricula reforms are critical for successful policy implementation (Park & Sung, 2013). Teachers bring their preconceived notions and understandings to their teaching practices (Borg, 2015). Studies indicate that teachers' perceptions and practices can also be shaped by their cultural contexts and school conditions (Hobbs, 2017; Yeleussiz, 2024). Hobbs et al. (2022) reported that teachers often interpret ML through such concepts as 'critical thinking' or 'digital citizenship', with a particular emphasis on analytical skills, source evaluation, and bias detection. Similarly, teachers' understanding of literacy, often tied to reading and writing proficiency, affects their instructional strategies (Aubakirova et al. 2024; Gervais, 2021; Sochorova & Kubiatko, 2023). Literacy traditionally involves recognising, interpreting, and reproducing language symbols and comprehension in early years (Mkandawire & Ilon, 2018). For instance, Opoku-Amankwa et al. (2011) highlight that EFL teachers often prioritise error correction and grammar, which may indicate potential limitations in broader literacy approaches. However, as media, technology, and information become integral to contemporary society, the concept of literacy has evolved dramatically. Harb and Thomure (2020), for example, advocate for expanding teachers' roles to both literacy instructors and social advocates. Kellner and Share (2019) proposed a framework in which educators integrate critical thinking and ML with reading comprehension, equipping students

with skills to interpret messages and authors' intents in media texts, much like traditional written content (Allen et al., 2022).

Promoting ML in schools

Government promotion of ML in schools is crucial and requires comprehensive and sustained efforts (Meehan et al., 2015; Manfra & Holmes, 2020). Strategic investments in infrastructure, training, and policy frameworks are pivotal in empowering educators and fostering a media-literate citizenry (Manfra & Holmes, 2020). These efforts contribute to creating an educational environment that enhances students' critical thinking and equips them with analytical skills to navigate the complexities of the digital age (Robertson & Hughes, 2011). The comprehensive and sustained efforts are necessary to integrate ML effectively into education systems. For example, Hattani (2019) highlights that despite the Moroccan government's initiatives to promote ML in secondary schools, the majority of educators (81.92% of respondents) believe these efforts are insufficient, underscoring the need for more active and consistent promotion of ML education.

Teachers' proficiency in ML is essential for harnessing digital technologies to enhance learning outcomes and prepare students for active participation in a networked society. Teachers' educational backgrounds and professional roles considerably shape their perceptions of media and have an impact on their media-related classroom practices (Weninger et al., 2017). The rapid development of social media, evolving pedagogical approaches, and the ethical challenges posed by social networks underscore the critical need to improve teachers' ML skills (Anurogo et al., 2023; Singha, 2024). The global drivers of social media and pedagogical development highlight the importance of governance in advancing ML promotion. The integration of social media and networking tools into educational settings has the potential to enhance student engagement, facilitate peer-to-peer learning, and foster digital citizenship skills (Ahmad, 2024). Social media platforms have revolutionised communication, information dissemination, and social interaction, making it essential to critically examine their role and impact in education. By providing adequate support and resources to teachers, governments can bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring ML is effectively integrated into curriculum development, instructional strategies, and assessments (Schmeichel et al., 2018).

Ongoing professional development and supportive policies can equip teachers with the tools necessary to incorporate ML into their classrooms effectively. Providing professional development opportunities about ML is essential, as teachers often struggle with curriculum demands that may lack study materials related to ML (Fraillon et al., 2020; Korona & Hutchison, 2023; Orakova et al., 2024). This is particularly relevant in Kazakhstan, where geographical disparities might create barriers to traditional training programmes, especially for rural schoolteachers (Beikutova et al., 2024; Serikkhan et al., 2024). Teachers in rural schools often adopt a pragmatic approach to ML, emphasising basic digital skills over advanced critical media analysis due to limited infrastructure and resources (Kormos & Wisdom, 2021). This focus on rudimentary competencies is influenced by challenges such as inadequate access to technology

and insufficient training opportunities (Hohlfeld et al., 2017; Ritzhaupt & Hohlfeld, 2022). Consequently, teachers in these settings primarily rely on traditional methods, incorporating media literacy concepts through available media like printed materials and offline multimedia resources (Bajwa, 2023; Ismagulova et al., 2024). This approach underscores the need for adaptability and resourcefulness in delivering media literacy education within constrained environments (Lacković & Olteanu, 2023; Laila, 2016; Rasi et al., 2019).

RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative research was conducted in three secondary schools in southern part of Kazakhstan during the 2023-2024 academic year, employing a school-based case study design to examine teachers' and principals' perceptions of ML. This approach is particularly suitable for examining complex and context-dependent phenomena, allowing an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A case study method enables detailed exploration of specific instances within educators' real-life contexts (Yin, 2017). As a result, the data collection tools consisted of (1) focus groups with teachers, (2) interviews with school principals, and (3) a reflective research journal.

Interviews

One-to-one interviews were essential in obtaining an in-depth understanding of school conditions and policies employed to promote ML within schools. School principals are believed to play a pivotal role in fostering teacher collaboration and leadership (McLaughlin & Ayubayeva, 2015; Qanay & Frost, 2020). Therefore, the contextual insights provided by school principals were crucial in understanding school conditions (Johnson & Christensen, 2024). Consequently, individual interviews helped identify existing school conditions that either support or hinder ML development. Their interview questions covered topics such as a general overview of the school, opportunities for teacher professional development, factors affecting ML development, ethical pedagogy in the era of social media, and the use of social media as a tool for learning (Algozzine & Hancock, 2017). The interviews were further complemented by focus group discussions with teachers, enabling data validation.

Focus groups

Focus groups were utilised to engage teachers in open discussions. As research participants may hesitate to openly discuss sensitive issues during face-to-face interviews, focus groups help foster a more collaborative and comfortable environment for open discussions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The first part of the focus groups explored teachers' perspectives on ML, the ways they integrate ML into practice, and the impact of technological advancements, including social media, on their teaching and student learning (Luan et al., 2020; Corser et al., 2022; Tandoc et al., 2021). The second part focused on national policies related to ML integration and curriculum (McDougall et al., 2018). Participants were also asked about the guidelines provided by local education authorities and national institutions to assess the support available for effectively incorporating ML into educational practices (Fastrez & Landry, 2023).

Research journal

Research journals were used to document and reflect on the researchers' experiences, providing an avenue for self-awareness and a deeper understanding of their actions and responses to external factors (Holly, 2009). A research journal approach is widely recognised as a valuable tool for fostering researcher reflexivity (Borg, 2001). It enables scholars to critically evaluate their experiences and enhance their understanding of the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Serving as a platform for reflection, it facilitates the generation of new ideas, the exploration of concepts, and the discovery of insights (Maxwell, 2008). The research journal included details such as location, time, participants, organised events, and reflective questions (Fox et al., 2011). To ensure systematic documentation, a checklist was used to record information daily, with the recorded data later validated through other data collection tools (Morrison et al., 2012).

Research participants

A purposeful sampling approach was utilised to understand how varying socio-economic and cultural contexts influence ML perceptions and practices in schools (Patton, 2002). Schools were first selected based on their geographical locations to capture variations in ML practices across different socio-economic conditions and types of schools in Kazakhstan. Selection criteria also included student population size, varying scales, and resource allocations.

Table 1.

The schools' characteristics

	Oblys school	**Qala school**	**Auyl school**
Location:	Regional city	City	Village
Established:	1994	2022	2021
Type of school:	State-owned regional school for gifted children	State-owned comprehensive school	State-owned comprehensive school
Managed by:	Regional Department of Education (*Oblys*) and International Fund's Board of Trustees	City Department of Education (*Qala*)	District Department of Education (*Auyl*)
School level:	Middle and High school (age 11-17)	Primary to High school (age 6-17)	Pre-Primary to High school (age 6-17)
Student admission:	Highly selective	Gymnasium classes are selective	No selection
Financial resources:	Republican Budget	Local Budget	Local Budget
Language of instructions	English language of instructions	Mixed language of instructions (Russian and Kazakh)	Kazakh language of instructions
Size of the school	Small-sized (up to 350)	Large-sized (over 1000 pupils)	Middle-sized (between 500 and 1000)

