Critical Media Literacy in the High School Classroom:

A Student Centered Approach

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this writing is to explore the relationship students have with popular media as well as the call to implement a Critical Media Skills course at the high school level. The research was interested in finding what images from popular media students were taking into their personal lives and how implementing a Critical Media Skills course could make positive benefits into their lives. From casual observations, informal student interviews, and the creation of an online survey in which 72 high school students participated I was able to collect data about the extent students were consuming popular media and how they believed that skills teaching them to analyze media would be beneficial. From these findings I was able to build upon Patricia Hill Collins (2009) to develop techniques for a classroom in which critical dialogue would be a focus. This exploratory study takes into account student voices, as well research from others in the field of Education and Media Literacy.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The ability to take a critical look at issues that are being displayed in the media through the medium of television and movies can be utilized as a valuable teaching tool. It can help us understand relationships among students, and evaluate issues that they encounter such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. The viewer of popular media immediately transforms into that of a learner the instant they witness images on the screen. This is a learner who takes in what is presented, processes it, and applies it to the world they encompass. As Wright (2009) states, "I emphasize that people learn from popular television no matter what the intent of the writers, producers, actors, commercial sponsors, or audience" (p. 471). That application could possibly be in the form of a student's own personal identities, as well as how they choose to interact with others. Elements of race, class, gender, and various stereotypes run rampant throughout mainstream media.

Once a viewer realizes they are in control of how to decode information and they see how that shapes their thoughts, positive progress can be made towards achieving their social identity, academic identity, and interpersonal relationships. Media literacy—indeed literacy more generally—is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993; Christ & Potter, 1998). With the introduction of Critical Media Literacy in the classroom, students would have the possibility to engage in what is being presented to them, why it is being presented, how they are absorbing the

information, and how they are applying it in their lives. Schools can act as a

critical tool in helping to slow down the racist, gender biased, homophobic, and

social class stereotypes that are being displayed, and control their effect on

individual students. These skills will allow students to have a foundation of

knowledge that is needed in order view popular media with a critical eye. Critical

media literacy expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass

communication and popular culture as well as deepens the potential of education

to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information and

power. Media literacy helps people to discriminate and evaluate media content, to

critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media

intelligently, and to construct alternative media (Kellner & Share, 2007).

By incorporating a Critical Media Literacy course into the high school

Though scholarly work has been done in Critical Media Literacy, I feel

more attention needs to be given to the skills students need in order to reach that

point. This thesis will stress the relationship that students have with popular

culture, the hidden themes of race, class, gender in popular media, and the

positive role the educator can have in helping students foster a positive identity

for themselves as well as being able to move towards a more democratic society

where students can engage in healthy dialogue. This type of Critical Media

Literacy focuses on introducing the media and the power that it has to students so

that they may understand the relationship they have with it and the influence it has

on their lives.

By incorporating a Critical Media Literacy course into the high school

curriculum, students will be introduced to the building blocks towards a literacy

they will be able to utilize long after they have graduated. Though schools are at a time where core classes with mandatory, state mandated, standardized tests are the focal points of the curriculum, a Critical Media Literacy course would be beneficial to any high school course offerings. With popular media becoming such a driving force in students' lives, a school that offers a course introducing Critical Media Literacy will show its willingness to incorporate into its curriculum a relevant, powerful, and effective teaching tool for students. Critical Media Literacy has the potential to allow students to begin to understand the relationship they have with popular media and to engage in dialogue with other students regarding the effects it has on their lives. This course will still have the capacity to adhere to schools' requirements on rigor, deep levels of thinking, and relevance. The source of knowledge and conversation will not come from a textbook, but popular media. Literacy as understood in the thesis concurs with the foundations of literacy developed and tested by Paulo Freire (1992, 1994) and Freire and Macedo (1987) when they state that an educated person be prepared to "read the word and the world".

In this thesis I argue three main points: 1) Once a student decides to watch a program, they are in the viewer/learner role; Regardless of the intent of the viewer while watching a program, they are simultaneously learning. 2) This type of learning becomes problematic if the images presented to students are inaccurate or are cast in a negative light. Students can and will take this as truth and use that to form their personal identity and their interpersonal relationships. 3) A call for schools to implement Critical Media Literacy into the curriculum for

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students so they can start to question the images they see on television and how those images may play out in their daily lives. Critical Media Literacy can be an effective way for students to analyze popular media and its effects.

For the purpose of this research it is necessary to explain my definitions of both popular culture and popular media. Though many complex definitions have been explored by researchers (e.g., Adorno & Horkheimer, 1999; Docker, 1994; Hall, 1998; McCarthy, 1998; Storey, 1998; Williams, 1995, 1998), for the purpose of this thesis, popular culture will apply to "culture that is widely favored or well liked by many people" (Storey, 1998, p.4).

Popular media will be the extent that one is exposed to popular culture. The term media is commonly invoked to mean both the mediums of communications (radio, internet, recorded music, television, print, film, video), as well as the products or texts of these mediums (journalistic accounts, television shows and film productions, video games, websites). The central media –print, radio, and television- are the ways we "imagine ourselves to be connected to the outside world" (Couldry, 2003, p. 7).

This is an exploratory process in order to start the conversation in school districts about developing a Critical Media Literacy course into their curriculum. I believe that these will be skills that a 21st century student will benefit from over the course of a school year. Critical Media Literacy has a place in our current educational curriculum. When it is incorporated into a course, schools will provide a media education to students that have not previously been properly exposed to such.

I believe that popular culture in the form of television and movies has the capability to dramatically portray and instill messages of where individuals and groups believe they should fit into society. These dangerous stereotypes have been playing out for years. Though not necessarily as blatant as stereotypes from past decades, the messages of racism, gender inequality, class struggles, and sexuality are told through television in different, more subtle ways. The concern to educators should be that students view media as mere entertainment and are coming into schools convinced that what they watch is the truth and reality. The issue of students "trusting" what the media is presenting to them is vital to what Critical Media Literacy ultimately wants to change. Students have grown up with popular media being the source of information they receive. Just as with their school teachers, students commonly accept what media is presenting to them as "truth". Critical Media Literacy aims to have students question what is being presented to them through the media, and ultimately, how it shapes the lives they choose to lead.

Popular culture, when taken as "truth", will have a negative impact on students' social, academic, and interpersonal relationships. Research taken from Carpenter and Sourdot (2009) found the following:

With respect to the pedagogical implications of television, what seems certain is that school age children in the United States are exposed to an implicit or hidden curriculum. This curriculum competes with official school curricula on a daily basis and, in a sense, television has become the national curriculum and the media now provide edu-tainment (p. 445).

Unfortunately, students are receiving a dual education from what they learn in school and what they see in media.

This thesis is not intended to speak to every hidden meaning on every show that is currently in popular media. The purpose of this thesis is to help the viewer/learner critically analyze and question themes found in popular media, so that those themes do not simply get reproduced without the viewers knowing what happened in the process. It is important to realize that the term "media" I speak of throughout this research refers to popular media in the form of television and movies. Television in the form of network programs, basic cable, or satellite cable and movies both in and out of the theaters will be my focus. For the purpose of this thesis, "media" will refer to both of these elements.

Also, I have been careful not to cite specific examples from popular media for this research. While there is a tremendous amount of examples of race, class, gender, or stereotype issues I could include, it would go against the core of the Critical Media Literacy I am advocating. The strategies that I propose sets up the student to come away with questions about what is being presented to them in the media. A teacher's role in this form of Critical Media Literacy is not to dictate and point out to students what images are being portrayed; rather, the goal is to set students up with proper guidance from the teacher. This research will stay consistent with the goals of Critical Media Literacy and suggest the overall themes, not simply specific examples, of race, class, gender, or stereotypes currently being portrayed in popular media.

Ultimately, I am hoping that students will be able to question what is being presented to them and how they use this information in their daily routines. I am hoping that students will be able to ask questions such as: What characters are being portrayed? What races are educated? Is there an equal representation of races being shown? What jobs do different races have? Who are the "poor" on television? What does it mean to be middle class? What barriers do certain classes have? How do men and women interact on television? Is there a power struggle between the two? What jobs do men and women have? What is the family structure like? How does television portray promiscuous women? How is homosexuality viewed? These questions are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to getting at the core of how we think and how these thoughts have the capability of being handed down to future generations. This is why I believe it is important for students to be introduced to Critical Media Literacy and for schools to see the importance of adding this to their curriculum. I argue that in an era of information, it is of utmost importance and necessity for everyone to understand how the media works in terms of management of information, advertising and entertainment (Macedo & Steinberg, 2007).

Chapter 2

THEORECTICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework taken from Patricia Hill Collins (2009) is what I will be building this thesis upon. I will be emphasizing two of Collins' domains of power; the structural and cultural domain. Both emphasize the importance of classroom climate and prior knowledge. This framework, combined with Critical Media Literacy that I advocate, form a solid base for students to acquire new sets of skills while questioning larger themes around them.

The structural domain focuses on practicing resistance in the classroom by creating safe and free learning spaces in which students can engage in questioning what is around them in terms of media and their lives. The structure that Collins refers to is the current, dominant way in which society operates. Students will begin to analyze current themes in society and where they originated from. In doing so, the classroom will morph into a political space. This idea focuses on changing the classroom into a space that invites of conversation and active listening. Being able to have students engage in critical dialogue is crucial to begin the implementation of Critical Media Literacy. Collins, like myself, sees schools as the place for students to participate in this kind of discussion. Schools must transform from teacher-directed and objective-oriented lessons to focusing on the student. Educators must use the classroom more effectively in order to maximize student growth. Collins states "ironically, kids spend enormous amounts of time in the physical space of their school, yet schools typically suppress this kind of open and honest dialogue" (Collins, 2009 p. 91). This

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domain of power will allow students to recognize for the first time, on their own terms, what their thoughts are on race, class, gender, and stereotypes. The only way this happens is when the classroom is a safe, free space that encourages critical thinking and active listening. Critical Media Literacy has been set up to ensure that this process takes place. With these skills students will have the ability to alter the structure they inherent (Collins, 2009, p. 95).

The cultural domain of power focuses on the importance of media as a source of student learning. Though schools are the dominant source of learning, media makes up a considerable portion of a student's knowledge. I agree with Collins in the belief that media is closing the gap with schools as to where students are gaining knowledge. Schools will soon become sites where students practice skills of media literacy that they can utilize in their everyday lives. The overarching goal of media literacy should be to help youth move from being passive consumers to active creators of knowledge (Collins, 2009, p. 117). A primary goal of the Critical Media Literacy that I am advocating focuses on the students being in control of the media they consume. A more productive, democratic society will be the end result. Cultivating Critical Media Literacy in schools with our youth so that they can develop their own critical analyses of their neighborhoods, schools, families, and friends, as well as the media messages that they confront on a daily basis, constitutes a vitally important form of resistance (Collins, 2009, p. 117). Schools can be the place where students gain these skills and take them into their own lives.

The two domains work and feed off of each other, and are equally important. I recognize that schools should be a place for students to engage in critical conversation as well as where students gain the understanding of the importance of media in their lives. This framework on which I base my thesis builds a strong case for the implementation of Critical Media Literacy into a high school's curriculum.

Chapter 3

BACKGROUND

While there has been a push for the introduction and implementation of media literacy over the last two decades, I feel that an original and still prominent form of technology, television and movies, has not been given the proper amount of attention for its role with high school students. Television and movies still have the capacity to present information to students and viewers. With the new forms of technology that have been springing up, it is important to not ignore, downplay, or resist the role that television and movies still have on the student, as well as recognizing that students will take this information and incorporate it into their personal lives. Television and movies must always be considered new and evolving technology and, if taken for granted, we as educators will be blatantly ignoring an influential pedagogical tool that students use to gain new information and shape information they may already have. While there are techniques to implement the new forms of technology such as web media, we cannot discount the continuing relevance of television and movies due to the fact they have been around for decades. Though this is not new technology, it has always been constant, so educators must recognize the potential that popular media still has on students.

Students share a unique relationship with popular culture and popular media. Due to easy access, they are watching television and movies more than ever. Students are connected and as educators we must be aware of this and give them the skills needed to be in control of what they take away from media.

Critical Media Literacy has the potential to give students the tools they need to better decipher and understand what they are constantly engaged in.

It is important to note that I am coming from a perspective of currently being in a classroom as an educator. I will be presenting issues that I have experienced personally and speaking to what I have been able to witness in and around classrooms. I believe that addressing this issue is extremely important, relevant, and long overdue. The implementation of Critical Media Literacy can be utilized by all schools because the matter will be relevant with any student body. Even though I am an educator, this does not make this paper biased, misguided, or convenient. Rather, I have a unique, first-hand account of actual experiences and strategies for how media is currently being presented to students in the classroom. I am also aware of the effect it has on their personal knowledge. Using my experience adds to the effectiveness of implementing Critical Media Literacy in a high school setting.

Chapter 4

METHODOLOGY

The role that I have as a classroom teacher laid the groundwork for my methodology in building a case that a Critical Media Literacy course was needed in the curriculum of high schools. There were many methods I was able to utilize during this process. Extremely beneficial in this process was the fact that I was in a position to work with students on a daily basis. At first I wanted to simply take in general observations to give me an understanding of whether students had a relationship with popular media, and if they were gaining information from it. I realized that students were engaging in dialogue that dealt with critical topics portrayed in the media. I was able to hear the conversations of the students and how they viewed current themes in society and see how media played a part in those themes. The amount and range of topics students were interested in talking about was extremely noteworthy. Among others, issues of race, gender, and class were always a main topic of conversation. I realized that popular media is not entertainment exclusively; rather, it is a source of student learning. Students are growing up in a media saturated culture. I began to utilize these observations in my lessons and my planning. I quickly realized that students were seeing images that were parallel to the standards being taught in my class. The conversations the students were having were in fact genuine. Before long I realized that students were genuinely interested in popular media and the images they produce.

From these general observations, the initial interest came to mind, being able to create a classroom where students would simply talk about popular media.

I realized that popular media could be a source of learning for the students. I wanted to gain an idea of just how much students were using popular media. I have found that they were incorporating images into their conversations, so I made a point to understand how much time students were investing in popular media. As expected, I would understand that students were involved with popular media during the majority of their day.

My next observation would prove critical for me in realizing that students would benefit from being introduced to Critical Media Literacy. I found that students would use examples from television and movies to prove various points they were trying to make during their discussions in class. In a debate, students often quoted lines from direct dialogue or characters that personified the opinion they were trying to validate. It was interesting to note that the other students in the room would accept this form of validating arguments. This was the first time I realized that students can see media as truth. I believe that Critical Media Literacy would allow students to slow down and engage at a deeper level their relationship with popular media. To realize that students were using images from popular media in their personal conversations and as factual grounds in the classroom made me understand how deeply rooted some students are in regards to media.

I was able to gear assignments in the classroom on popular media, images they see, and what they take away from it. I had students write down, in confidentiality, their opinions, thoughts, or questions on topics such as race, class, or gender. Next, I would ask them to give examples in popular media that

showcased these topics. Last, I asked them to write down if they believed what they were watching had an accurate portrayal of the issues. The responses that came back had the same characteristic in common: students generally believed that what was portrayed in the media was by in large, true. They never questioned the images that were presented to them.

I felt that it was important to start hearing opinions that came directly from the students themselves. I had been fortunate enough to gain valuable data by simple observation and quickly understood that media was important to students and realized students were using information from popular media and incorporating it into their own lives. The next step after general observations would be direct questions that I would bring up with students. I decided to ask students for their opinions on popular media. At this point my main focus was to have students answer honestly and in their own terms. With that, the conversations and ultimately the questions that I asked students were kept extremely informal. This process would not involve questioning every student I had; however, I would still be able to engage in conversation with many of my students. I purposely stayed away from formal interviews because I valued having students answer questions about media in a very natural state. I feared that a formal interview, at this early stage in my methodology process, would give me a less accurate view compared to an informal interview. Students and I would begin having conversations about popular media. I felt that I was able to come away with genuine thoughts and opinions from the students. Not only did these informal conversations stay consistent with my general observations, I realized

that popular media was actually a part of their lives more than I had originally thought. Further, students did know that popular media was an important part of their lives and they valued it; however, they did not understand to what degree it played a part in their lives. The majority of the students that I shared conversations with shared this same thought process. At this point I realized that the topic needed to be clearer, and that it required more responses from the students that went beyond simple conversation and could give me sense from a larger group.

I decided to create a survey[1] in which students could answer direct questions about popular media, how much they were utilizing it, and what they believed they were taking away from it. Using this survey, I would be able to get quantitative data that could support my observations and informal interviews. I wanted to be sure that I was not forcing any student to answer questions about this topic, so I made the questionnaire entirely optional. I would have no way to find out who participated and who did not. I set up an online survey that the students could take on their own time, and outside of the classroom. The students' opinions would be free of myself, the classroom, and any other school influences. Out of the 120 students that I asked to volunteer, I had 72 of them respond. Though there were 48 students who did not participate in this survey, I was confident that the 72 students who did were giving truthful answers to the questions, especially considering they were taking this survey during their own personal time. I felt comfortable with this sample size.