Furthermore, the reputation and recognition of schools within their communities, innovative teaching practices, and support for gifted education programs played a key role in

school selection (see Table 1). School A (hereinafter, Oblys school) was a regional school, a state-owned highly selective institution with English as the language of instruction, catering to middle and high school students. School B (hereinafter, Qala school) was a city school, a state-owned all-through comprehensive school with mixed language instruction (Russian and Kazakh) and gymnasium classes, providing education at primary, secondary, and high school levels. School C (hereinafter, Auyl school) was a village school, a state-owned all-through comprehensive school with Kazakh as the language of instruction, serving students at primary, secondary, and high school levels.

The research involved 34 participants from Oblys school, Qala school, and Auyl school in Kazakhstan, selected through purposeful sampling to align with the research objectives. The participants included 31 EFL teachers and 3 school principals. Focus group discussions were conducted with teachers at each school, comprising Oblys school (n=10), Auyl school (n=11), and Qala school (n=10). Additionally, each school principal participated in individual interviews conducted over two sessions, each lasting 1 to 2 hours. The participants had a wide range of professional qualifications and teaching experiences, enriching the study with varied perspectives. Participants included novice teachers with 0-5 years of experience (44.12%) and highly experienced professionals with over 16 years in the field (17.65%). Their qualifications were categorised as 'Teacher' (29.41%), 'Teacher-moderator' (17.65%), 'Teacher-expert' (35.29%), and 'Teacher-researcher' (8.82%), reflecting different stages of career progression and expertise (see Table 2 below).

Table 2.

Research Participants

Characteristics		**Number (%), n = 34**
Position	Principal	3 (8.82)
	Teacher	31 (91.18)
Location	Regional	11 (32.35)
	City	12 (35.29)
	Village	11 (32.35)
Qualification category	Pedagogue	10 (29.41)
	Pedagogue-moderator	6 (17.65)
	Pedagogue-expert	12 (35.29)
	Pedagogue-researcher	3 (8.82)
Years of teaching experience	0-5 years	15 (44.12)
	6-10 years	9 (26.47)
	11-15 years	3 (8.82)
	16-20 years	6 (17.65)

Qualitative data analysis employed abductive coding (Pope et al., 2000). Thematic analysis followed six phases: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) generating codes, (3) identifying

themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2024). All interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorised into themes using both inductive and deductive approaches (Elliott, 2018). Ethical considerations were rigorously maintained throughout the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, with all participants providing written informed consent (Bekele & Ago, 2022; Wiles, 2012). Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the Kazakh National Women and Teacher Training University, ensuring compliance with research ethics standards.

FINDINGS

The data analysis revealed two overarching themes: (1) perceptions of ML and (2) the impact of national policies. The first theme encompassed subcategories such as critical thinking, information filtering, digital skills, and how educators conceptualise and integrate ML into their teaching practices. The second theme centred on educators' awareness of ethical codes and how national ML policies are interpreted, adapted, and applied locally. Each of these themes is explained in the following subsections.

Educators' perceptions of ML

Data results indicated that teachers' perceptions of ML vary across schools. While one teacher's response indicated an advanced level of ML recognition and integration into the classroom, others depicted a basic understanding and practice of ML. Teachers' open-ended responses revealed four predominant categories (supported by 36 codes across 21 distinct responses), with frequently mentioned themes including the ability to search, verify, analyse, and critically evaluate information from different sources. Participants emphasised the importance of identifying false information and connecting media content to educational contexts. Overall, the majority of participants acknowledged and recognised ML as a critical competency in the digital age:

> *ML is a skill that is necessary for everyone today. In our modern era, individuals cannot develop without the ability to search, receive, and differentiate information. Teachers must guide students in discerning truth from falsehood, particularly on social media* (Teacher, Oblys school).

This sentiment was echoed by the Qala school principal who noted that:

ML is crucial in today's digital world (School principal, Qala school).

The consensus indicates a shared understanding of ML as an essential skill for both personal and professional development. Despite this recognition, differences emerged in how confidently teachers assessed their own ML skills. Teachers from Auyl school expressed concerns about their understanding, highlighting the need for deeper engagement with the concept of ML in rural areas.

> *To be honest, I am not entirely sure what ML really means. I've heard about it, but I have never attended professional development courses on media literacy, so it's difficult to fully understand or implement it in my teaching* (Teacher, Auyl school).

Teachers in the Ayul school also report that no official guidance on ML training or ethical codes had been provided by local education authorities. As one teacher stated:

No guidelines on ML training were provided by the local education department or the National Academy of Education (Teacher, Auyl school).

Information filtering and evaluation

The second theme, which appeared in 15 responses and supported by 22 codes, focused on the necessity of information filtering and evaluation. Teachers highlighted the importance of equipping students with the skills to navigate and assess the vast amounts of information available, particularly on digital platforms, focusing on its validity and reliability. Both teachers and principals highlighted the challenge of teaching students to differentiate between false and true information, which was consistently recognised across all school types as a critical aspect of ML. The principal of Qala school expressed concern about the widespread dissemination of false information, stating:

> *We need to hold a special seminar on this [ML] to assess whether the information is true or false. Whilst novice teachers can be more tech-savvy, older teachers may be deceived without knowing. If there is any false information, they should be able to double-check it. Fact-checking is necessary* (School principal, Qala school).

The statement above highlights the need to educate both students and teachers to critically evaluate information and sources. Teachers also noted difficulties in guiding students to consistently recognize credible sources. The urban teacher mentioned that:

> *In the classroom, we integrate research projects to help students learn how to check the reliability of sources. This helps them assess information for trustworthiness. This process not only enhances their critical thinking and analytical skills but also empowers them to navigate digital platforms responsibly and fosters lifelong ML competencies* (Teacher, Qala school).

Similarly, the regional schoolteacher highlighted students' struggles in this area stating that:

> *There are cases where students do not check the authenticity of data and hence accept the information as it is depicted in media messages. Students even believe that Wikipedia is a reliable source, but we know that it is not* (Teacher, Oblys school).

These challenges indicate the necessity of implementing targeted educational strategies and providing resources to equip students in remote and deprived areas with the critical skills needed to effectively navigate the complexities of the modern media landscape.

Digital skills

The emphasis on digital skills as a core component of ML, highlighted in 12 responses supported by 18 codes, underscores their importance in effectively integrating media literacy into educational practices. Teachers noted the critical role of digital tools such as the internet and social media platforms in fostering ML, with one teacher commenting: *ML is the ability to use media tools, including websites and social networks, effectively and profitably, ensuring that*

language, nationality, religious views, and professional skills are respected in the process (Teacher, Qala school). Teachers expressed concerns that strict mobile phone policies in their schools can hinder the development of ML, as they prevent students from practising these skills during lessons. As one teacher explained:

> *The school's policy on mobile phones is very strict, making it difficult to use them during lessons. While it is possible to retrieve a phone, the process is so time-consuming—you need to find the person responsible, request the phone, distribute it, and then recollect it afterwards. By the time this is done, the lesson is practically over. Sometimes, I just decide it's not worth the effort* (Teacher, Oblys school).

However, disparities in technical infrastructure create barriers to implementing these skills, particularly in rural contexts. As one teacher from the Auyl schools noted:

> *There were many occasions when neither the school's internet nor my own worked. Interactive whiteboards were simply unavailable—we had only old-fashioned blackboards and broken desks, and even those were not always accessible. Of course, if I had access to all the necessary technical devices and reliable internet in the classroom, teaching ML would be easier* (Teacher, Auyl school).

Rural teachers consistently linked their limited access to technical needs with their ability to develop and teach ML skills. One rural teacher explained:

> *ML is not just about having the skills, but it means having the tools to apply them. Without reliable internet, proper computers, or even functional classrooms, it is difficult to teach critical thinking or usage of digital platforms. The seminars that are organized by the educational department often coincide with our lessons, and since they are conducted online, we are unable to fully participate* (Teacher, Auyl school).