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[1] See Appendix A

The survey was composed of 10 questions that asked students about their usage of popular media, if they felt they gained knowledge from popular media, and if they would like to see a media skills course offered at school. The process of selecting the 10 questions originated from observing the students and the general dialogue I had with the students. I felt that all of the questions on the survey were appropriate, reliable, and valid. Each question gave students 5 options for the students to select, to determine if the question had no relevance or high relevance in their lives. Each question would have an option to select if that question did not apply to that particular student.

Chapter 5

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The first part of the survey came back as I predicted in that the majority of

the students encounter popular media on a daily basis. Over 85% took in over 6

hours of popular media a week. This was no surprise to me considering the

informal observations and questioning I had done before. However it was

important to put a number on just how many students were in front of visual

media each week. The next part of survey involved images from popular media,

if these images were an accurate portrayal, and what they were taking away from

popular media. An overwhelming number of students, 60 of 72, felt that the

images showcased on popular media were accurate depictions. From this I was

able to realize that students take the images that they see as legitimate, viable

pieces of information. The questions on the survey that involved the

incorporation of popular media in to their own lives came back with incredibly

interesting results. Here the majority of the answers fell in the middle, students

did not know if they were or were not taking information with them after they had

viewed popular media. The results came back with notion that students had a

certain ambiguity in understanding if they did in fact take what they view on

popular media and incorporate it into their own lives. There was not any

particular answer that had a statistical lead. There were roughly the same number

of students who marked "agreed" that they incorporated popular media as there

were students who marked "disagreed". Of the 72 students who participated in

the survey, 65 of them answered one of those options. However, I knew from my

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observations and interviews that students were using information from what they have seen in popular media into their personal conversations, and that led to me believe that they were in fact acquiring information from popular media, they just did not know it. I was intrigued because I believe that Critical Media Literacy would benefit students who thought either way.

Lastly, the survey had questions about implementing a media skills course into the curriculum. I was pleased to find out that the majority of the students were in favor of a course dealing with the issues that Critical Media Literacy would provide. Over 80% of the students marked "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they would benefit from a course regarding media literacy. This high number led me to believe that students had a high interest in learning this new type of literacy.

The research process gave further proof of the reality of the relationship students have with popular media, as well as the introduction of Critical Media Literacy being a welcome idea in the classroom. The observations proved critical, for they gave me the foundation to go forward with my research. Students on a day-to-day basis were talking about popular media in their own casual conversations. I knew that this topic is a big part of many students' lives. From there the informal interviews gave me specific answers to the questions I had for the students. Not only did I use the interviews to reinforce what I had observed, it also gave me a foundation on which I could base my survey. I believe that the use of the survey along with my general observations and conversations provides a legitimate foundation for making Critical Media Literacy available to students.

Though the data from the survey came from anonymous students, it still provides a voice originating from the students that they were in fact in favor of a media skills course as well as seeing the importance of this course. It is important to have the students' opinions included in this thesis considering Critical Media Literacy is about focusing on student growth and understanding of popular media. From the beginning stages of the research process up until the student survey, I felt that students were able to give their true, honest opinions on popular media and how it plays into their lives.

Ultimately, I was able to gain an understanding of how much the students would benefit from Critical Media Literacy. The foundation for success is there. Students spend a great deal of time with popular media and the majority of them believe the images are accurate. Students may or may not realize they use what they see in their own lives, and they are in favor of learning this new type of literacy. I believe that students should have the skills necessary to understand the power that popular media has on them. The Critical Media Literacy I want to establish originated from being able to see just how much students could benefit from it. Understanding that they would be able to critically analyze images and themes in popular media, as well potentially seeing positive changes in their academic identity, social identity, and interpersonal relationships gave me the motivation to see that these skills would be available for high school students as they develop their opinions on themselves and the world.

Chapter 6

STUDENTS AND THE VIEWER/LEARNER DYNAMIC

Television and movies have evolved, with the viewer having a distinct

relationship with the programs they watch over the course of their daily routine. I

use the word *relationship* on purpose to point out popular media brings out an

incredible amount of personal feelings, learning capabilities, and also works as a

broker for students to deal with the outside world. This is not a relationship to

take lightly or brush off; rather, it is important to realize how this relationship

operates and understand the extent of the relationship students have with media.

Ultimately, the goal is to understand ways educators can help facilitate Critical

Media Literacy to high school students.

Though there are many forms of popular culture students have at their

disposal (internet, facebook, iPods, twitter, cell phones), I have elected to talk

about popular media in the form of television and movies and the impact it has for

three reasons: 1) Time- there are programs that are available for viewers at all

hours of the day 2) Convenience- With new innovations students are able to fit

popular media into their schedules. If a student makes viewing popular media a

priority, there is a great likelihood that it will happen. The way in which a student

is able to view popular media has become more convenient. Students can access

movies and television shows in many other ways besides the traditional theater or

at home. Streaming video on the internet and smart phones give students another

convenient way for students to view popular media. Also, one no longer has to be

home at the original air date of the program. Digital recording devices allow

students to not be bound by time. 3) Economic Status- Critical Media Literacy will benefit all students who come into contact with popular media. These skills are beneficial to anyone who has been a viewer of popular media for any given time. For the students whose families do not subscribe to cable or satellite television it is of no worry. The same skills can be utilized with basic network programs. I am aware that there will be students that do not own a television or not able to go to the movies; however, Critical Media Literacy will still be valuable for these students for the select times they happen to be in front of popular media. Critical Media Literacy can be a program that will benefit schools of all socioeconomic statuses.

Popular culture cannot be reduced to the culture for the uneducated masses; rather, we must look at it as a pedagogical tool that in many aspects of daily routine is active. Knowledge is simultaneously being presented and *processed*. Students are processing the information in the same way that they would in traditional schools; this time with the television giving the information rather than the classroom teacher. It should be no longer a question of *if* students are using popular culture, but *how much* they are using it. In 2005 the Kaiser Family Foundation surveyed a national sample of third through twelve graders in the United States and determined "young people live media-saturated lives, spending an average of nearly 6 and a half hours a day with media" (Rideout, Roberts, & Foehr, 2005, p. 6). Mainstream in every sense of the word, students are using what they see in popular culture and applying these messages to their realities. When what is being presented to them harbors negative stereotypes and

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dominant ideologies, there is potential for students to play out what they see for hours at a time. These programs that "represent popular art's potential to liberate viewers by offering alternative interpretations of social, cultural, and political apparatuses" (Wright, 2006, p. 472). Knowing this, there is a tremendous amount of responsibility that goes out to educators to introduce into their curriculum an elective course that focuses on these skills, Critical Media Literacy.

The viewer/learner dynamic occurs immediately when a student decides to watch any form of media. The instant a student becomes a viewer, they are inviting the presentation of knowledge. Though the amount of information absorbed will vary by viewer, the main point is that a learning process will occur. Regardless of whether or not the viewer intends to come away with knowledge while engaging in media, that will be the end result. Carlos Cortes (2000) conducted a very interesting study observing two of his granddaughters watch and learn the TV multicultural curriculum. He concludes: "Media teach and media consumers learn" (p. 24). There will never be a time where a viewer can watch popular media and not come away with knowledge. Given the amount of media students are watching on average, there is potential for a student to be exposed to thousands of images, many of which depict inaccurate representations of various topics. Educators cannot dismiss visual media as mere popular culture from which students will absorb nothing. There has to be recognition in schools of the power that popular culture has in students' lives.

Media has the potential to shape how students view themselves and how they feel society operates. Images, people, and places that are portrayed in

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television go into the thought process of the viewer, turning them into a learner. Whether the viewer understands or recognizes that this is taking place, it is exactly what is happening. Media now has a curriculum, the same way students are exposed to school, district, and state curriculum over the course of an academic year.

I believe that a crucial mistake that is made at the school, state, and district level is the belief that students are coming into the classroom free of any outside curriculum that they have gathered, processed, and utilized in their lives. While there can be no doubt that there are many other places of learning (family, friends, customs, traditions, etc.), I stand firm in the claim that popular culture, and in this case television and movies, are in a position to be a major provider for students to learn a different set of curriculum that they will bring with them into the classroom. Given that the viewer/learner dynamic happens instantaneously and without permission, it should be a focal point of Critical Media Literacy.