Interestingly, when school principals were asked to provide an example of a highly media-literate teacher, they described teachers who actively incorporate digital tools and ICT into their teaching:

> *I once entered a biology class. The lesson was taught by a novice teacher. […] He used the blackboard, YouTube, video, CLIL method, he did everything to make the students' learning more engaging. This is a wonderful thing, if a teacher can master ICT, I think that also means being media literate* (School principal, Oblys school).

Likewise, the school principal from the Auyl school also highlighted:

> *At our school, a graduate student teacher worked 4 hours per week last year. I was impressed at that time. He gave a demonstrative lesson, which involved an interactive panel and various games to solve mathematical equations with children. I think that was a great example of a lesson demonstrating his ML. Nowadays, without proper ICT skills and working with digital media it is impossible to be fully literate* (School principal, Auyl school).

The quote above indicates that school principals perceived teachers' ML primarily as ICT skills necessary for effectively engaging with digital media. Collectively, the research

participants' responses suggest that ML is perceived as a multifaceted concept, encompassing critical thinking, information filtering, and ICT skills—each playing a crucial role in navigating the complexities of the modern media landscape.

Policy implementation

The research participants highlighted a lack of familiarity with ethical codes and guidelines related to media usage and behaviour on social media. Teachers often acknowledged this gap, with one stating: *We were not familiar with ethical codes or guidelines related to media usage. No instructions were provided from local educational departments regarding posting photos/videos of students on social networks (Teacher, Auyl school).* This may indicate a disconnect between the national policy development and its local implementation. A teacher from the Oblys school further reinforced this point, noting that:

> *We were asked to record our demonstrative lessons and post them on YouTube channel to share best practices with other regional schools. I warned students verbally that I will record and post the lesson on social platforms. […] I did not ask permission neither from students nor from their parents. None of the administrators or tutors were aware of any such regulations. However, when students were videotaped during the Republican Olympiad, school administration demanded us to get permission from both students and their parents and get informed consent forms. I understood then that such permissions were obligatory, but only at high status republican level, wherein locally we did not practise it* (Teacher, Oblys schools).

The recurrence of this code underscores the gap between policy awareness and its practical implementation in schools. A teacher from the Qala school also noted that:

> *We warned all children in advance that this lesson will be videotaped, but we did not get permission from their parents. There is an official Instagram channel of the school, where pictures of students are published. I do not think that our schools ask for parents' permission* (Teacher, Qala schools).

There were teachers who acknowledged the existence of guidelines with uncertainty. A teacher from the Qala school mentioned that instructions and ethical regulations regarding conduct on social media were provided by the National Academy of Education after Altynsaryn (hereinafter, NAE) but admitted to never being able to familiarise themselves with those policies. This may suggest that, while such policies existed, they were not always effectively applied at the classroom level. Teachers showed varying levels of awareness and adherence to ethical codes concerning the use of student images on social media, with some expressing discomfort and highlighting the lack of clear guidelines in their schools. Several teachers conveyed reluctance to upload videos or share personal lessons on the school's YouTube channel due to unease about engaging in media practices without clear directives:

> *We shared our lessons on YouTube to share our experience at the regional level. I did not want to share my lesson on YouTube either […]. It turned out that not only teachers, but*

> *also students can be affected by video recording. […] We did not get permission from children or their parents before uploading our lessons online* (Teacher, Oblys school).

Interestingly, school principals expressed varied understandings of ML policy implementation. The school principal from Qala school acknowledged that ethical 'guidelines were not provided', though new regulations, including ML, were usually introduced during the annual teachers' August conference. This suggests that while the importance of ML is recognised, it is not formally embedded in a structured curriculum or policy framework. The school principal from Oblys school confirmed that they had never received regulations on teaching and learning regarding ML. School principals also appeared uneasy when discussing national regulations and their implementation at the school level, as recorded in my research journal:

> *She did not want to criticise the implementation of national policies but felt that she feared potential repercussions for expressing her thoughts openly. This cautious approach reflected her awareness of the sensitive political climate and the need to maintain a neutral stance in public discussions. I did not get any documents or guidelines about media literacy in either of the schools or school principals* (Research Journal, 05.06.2024).