Television and movies have the capability to extend socially produced stereotypes once a viewer starts to watch any program. However, there is little chance of this learning morphing into questions unless the viewer watches programs with a critical mindset and have the ability to challenge the stereotypes that are present. The viewer must realize they are in the process of learning, just as they would be in the classroom. Julie Garlen Maudlin (2007) shares her optimism stating, "through cultural texts we can access narratives, metaphors, and images that enable us to negotiate through our uncertainties" (p. 502). Critical

Media Literacy will give the students the capability to question what they are watching.

Popular culture, as stated before, is becoming more and more of a driving force of not only how students view themselves, but how they may or may not interact with others. Race roles are played out in television and then applied to real world settings. The same can be said for the issues of gender, sexuality, and class. It is important to realize that the viewers of shows will not only *accept* what they see on television, but will try to *emulate* what they see as well. This is a crucial problem that viewers find themselves in, and it will only change if the viewer realizes that learning is taking place and they are in control of it.

We are past the point where popular media could possibly be a variable of one's identity. Currently popular media has a significant influence on the development of our sense of self. Crucial to my argument is the degree in which student learning is being formed by popular media, and in this case, television and movies. A student learns about themselves and what is expected of them. What becomes problematic is when a negative personal identity is created with the influence of television. As Kellner (2005) states;

> Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people
> construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of
> sexuality, of "us" and "them". Media culture helps shape the
> prevalent view of the world and deepest values: it defines what is
> considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories
> and images provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help

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constitute a common culture for the majority of individuals in many parts

of the world today. Media culture provides the materials to create

identities whereby individuals insert themselves into contemporary

techno-capitalist societies and which is producing a new form of global

culture. (p. 372)

If we conclude that students are coming into the classroom with an alternative

curriculum from the media at their disposal, as well as the understanding that one

can not be a viewer of television without at the same time becoming a learner,

then there is no doubt that there is a need for Critical Medial Literacy to be

incorporated at the high school level. As educators we must realize that students

are engulfed in mass media. I believe it is irresponsible for educators to keep

students from acquiring the knowledge they need in order to process the images

they see and the understanding of how they will use these images in the world.

To understand the need for implementation of Critical Media Literacy, one

must realize the viewer/learner dynamic that occurs at any moment a student is

engaged with visual media. Educators must realize that television and movies

play a big part in the lives of students; that they are also learning from these

images that are presented to them and they are bringing these new thoughts with

them into the classroom. It is problematic when the student brings something into

the classroom, that they have learned from media in a way in which they had no

control. This relationship the students have with popular culture in the form of

television and movies is teaching students on a daily basis. In the evolving

multimedia environment, media literacy is arguably more important than ever

(Macedo, 2007, p.16).

Chapter 7

HOW SCHOOLS ARE USING MEDIA

In this thesis I am not arguing that classrooms ought to use more visual media, or less visual media. They have and always will be a popular and somewhat effective way to present information to students in the classroom. Throughout classrooms there have been movies or television shows that have become staples in curriculum; *Stand and Deliver* in Math courses, *Saving Private Ryan* in American/World History courses, *Norma Rae* for Economics, and *Animal Farm* in English, to name a few. Popular media can provide meaningful lessons for students who prefer information be given to them visually, thereby engaging students with a different learning style than the norm. By incorporating Critical Media Literacy, students will be able to fully reach the full learning potential that media in the classroom provides. Currently schools are using media as an outlet to teach students about Economics, American History, Mathematics, etc. This traditional technique tells the students that the answers that they are looking for are embedded in this movie or program. Critical Media Literacy, in the sense I argue, is more than this. As opposed to students viewing media looking specifically for an image or theme, they will be able to start to question for themselves the accuracy or misrepresentation of broader themes being shown. These broad themes include, but are not limited to: race, class, gender, and stereotypes. Media literacy educators must find creative ways to change educational practice and work to increase the knowledge and skills of every student (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). The Critical Media Literacy that I am

advocating for aims to have students think at a deeper level, as opposed the common technique of today. Research conducted by Considine and Haley (1999) state "media literacy in K-12 environments generally features activities that invite students to identify author, purpose, and point of view in films, commercials, and television" (Considine & Haley, 1999). Students should be able to analyze and apply images from popular media into their world, as opposed to simply identifying images.

Central to the argument regarding the need for the implementation of Critical Media Literacy is the fact that media in the forms of movies and television are merely being *presented* to the students. They are presented to the students in a way that tells them that the issues being raised, the questions being asked, and the images being shown to them are embedded in fact and to be taken as such. This form of presentation does not adhere to higher level of critical thinking for students. Instead it allows the students to identify current issues in the media, as if they were looking for vocabulary terms in a word puzzle.

Often times the incorporation of media into the classroom is looked at by both teacher and student alike as the final answer on whatever the topic it is they are viewing. Media is frequently used at the end of the lesson to summarize the lesson and to answer any remaining questions students may have. With this style it leaves two main gaps in student involvement and understanding the material. First, students will be left with the belief that what they have just viewed is to be thought of as the absolute final answer in regards to the material. Media in this case is held to the highest standard of teaching in the views of students. Students

who leave the classroom with the notion of the media being correct because *it is the media* is a dangerous notion. Those who run the networks and movie studios are not concerned with social justice and correct representations of individuals and culture as much as they are with selling tickets, advertising, and merchandise. These producers are willing to present images and themes in a negative or incorrect manner if it will result with high profits. With this, educators are leaving the teaching up to studios, as opposed to conversation, debates, and student led interactions. Second, students will begin to believe that they can learn the material exclusively through the use of media. Though every lesson and standard will not have its counterpart in the form of media, broader issues in terms of race, class, and gender are widespread throughout visual media. This has the potential for students to gain a deep understanding by way of media, of how they view and shape their thoughts with race, class, gender, and other social issues. This is problematic for the student in terms of their identity and the social interactions that will take place both in and out of the classroom.

Critical Media Literacy does not merely present a visual way of learning to be taken at face value, rather it is a lifelong ability to challenge, engage, and question what students are viewing. To merely present media to students is not beneficial for students in their quest to foster a better understanding of how complex issues are being portrayed and how they incorporate these images into their daily lives.

For far too long educators have not been cautious with the incorporation of media into their classrooms. Educators have been willing to accept media as a

form of truth that students will be encouraged and required to learn as fact.

Popular media is much too complex for this simplistic way of teaching. Given the

intentions of media outlets, schools must incorporate Critical Media Literacy to

ensure that the ultimate objective we have for students is met. We must give

students the tools to think for themselves and truly understand the complexities

and beauties of their world. A lack of caution could soon turn dangerous if and

when students take visual media as truth and continue to emulate the images they

see and reproduce them into their daily lives.

In addition to the lack of caution associated with visual media is the

emphasis that many school districts are planning on incorporating even more

visual media for students in this new digital age. Teachers are being asked to

reach out to the visual learners by presenting material in the form of media. This

is speeding up the misuse of visual media by educators, as well as increasing the

need for students to utilize Critical Media Literacy strategies. With the call for

more visual learning opportunities in the classroom, a worry becomes the rapid

pace at which students view television and movies without the ability to realize

there is much more information available beyond the surface level. While adding

more visual technology to the classroom is beneficial to students and the learning

process, I feel without the skills necessary to decode the themes and images being

portrayed we are ultimately doing students an injustice by not letting them see the

entire picture that's being painted by television and movies.

This is the issue that needs to be addressed with the implementation of

Critical Media Literacy in high school. Students can come away with the media

being presented to them with *questions*, rather than answers. Whether the student is engaged with visual media at school or, more likely, engaged in their free time, students that have been exposed to Critical Media Literacy will benefit. With students starting to raise questions we will now have a young demographic that will start to think critically about social and political issues, and their opinions will be based on their own thinking, not the ideas of the networks and producers. Students will be introduced to an entirely different and exciting thought process, as well as a new view of the world and society. Critical Media Literacy forces students to foster organic thoughts and to realize that visual media they often overlook, undervalue, or ignore has images that may not be consistent with what they truly believe. Having students come up with questions, not answers, is the fundamental part of this stage of Critical Media Literacy.

There should be a call for educators to ask students to look deeper into the issues that are shown, raise questions about the topics and images, and have the learning that comes from it student-centered rather than having the student accept what is being shown to them as fact. The student will have a deeper understanding of the course material as well as how they see the world outside of the traditional classroom. It will be difficult to find a television show or movie that does not show images of race, class, gender, social roles, or stereotypes. Knowing this, it is time for the student to realize that they are in control of what they are viewing and can come away with having questions as opposed to leaving with answers after being a viewer/learner. Having the ability to question how images of people, races, and gender are presented to them and why they were done so is a goal of

Critical Media Studies. With Critical Media Literacy students can realize that the media they view can act as a supplement to their learning, and is not the final authority. These will be skills students will carry with them long after they have left the classroom.

Chapter 8

TEACHING CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

Having the understanding that a major part of the learned curriculum

students come into the classroom with can and will come from popular media, it

is time to move forward in trying to implement Critical Media Literacy in a high

school setting. An elective course that the student has the option of taking moves

towards that understanding. I have stressed the potential that television could

have in shaping mindsets, the relationship that students have with television and

popular culture as a whole, and stated that there can never be a time in which one

is viewing a program without at the same time learning from it. In a classroom

setting, educators will have the opportunity to share strategies for students to read

television the same way they would a book. This will require an emphasis on the

teacher knowledge base and will require students to be active in their learning and

understanding process. "In the evolving multimedia environment, multimedia

literacy is arguably more important than ever" (Kellner & Share 2005).

Though I will discuss three strategies to introduce Critical Media Literacy,

I must first point out that I believe these practices at their core must be student

led, student driven, and student defined. I am purposely asking the student to

define a bulk of the learning emphasis. Critical Media Literacy puts much of the

emphasis on the student. That being said, it is noteworthy that I am placing an

extraordinary amount of responsibility on the teacher to remain dedicated to the

cause of Critical Media Literacy. Though many schools are not designed for open

dialogue educators must realize they can overcome this by starting conversations with students in the form of Critical Media Literacy (Collins, 2009, p.91).

While this may be foreign to many educators, ultimately it is up to them to be willing and able to research, plan out, and discuss these possible new topics with students. Even though the vast majority of ownership and responsibility is placed on the student, this can not work without the classroom teacher leading the way implementing the same techniques in the classroom they already utilize, challenging students to look and think deeper about the learned curriculum that is popular media.

Schools must recognize the importance of popular culture in the lives of students, what stereotypes are being portrayed on television, and how schools can use this information in the classroom to foster open debate and debunk myths students may be carrying with them. Critical Media Literacy calls for educators to be active in their lessons, knowledge base, and their students. Teaching through popular media can be an effective tool in the classroom to talk about subjects that may or may not be introduced in the school/district standards. New opportunities will be given to schools for students to become aware of social issues that are being played out on television. Critical Media Literacy will breathe new life into the structural domain of power (Collins, 2009, p. 97).

The strategies in this thesis can be incorporated into any school, district, or state sets of curriculum. However, without passion and willingness to allow for the process to unfold, this can not work. Technology and visual aids are used in classrooms across the country, but showing a video is vastly different than being

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able to give students the tools they need to break down media as text. If a school is willing to stay committed to the evolving nature of the 21st century student by introducing and being consistent in implementing Critical Media Literacy in their curriculum, true progress can be made towards a more democratic society, free of stereotypes and misrepresentation.

The first strategy I propose is for *educators to be aware of the role television plays in the lives of their students and how it can be utilized into the curriculum*. This is directly tied to the responsibility of the teacher in that it will require teachers to do more than they already do and try to gain a broader perspective on the relationship students have with television and the impact it has in their learning process. The viewer/learner dynamic must be recognized and understood by the teacher. Regardless of the teachers' stance on media, they accept that it plays a huge role in the daily lives of students. Teachers must be willing to become learners themselves to come to the realization that media passes on curriculum.

In no way could one expect any teacher to have a full understanding of every television program, theatrical movie, or any other piece of visual media. Again it is not up to the teacher to point out misrepresentation to students; it is up to the students themselves. However, I am suggesting that educators realize the impact, importance, and time that students are investing in media and the implications that has for them both in and out of the classroom. Teachers need to gain an understanding that students are learning from the popular media they consume.

Teachers must realize the potential this has in the classroom, and whether familiar with popular culture or not, it is the responsibility of the teacher to recognize this tool. To gain a critical lens is the key. Used correctly, this can be a powerful, effective way to engage students in current issues, and the stereotypes they may be carrying with them. Teaching Critical Media Literacy is not dissecting each and every program; rather it is about common techniques students can attain that will apply to all shows they watch. Having students begin to gain a critical lens is key to opening up the classroom and schools for open, honest debate about one's views of themselves and society. Educators cannot downplay the magnitude of popular media into thinking that students are not acquiring information as they view the programs. They are, in fact, bringing the set of knowledge acquired from television into the classroom.

The ability for the teacher to create a space in the classroom where students can come in and talk about what they believe they are watching and the messages they receive would be a strong start in a positive direction. I must emphasize that in this stage the teacher should not be worrying about changing or altering students' opinions. This is a time for students to bring their thoughts to the forefront. In order for students to really grasp the potential that Critical Media Literacy could have for them, students need to begin to understand what thoughts and opinions they are bringing with them into the classroom. Students may have difficulty sharing their thought about race, class, gender or stereotypes and may be unaware of the role media plays in shaping these beliefs.

This phase will require patience. For many students, this outlet will be the first chance they have to talk about the issues stated above. On the same note, for many students it will not come quickly or easily. If the classroom is a safe zone where the student feels comfortable that their true views and opinions will be shared, that is exactly what will happen. This is a stage that cannot be rushed. To do so will create a negative classroom climate in which students will feel required to share beginning thoughts on critical topics and may hinder any further critical thinking. A student who is at first not able to share his or her thoughts must be given the time needed in order for those thoughts to come out on their own.

The teacher's role in this first step, aside from setting up a positive, safe classroom, is to take on the role of a motivator. This involves teachers encouraging students to have an honest discovery of their opinions with themselves and the class. The student must feel as if the teacher will not pass judgment, influence their beliefs, or rush them when trying to find their deep thoughts and opinions. Students must feel as the teachers are encouraging them to find these thoughts on their own. As Erin Riesland (2005) states, "integrating visual media literacy instruction into classroom curriculum begins by asking a few key questions to spark the critical thinking process" (p. 9).

The second strategy regarding how educators can teach critical media skills *is to have a safe and free learning space for students to engage in honest, meaningful conversation* (Collins, 2009, p. 90). The classroom should be a place for students to talk about and hear other opinions, stories, backgrounds, and examples about topics of race, class, gender, and stereotypes. This has the

potential to be an eye opening experience for students, many of whom have never had this experience before. Tremendous planning and accountability is put on the teacher for this phase in order to create a healthy, safe environment where students can talk about their opinions and how these subjects are played out in popular media. This is crucial because if the teacher does not set up this zone, conversation will not take place and the transfer of ideas and thoughts will simply not happen.

Safe classrooms, where all ideas are welcome, conflict is practiced and expected, and agreement is not required, become free spaces (Collins, 2009, p.96). The conversation must not turn into a place where one's opinion trumps another's in the room. The classroom environment should not be set up as a debate that is ultimately trying to find a victor. Critical Media Literacy is designed to set up a classroom where students ask questions and challenge prior ways of thinking about race, class, gender, and stereotypes. One's opinion does not trump another's in the class, for that will take away the ultimate meaning of conversation in the first place. This should be a place to express opinions and hear others. One should be able to explore current portrayals of race, class, gender, and stereotypes in media and examine how these have shaped their own opinions and whether they should start to question what is being presented to them. The opinions that students may enter the class with regarding race, class, gender, and stereotypes may have been formed over many years and thus are not likely to dramatically change over the course of the lesson, unit, or semester. However, it is the action of having students engage in meaningful, honest, and

real conversations that may spur change, even if it happens to be down the road when the student-teacher dynamic is long gone. Critical Media Literacy recognizes the long term learning process students will encounter. Students can apply these new thoughts and ideas in their real world. In other words, "the fictional content of television provides possibilities for meaningful application in classrooms, this content is important with respect to school age children who view numerous images on television that reflect social issues, among which include race, ethnicity, and cultural identity" (Gay, 2000, p. 123).

This alternative way of learning gives the student ownership of the material and the learning process, a key component of Critical Media Literacy. They will be in charge of placing importance on issues and will be given a foundation towards this new foundation of knowledge. Learning at this much more personal level adds value and a uniqueness that may not be present in standard classroom curriculum. Student agency will hopefully ignite the drive for students to start asking more questions and seek better answers.

I believe that when students are given the opportunity to have a choice in the curriculum, students have the potential to be honest with themselves as to what issues are of importance to them. This type of honest, critical thinking is in direct response to the role the student has been given; the role of owner of the material. Teaching media literacy should be a participatory, collaborative project (Macedo, 2007, p. 17).