Similarly, the Auyl school principal emphasised the importance of addressing local issues, such as resource allocation and infrastructure, rather than focusing on the implementation of ML policies:

> *She told me how she attracted funds to school from local businesspeople. She also highlighted that she renovated the road to school as the old one was in terrible condition. Due to the school's strict mobile phone policy, the Auyl school leaders built a locker at the entrance, where students placed their phones upon arrival and retrieved them when leaving. This indicated that schools were creative in resolving their urgent needs rather than waiting for formal directives* (Research Journal, 03.06.2024).

These reflections highlighted that school leaders prioritised immediate local issues over broader policy goals. Both teachers and school principals consistently emphasised the need for clearer, more detailed guidelines and stronger support regarding ML:

> *There are no specific guidelines from the national education department on media literacy, making it hard to implement it into our teaching and learning consistently* (School principal, Oblys school).

This suggests that schools were largely left to interpret and implement ML independently, grappling with its ethical aspects due to a lack of policy support and clear regulations.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to (a) explore the perceptions of educators and school leaders regarding ML across diverse school settings in Kazakhstan and, (b) examine the extent to which

existing policies support the promotion of ML in these contexts. By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to the understanding of ML education in underrepresented contexts, providing a localized perspective that bridges the gap in the existing literature and aligns with global trends in equitable and inclusive education. Teachers' perceptions of ML considerably impact its integration into teaching practices (Gervais, 2021). Hobbs et al. (2022) highlight that teachers often associate ML with critical thinking, potentially narrowing its instructional scope. The findings indicate that teachers' perceptions of ML were closely tied to critical thinking and information analysis. Teachers frequently identified ML as the ability to search, verify, and critically evaluate information, underscoring its practical application in the classroom.

These findings align with existing literature, which underscores the importance of fostering ML to equip teachers with the tools to develop students' critical analytical skills effectively (Sochorova & Kubiatko, 2023). The findings highlight a contradictory understanding of ML, often conflated with digital literacy. School principals and teachers frequently described ML as the ability to use digital tools effectively, shifting the focus towards ICT tools rather than engaging comprehensively with media content and its broader implications. However, ML encompasses not only technical proficiency, but also the critical analysis and evaluation of media messages (Milutinović, 2020; Tondeur et al., 2019). These mixed perceptions risk diminishing the critical and analytical dimensions of ML, redirecting attention to superficial digital tool usage (Dmytrenko, 2024). Consequently, educators' emphasis on teaching *with* media rather than teaching *about* media neglects the deeper critical competencies central to ML (Berger & Wolling, 2019). This underscores the urgent need for clearer distinctions and integrated approaches to ML education within school curricula.

The findings align with the literature emphasising technical competencies as a core component of ML (Daneels & Vanwynsberghe, 2017), with educators highlighting the importance of ICT skills and the effective use of digital tools in ML development. Interestingly, teachers in rural areas perceived ML primarily in terms of infrastructure development rather than critical engagement with media content. That said, educators across the three types of schools expressed uncertainty about the broader concept of ML and identified the lack of training as a significant barrier to fully integrating ML into their teaching practices. Orakova et al. (2024) found that teachers' digital literacy predicts their pedagogical and technological skills, highlighting its importance as a foundation for media literacy in education. Our findings revealed that stakeholders tended to favour a protectionist stance regarding ML integration, with some schools prohibiting the use of gadgets on school premises. This reflects a traditional view of media as a potentially harmful activity that can be mitigated only through strict regulations (Burri, 2016; Yildiz Durak & Saritepeci, 2019; Yeleussiz, 2024). Such paradigms, however, are increasingly outdated in the context of the modern media environment (Tondeur et al., 2019). In the 21st century, education has shifted towards a competency-based approach, focusing on empowering students to engage critically and responsibly with media (Valtonen et al., 2019). Yet, in the absence of clear policies and regulations for ML implementation, Kazakhstan

continues to rely on outdated protectionist practices that inadequately prepare students for the realities of today's digital world.