Critical Media Literacy is a complex process for students to try and understand. These are skills that cannot be handed down from teacher to student

from a master plan. As with traditional ways of learning, they can not be measured by a standardized test. A student experienced in Critical Media Literacy will have the knowledge and tools to dissect media and the images presented to them, as well as figure out for themselves how to use this information. This is impossible to track on a test. Though one can not measure these skills in the manner schools do in formalized testing, the learning that goes on will be just as viable, rigorous, and meaningful. Critical Media Literacy will give students the opportunity to recognize their viewpoints on various issues, how they believe media is responsible for that, if media is correct in its portrayal of these images, and how they use this information in their own lives.

The teacher still plays a vital role in this process, though they are giving many choices to the students. Teachers must pose questions for the students to think about and be the broker, encouraging students to think. These questions will not have a direct answer; rather it is a process that can take time. In the Critical Media Literacy that I am proposing, it is not up to the teacher to force an answer out of a student as much as it is to propose questions for them. Students will then think and come up with their response on their own time and with their own criteria. This is a life long set of skills the students will have at their disposal. The teacher is still the presence in the classroom, guiding the students along in their quest. In this type of Critical Media Literacy, the teacher is not looked to for all of the answers; rather he or she is a mediator who is able to help students consider current issues going on in society, as well as one who can ask questions at the correct time to spawn thinking. A teacher must stress the

relevance that media has on the students and the very issues society is facing. Ultimately, the teacher is not aiming to stop students from watching a program on television, or have them start watching a new one; they are there to let the students know that in any program there is a potential to learn.

The third strategy I propose is *setting up an environment where students can discuss the issues in a space not designed to produce a winner/loser and to ultimately leave with questions, not answers.* This third phase of Critical Media Literacy is designed so students have the ability to engage in dialogue about their opinions on current issues, the role media plays in their lives and what they expect moving forward. The introduction of Critical Media Literacy encourages students to recognize these thoughts. The classroom cannot be set up as a place where one student's opinions, thoughts, or solutions win out over others in the class. Engaging in dialogue with these parameters is essential for students to develop their own understanding of their opinions and is an imperative first step if the students are to realize if their thoughts and opinions about race, class, gender, or stereotypes ought to change. If the classroom is set up to crown a winner or loser, this awakening cannot take place. The winner/loser dynamic is set up so that the winner, which has a flawed definition of who truly "wins," leaves without being put in a position of questioning themselves and never having to look deeper inside themselves about their opinions of current issues and how media is a part of them.

The winner/loser mentality I speak of refers to the notion that there can be only one definitive, correct answer for a given topic in the classroom. Critical Media Literacy advocates that the opinion of one individual should be unable to

trump any others in the class, for that will take away from the effectiveness of the purpose of the conversation in the first place. The classroom should be a place to express opinions and hear others. It should be a place to explore current portrayals of race, class, gender, and stereotypes in the media and how it has shaped their own opinions on the matter and whether they should start to question what is being presented to them. The classroom can morph into a place of discussion and ignite social change, and students can take that into the world outside. As Carpenter and Sourdot (2009) proclaim "educators willing to incorporate this content as curriculum seek to resist the perceived negative influences of popular media on children and simultaneously assist viewers in the development of their own critical cultural, visual, and media literacy" (Carpenter & Sourdot, 2009).

The winner/loser technique is a common theme that classrooms across the countries employ. Often it's set up as a debate where only one student can be victorious. Under this set up, students bring up a topic and argue for or against its legitimacy while the class will cast their vote to lay proof that one particular way is the correct viewpoint on a particular topic. No where in this winner/loser set up does the student have an opportunity to define the topic and have control of their learning. Only active, honest, and safe places for students to discuss and explore will create the ability to participate in meaningful discussion that can trigger critical thoughts.

At the heart of my third strategy is the understanding of the ultimate goal for students is to leave the classroom with a critical eye towards popular media.

The goal will always be for students to question the images and themes they see in popular media and how it plays out in their lives. Students are not trying to find answers about their opinions, the media, and how those two interact; rather the goal at this beginning stage is to get them to ask questions about what they are watching and what the images mean to them. It is irresponsible for the teacher to set up a lesson to search through the media and ask the student to "find" the images being portrayed. Critical Media Literacy is much more personal than that. Educators cannot and should not expect every student to come up with the same conclusion; again this is contradictory to what Critical Media Literacy advocates. The objective of having students exit with questions lends itself perfectly with the student defined design of Critical Media Literacy. Students need the tools to look for themselves and question what is going on in the world of media and how that applies to them. Taking from Kellner and Share (2005), "a student-centered, bottom-up approach is necessary for a standpoint analysis to come form the student's own culture, knowledge, and experiences" (Kellner & Share, 2005).

All phases compliment each other as students will be able to formulate questions about images in media that are presented to them, and how this factors into their world. Often these questions may be difficult, embarrassing, awkward, or sensitive for both teachers and students alike; however, this is the most vital step in starting the conversation about what is being shown in the media and how these particular issues are being played out on a personal scale as well as in society as a whole. Teachers should encourage students to think about the ideas they are coming to school with, if and how they learned them, how these thoughts

get played out in their social lives, how they play out in their academic lives, and what they see going forward. It is vital that educators be aware that getting students to think about the questions is more important than the ability to find answers.

When students leave the classroom with questions about the media they have started the first step to critically analyzing and taking control of the images they are presented. The third step of incorporating Critical Media Literacy stresses that these skills are the beginning for students, not the end result. The end result occurs when students use their new media literacy after they have left the traditional classroom.

Students are coming from different backgrounds and different knowledge bases, so for Critical Media Literacy to be effective it must be student led, student driven, and student defined. The students in any classroom all come in with different perspectives. Critical Media Literacy at this step is designed for students to have the opportunity to start to question what is being presented to them and what it means to them. This is different from other curriculum that educators face, however to objective is the same: to have students achieve deeper levels of thinking. Critical Media Literacy cannot function at this stage if an educator designs what the students should take notice of in a particular program. Again, students will see images differently when one's context is taken into account. This student defined way of learning is a powerful tool and has the possibility for students to gain a deeper understanding of the issues they face.

Critical Media Literacy puts an emphasis on having students exit the classroom with questions so that it adheres to the objective of having these skills defined by the students. With the educator recognizing the importance of media in students' lives, setting up a safe place for students to start a dialogue in which there is no winner/loser dynamic, and having the students leave the room with questions fulfills what Critical Media Literacy was set up to accomplish.

Chapter 9

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY AND THE POTENTIAL FOR STUDENTS

While Critical Media Literacy focuses on students gaining a better understanding of the images and themes being presented to them by the media, the major benefit and aim of these skills is the potential it will have on students in the future. Critical Media Literacy can be a tool students will use long after they have left the traditional classroom. A more accurate view of how students see themselves in academics, in society, and how they view others is at the base of what this type of media literacy provides. Standards for media literacy programs should include criticizing the ways that media reproduces racism, sexism, homophobia, and other prejudices, and encouraging students to find their own voices in critiquing media culture and producing alternative representations (Kellner & Share, 2006).

I am using the word "potential" purposely in this thesis. I have stated that Critical Media Literacy has the potential to help students begin to understand and decode images and themes presented to them. I have the understanding that Critical Media Literacy will sometimes be looked at by the student with no progress made. Potential in this sense means that it will have different effects on different students. Likewise, the potential that I speak of after students have left the classroom is in the same realm. The Critical Media Literacy that I am proposing is a one size fits all cure to becoming a more responsible viewer of media, to recognize inaccurate portrayals in the media, and to use this information to foster better relationships with one's self and others. I recognize that not all

students will leave the classroom better informed of issues being displayed in the media. Still, I am not discouraged by the potential that Critical Media Literacy has for students. Across the country, several curricula have been field-tested, indicating that such programs can accomplish exactly what they set out for (Strasburger &Donnerstein, 1999). With this in mind, the implementation of Critical Media Literacy in high schools should move forward. When students come to terms with their own opinions, begin to recognize the relationship they have with media, how the media portrays critical issues, how that plays out in their own lives, and what they will do with that information moving forward it is a step in the right direction. Due to this, it is worth implementing Critical Media Literacy in the high school curriculum.

Educators can use the powerful tool of the media to foster new ideas, challenge old ideas, and critically question the world in which they live. Though these skills will be hard to quantify with numbers, it should not diminish the powerful capabilities it will have for students. It is possible that these skills can and will vary from student to student, but for this thesis I will focus on how the student fosters a more positive view of themselves academically, socially, and in their relationships with others.

The first benefit students will be able to potentially possess is the ability to locate themes of race, class, gender, and stereotypes in popular media and what those images mean to them. Being able to question the images and themes that media is presenting to them is the beginning step towards positive changes in their academic identity, social identity, and interpersonal relationships. Educators who

set up a classroom where Critical Media Literacy can thrive will set up a greater chance of success for students to potentially see positive changes in their lives.

Students are forming an idea of how they ought to fit in academically with the "help" of media. Media in the form of television and movies often showcase images of various people and their stereotypical intelligence level. Unfortunately for viewers, these stereotypes offer little to no compromise in being anything else besides the group which you naturally fall into. Under the premise that students are learners every time they view a program, it should come with no surprise that students see what is being presented to them and take these academic roles into their personal lives. A variety of stereotypes in the media are shown dealing with academics.

Students of different races, genders, and socioeconomic status can look towards popular media and find answers to the following questions: what grades they should be getting? What classes they are supposed to be taking? How much they should study? What does life after high school have in store for them? What expectations come along with the makeup of their identity? What happens if they perform above or below expectations? Where should they seek guidance in their academic goals? Popular media has laid out an answer to every one of those questions. These stereotypes that the students accept as fact lay the groundwork for a potentially troubling academic future.

What is troubling is that many students will come into the classroom with a very specific understanding of their place within academics. The academic identity of a student will be made with some guidance of what media tells them it

should be. Students often times enter the classroom thinking they will fail because media has made it seem as if they are supposed to fail. Critical Media Literacy will help break that train of thought. Educators and students can find optimism in knowing what is constructed can be deconstructed. Critical Media Literacy has the potential to do just that.   Students who are introduced to these particular sets of skills will begin to understand that their academic identity has not been made up by popular media and they do not have to play by its rules. They are free to break away from the stereotypical roles that media has assigned. They can realize that media will not dictate who they are in their academic futures.

I would like to be clear in the fact that I do not believe that every student who consumes media morphs into the particular character they see presented on the screen. Yet, media does have the capability to alter or sway thoughts and assumptions students bring with them. Stephen Carpenter and Ludovic A Sourdot (2009) stress, "viewers of film and television public pedagogy can encounter meaningful learning opportunities through critical engagement within this form of visual culture" (Carpenter & Sourdot, 2009). I am making the argument that taken at face value, students who portray exactly what they see in media may in fact be settling into the stereotypes for their academic identities that have been given to them.   It is important to realize that students are coming into the classroom with many obstacles in front of them; the educational system has many trap doors for students of all backgrounds and to let the images showcased in media also become a barrier to their learning capability is an unnecessary speed

bump. Educators must understand that media is becoming more and more of a variable in how a student constructs their self image. In order to challenge stereotypes of a students' academic identity it would be extremely beneficial to make Critical Media Literacy a common, practical classroom practice that could benefit students by encouraging them to question the images they see on television, and more importantly, how they view themselves.

Just as students can shape their academic identity through media, the same can be said for students and their social identity. Students now have to face the obstacle of media in two phases of their lives. Images of what students ought to look like, how they should act, and what roles they should play are brought into the classroom. All of these are learned from popular media. Just as with their academic identity, students who learn and accept their social standing from the media will likely feel trapped under their assigned roles that have been given to them. Critical Media Literacy will show the students that these images are up for debate and they are in control of their own social identity.

School has become the place for adolescents to express themselves and portray an image to the rest of the student body regarding who they are. We can not undermine the importance of what schools bring to adolescents on a social scale. How students view themselves is important. Once a student views themselves in a positive manner, their grades, extracurricular activities, and overall enjoyment of school rises. The opposite can be said if students view themselves and where they fit in from a negative standpoint. Confidence, extracurricular activities, and the joy they find by going to school drops. Under

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the assumption that media plays a role in how a student views themselves in a social sense, we as educators must understand the importance for Critical Media Literacy to be implemented in the classroom.

Through media, students often emulate and recreate their favorite scenes, characters, and actions that they see on a nightly basis. Students become an image of their favorite character. Media in this sense works as a mirror; the students view an image of themselves on the screen or television. That image is something that students understand, process, and carry out into their lives. Taken at the very basic level, these characters become problematic when the social identity they are forming is that of stereotypical roles that are often oppressive at worst and incorrect at best. When students enter the classroom with this mindset, it needs to be an objective of schools to inform students of how media plays out in their lives and how they can be in control of it in a positive manner to promote a suitable learning environment.

When students see media as truth, it could be a very difficult mentality for them to break. Many current, popular, prime-time television shows depict social roles as if they were looked at with a magnifying glass. Media often times will take the stereotype and heavily reinforce it in their programs, leaving the student (viewer) no choice as to what the correct roles are in the social world. Not only do they show each social identity and the traits that come with it (sports, cheerleading, clubs), they also show the social hierarchy that each activity belongs to. Popular media is telling, not suggesting, its viewers what or how you

are supposed to act within a group and the overall level of acceptance you will receive once you have made your mind up to join that group.

School has been, and is today, a place where students take hold of their social identity. Taken at face value, if students are looking to recreate what they see on television as what their social lives should be, we are not headed to a more socially accepting space; rather, we're moving toward a place where the same characteristics of a group remain and the same standings of those groups are forever intact.

The way a student constructs their relationships comes from many factors such as family, friends, background, and upbringing. However, a driving force in our current society is what adolescents are doing with the images and messages they receive from the media. Though a students' academic or social identity focuses on the students themselves, there is another potentially huge barrier that media is helping to build: interpersonal relationships that students have in and out of the classroom. Just as with academics and social situations, popular media is showcasing not only how one should view themselves, but who they should be having relationships with. After students establish their own academic and social identities, they are ready to move on to look deeper into their interpersonal relationships. Critical Media Literacy has the capability to allow students to understand that they are not bound by the rules the media has set up.

Making students aware of the world around them and the opinions they have formed about themselves is an important first step in Critical Media Literacy. When students begin to understand that the misrepresentation of themes

and images in the media have played a part in their lives, positive steps can be made to correct, alter, or abolish those aspects. Like everything else that Critical Media Literacy advocates, there is no way to quantify what this would mean for every student. For example, there is no rubric to dissect just how much of a gain students make in their interpersonal relationships. However, it would be shortsighted to think of that as a disadvantage of the curriculum. The fact remains that awareness, on any level, is a positive step forward in building relationships that are free from stereotypes. Critical Media Literacy has the potential to completely change the dynamic of the school campus. Students will begin to realize the dynamics of their relationships can be free from the rules that the media has ascribed. Boundaries have the potential to be broken, new and interesting relationships can be formed, and general senses of comrodare are a few of the benefits of having Critical Media Literacy taught at the high school level. Just as important, and a benefit that students will realize, is that this new way of thinking about media will continue on after they have left the traditional classroom.

Though there is not a way to put a number to show how students are utilizing these new tools, that fact remains that there is potential for all students to reap the benefits. All students, regardless of level of utilization of these skills, are making positive steps towards a positive direction. Small steps, over time become the ground work of a new way of thinking about themselves and others. When this happens to a high number of students, the benefits are multiplied. These skills will be moving students in the direction to break down racial, class, or

gender issues they may face. If there is a possibility for there to be a place where social identities, academic identities, and interpersonal relationships can be improved, and educators have the capacity to help foster that, then the choice is clear: implement Critical Media Literacy in the classroom.

With media having the potential to shape the social and academic identities of students, educators need to realize just how powerful a teaching tool media can be. It is powerful enough to have students take themes from the media, process what those themes imply, and incorporate them into their academic identity, social identity, and interpersonal relationships. Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil (Kellner, 1995, p.10). We as educators have the understanding that it is not the media's objective to showcase accurate images of topics such as race, class, and gender; however, students who are viewing them are taking them as fact. Educators must take this into account and understand that media is and has been teaching our students for some time. Critical Media Literacy will put the power back into the hands of the viewer and expose the myths that media all too often portrays. With these skills students will have ownership of their identity and the relationships they form. They will begin to take back parts of their life that had at one point been dictated by the media. These skills will help foster a better individual, classroom, and community.

Though I have repeatedly used the themes of race, class, gender, and stereotypes, it is important to note that there are no limitations of what the students could ultimately take away. Advertising patterns, consumerism,

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representation, and political biases are some of the endless examples Critical

Media Literacy will allow the student to explore with a critical eye. The student

is truly not bound by anything in terms of what they take away from media.

Critical Media Literacy gives the student the opportunity to question any theme,

image, or representation that is of importance in their lives. Critical Media

Literacy gives individuals power over their culture and thus enables people to

create their own meanings and identities to shape and transform the material and

social conditions of their culture and society (Macedo, 2007, p.18).