A shift from protectionism to fostering critical media skills is essential to enable students to make informed decisions and engage effectively with media (Ismagulova et al., 2024; Naiditch, 2013; Potter, 2020; Pereira & Toscano, 2021). The policies on ML should be sustained and reinforced, requiring substantial investment in infrastructure, training, and policy frameworks to empower teachers (Robertson & Hughes, 2011; Manfra & Holmes, 2020; Meehan et al., 2015). The findings reveal a considerable gap between policy development and implementation in Kazakhstan. Teachers reported an absence of guidance on ML within the national curriculum. The lack of structured policies suggests that, despite the recognition of ML's importance, its execution remains inconsistent and underdeveloped, relying on ad-hoc solutions rather than systematic policy implementation (Sarmurzin, 2024; Schmeichel et al., 2018). These discrepancies highlight the need for cohesive policy interventions aligned with the government's educational objectives to ensure ML is fully integrated into teaching and learning practices. Besides, addressing resource shortages, communication gaps, and technical barriers is crucial for equitable and effective educational practices (Enwereji et al., 2024; Taole et al., 2024).

The findings reveal the importance of teacher development and systemic support, including improved media literacy skills, standardized training, and technological competencies to enhance education (Matjokana & Bipath, 2024; Özel, 2023; Tsakeni, 2023). Providing educators with systematic and clear guidelines is essential for effectively incorporating ML into the classroom. Korona (2024) highlights the value of online professional development in addressing teacher knowledge gaps, while Schmitz et al. (2024) emphasise the role of teachers' beliefs, skills, and subject areas on their engagement with ML. Zhang et al. (2023) further emphasise the importance of structured interventions targeting ML development. The study outcomes align with existing literature, revealing that vague policies and inadequate training hinder ML integration in schools (Ahmad Tajuddin et al., 2024; Fastrez & Landry, 2023; Yeleussiz & Tankibayeva, 2024). A lack of clarity at the policy level shifts the burden onto individual educators, potentially exacerbating educational inequalities.

Study implications

The research findings highlight several implications for facilitating ML in Kazakhstani schools. It is recommended that ML be formally integrated into the national curriculum across all subjects and grade levels to enhance educational outcomes. This approach should prioritize embedding media literacy within existing subjects rather than as a standalone course, ensuring a consistent emphasis on developing digital competencies, information analysis, and critical thinking skills throughout the educational process. Evidence shows that teachers who have studied media-related courses during their university education feel more confident and competent in incorporating media into their classrooms, demonstrating stronger personal and didactic competencies (Tondeur et al., 2019). Additionally, research highlights a substantial gap in

professional development, with nearly half of the participants reporting they had not attended any courses on media literacy (Rasi & Poikela, 2016).

Study limitations and future directions

This study is geographically restricted to the southern region of Kazakhstan, which may not adequately represent the diversity of educational experiences, practices, and policies across the country. Nonetheless, the qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of stakeholders' self-reported perspectives and practices in schools with diverse socio-economic conditions. Future research could adopt a broader scope, incorporating quantitative data collection tools to provide insights into national policies and practices on a larger scale.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the discourse on ML development in schools in Kazakhstan by underscoring its importance as an essential skill for navigating the complexities of the modern media landscape. While educators show strong awareness of ML's importance, the absence of structured support, resources, and clear national policies poses substantial barriers to its effective implementation in classrooms. Developing comprehensive guidelines and providing adequate resources are essential for ensuring consistent and effective ML integration across all schools in Kazakhstan. The study advocates for incorporating ML into all subjects and grade levels, alongside providing educators with professional development and ongoing support to ensure the successful implementation of ML policies and practices. Given the diverse socio-economic conditions in schools, equitable access to ICT tools and resources is particularly vital in rural settings. Furthermore, promoting awareness of ethical codes of conduct on social media is highlighted as an essential step in fostering ML in schools. Addressing these issues through clearly defined and consistently enforced national policies can enhance the quality of ML education and support the development of informed, critical, and media-literate citizens.

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