Chapter 10

LITIMATIONS

Critical Media Literacy, as I have presented, gains importance from the relevance media has in students' lives as well as the learning that students take from it. The implementation of these skills, in a high school setting, would be the foundation of a life long capability for students to realize that media is a powerful learning tool and should be critically questioned so that students can raise questions about the effects popular media has on their lives.

It would be naïve to talk about the implementation of Critical Media Literacy into a school's curriculum without mentioning possible limitations as well. Just as with any introduction to a standard curriculum, there will be speed bumps along the way. However these are minor and will not outweigh the positives these skills will produce.

The introduction of Critical Media Literacy is the first step of a process for students to be able to read media and question what is being presented to them. This is a process that will require time. It is important to realize that educators cannot expect students to ever fully comprehend what media is producing. Regardless of how long students are able to use Critical Media Literacy they may never be able to master full comprehension of media. Critical Media Literacy however, does not make this an objective, knowing it would be unreachable. When students take the first step to realizing the power and potential of media and how it plays out in their lives, that is a positive step in understanding the media with a critical eye.

Critical Media Literacy will not be curriculum that is easily defined, managed, or quantified with standardized test scores. To be able to track the progress that a student will have with a beginning pretest and finishing posttest simply is not possible. This is a set of curriculum that you cannot measure *with numbers*. The end result will happen when a student realizes the potential that media has on their lives. Students' stories, thinking, and questions are the ultimate indicator of students' understanding. These results will often happen long after a student has exited high school. However the inability to quantify success does not undermine the effectiveness of the skills themselves. With these set of skills, however, there is a chance that student will benefit in the classroom. These skills and activities may have an impact on students' motivation to develop more sophisticated reading, writing, and analysis skills (Kubey, 1998, p. 59).

This is not a limitation on the effectiveness of Critical Media Literacy. This is a limitation on the implementation of Critical Media Literacy for schools and districts that put premium on test scores, numbers, and visual results. Throughout the thesis I have focused on the *potential* that Critical Media Literacy can have for students. Unfortunately, that term does not give a measurable score that schools can use to analyze student growth and understanding. School districts are taking test scores as the only identifiable option measuring student progress. Individual schools are often put in a position where an improvement in test scores over an academic year is the basis on whether that school, course, teacher, or student has been successful. Quantitative evidence has been the main factor in determining what schools deem successful. Critical Media Literacy

cannot be measured in quantitative terms while keeping the integrity of its curriculum. Schools should realize that Critical Media Literacy has a curriculum that lends itself to student growth and original thought. Though not coming from test scores, we will be able to see students grow up with 21st century skills. These skills have a place in every high school across the country. When administrators and school districts realize that quantitative evidence should not be the only source for student achievement and growth, they will truly come to see the well rounded student they are trying to mold in the first place. Schools need to end the obsession with numbers.

Some may argue that popular media does not require students to watch with a critical eye. Simply viewed as mere entertainment, these skills are not worthy of a set curriculum in the schools. The importance of popular media will still not be recognized by districts, schools, and administrators. Given the current state of education, a curriculum that does not lend itself to direct student progress to help with state mandated testing does not belong in the classroom. Extremely problematic at its core, this way of thinking is at best old fashioned, and at worst, a hindrance. Popular media has always had trouble convincing people of its importance and the relationship it has with students. To dismiss Critical Media Literacy based solely on the belief that it is not important to a student is simply wrong.

Like other curriculum that is introduced to districts, schools, and administrators, Critical Media Literacy comes with its fair share of limitations. However, these limitations are under the premise of a quantitative based, old

school approach. These skills will help provide a well rounded, critically thinking

student that is getting prepared for life after high school. There is not a school

that would not want that for their students. The benefits of these skills for

students far outweigh the initial limitations they may have.

Chapter 11

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The task for educators and researchers is to engage in a new type of literacy education that incorporates new information communication technologies, media, and popular culture with critical pedagogy (Kellner & Share, 2006). Schools are lagging behind in giving students the opportunity to work towards a Critical Media Literacy. The need for media literacy skills is accelerating, yet schools are not acting upon it with the same speed. Schools will fail to produce students with 21st century skills if they hesitate to incorporate Critical Media Literacy into their curriculum. The use of media will continue to grow, both in its usage and importance, to students. This will create an even bigger call for students to have the skill set to critically analyze media and the images it presents. Schools are letting a golden opportunity slip through their hands by continuing to overlook the need for media skills. These skills will help students in all areas of their lives. Critical Media Literacy does not require schools to completely change their curriculum; rather, is a supplement to the curriculum. Media and media skills have a place in the school system. This has the potential to play a positive role in the climate of the school especially since educators frequently overlook school culture (Wren, 1999, p. 594). We as educators must not wait to present Critical Media Literacy to students, for we risk playing an inevitable game of catch up in which only the student will suffer. My hope is for districts to start to explore the introduction of Critical Media Literacy into their curriculum.

An important factor in the importance of Critical Media Literacy is that the use of popular media is not on the decline in students' lives. Rather, the opposite is true. We cannot fail to realize that students are growing up in a media-saturated world. Not only are students using popular media, they are connected to it. Students in today's times have an unbreakable bond with popular media. Knowing this, it is imperative that Critical Media Literacy be available to students. Popular media is not only here to stay, but it will be a major factor in the lives of all students.

Critical Media Literacy will finally allow schools, educators, and students to analyze the text that media provides. Simply presenting students with visual media and asking them to find the injustices does not give students the necessary skills they need to fully view popular media with a critical eye. When the educator creates a classroom where the core principles of Critical Media Literacy can be applied, they will be utilizing media effectively. Under the foundation of which Critical Media Literacy should be presented in the classroom, it will be an effective way of analyzing popular media.

At the heart of Critical Media Literacy is the focus and growth of the student. This is a unique process in which students can be in control of their learning. These skills are designed for students to come away with the life long learning capability of how to question popular media and examine what effects it has on their lives. The goal for media education should be *critical autonomy*, so that students will want to critically question media when they are not with their teacher (Masterman, 1994, p. 15). Because it is student led, student defined, and

student driven, Critical Media Literacy provides the ultimate personal learning experience. Students will realize that the teacher is not in front of them dictating what is to be memorized, picked out, or selected when viewing popular media. Instead, it is up to them to go on a personal quest to see what those images and themes mean to them.

It is in the set up of the classroom and the role of the educator that will make Critical Media Literacy successful. The issues and events that students pick out will, in fact, be the topics discussed. This organic method of conversation will have the students feeling empowered and in control of their learning. The classroom is safe and free for open dialogue, which will prove to be the perfect background for students to engage in meaningful conversations. They will leave the classroom questioning media, the images and themes it displays, and the role it has on their lives. The classroom will operate as a place where higher levels of thinking are common.

Critical Media Literacy is an exciting start for students to become active, life long learners in this important field of study. Ultimately the Critical Media Literacy that I am advocating for will add an important element to a growing field of research. The skills that I am advocating for take on many elements that have been discussed in the field of media literacy. The importance, power, and need for media literacy are as big as ever, and, they will only continue to grow.

Building upon the current knowledge base of media literacy that I am advocating will enhance the current field of research on a younger audience, in a high school setting. Encouraging high schools to incorporate Critical Media

Literacy into their curriculum is the ultimate objective of my study. Schools will see that having the student at the center of the learning experience, in a classroom designed to challenge students to think about media and its effects and getting the student to leave the classroom with questions about the lives they lead, will be truly beneficial. This is progressive education. Once schools implement Critical Media Literacy students will be ready for the media-saturated 21st century.

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APPENDIX A

DATA COLLECTED AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2011

STUDENT SURVEY

1. How many hours a week are you in front of visual media? (Television and Movies)
- one hour or less
- 2-5 hours
- 6-10 hours
- 11 hours or more

2. Do you have the capability to view television or movies on your cell phone?
- Yes
- no

3. Do you feel that popular media showcases accurate portrayals or people in its shows?
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree

4. Do you feel that popular media has an obligation to portray correct images of people in its broadcasts?
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree

5. Do you feel popular media have an influence on your day to day life?
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree

6. When watching any form of popular media you can point out the stereotypes that are being shown.
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree

7. After viewing popular media you come away with some form of knowledge.
- Strongly disagree

- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree

8. I generally believe what popular media (television and movies) presents to me as the truth.
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree

9. I feel that I have the skill necessary to analyze and break down images and themes in popular media.
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree

10. I would benefit from learning media skills to analyze what is being presented to me.
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree