

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY AND CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES  
IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

by

Sara Beith

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Sara Beith

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(faculty signature)

Michi Thacker, Member of the Faculty

## ABSTRACT

In traditional social studies classrooms, the curriculum is focused around a textbook and memorization of timelines and facts. If our goal in social studies curriculum is to support students in their development as active democratic citizens, we then must create a classroom that values democratic practices such as engaging in discussion. Critical media literacy, a way to analyze and critical various forms of media, is one way to engage students in discussions. In this study in a middle school classroom I discuss how students engage with critical media literacy and discussion.

*Key Words:* critical media literacy, discussion, democratic

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## CHAPTER 1—LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

### **Problem Statement**

Youth are heavily influenced by the media and hold a naivety toward history as presented by the media (Sexias, 1997). In middle school social studies classrooms, all students bring preconceived notions and misinformation that have often been absorbed from information presented to them in the media (Sexias, 1997). The media often portrays and perpetuates negative stereotypes, maintaining the status quo—which is problematic in a multicultural democratic society because it places value on some cultures and devalues others. Students are often led to the misconception that media offers an extensive unbiased representation of the world, however the media is tightly controlled by the dominant elite (Shor & Freire, 1987). “The school system and the media are closely related and continually transmit their delusional ideas about race back and forth. This ‘double madness’ persists because both schools and media teach to a mass audience, using curriculum informed by racism, sexism, and classism” (Yosso, 2006, p.53). Through critical media literacy, middle school students can explore history in a way that engages them with controversial issues by analyzing historical documents and engaging in discussion with their peers.

Critical media literacy engages students in a critical analysis of their perception of stereotypes and biases, and offers students the tools to move away from receivers of information presented to them by the media, encouraging them to develop a critical lens to take in these complex stories and histories (Sexias,

1994). Woelders (2007) in their study about using film in a middle school classroom states,

Middle school students are not likely to read historical accounts on their own. Arguably, then, historically themed media--whether created for films or televisions, educational purposes, or entertainment-- are the places where students are most likely to encounter the authentic application or misapplication of historical knowledge...Thus, social studies curriculum must include inquiry based learning activities that provide opportunities for students to practice and develop skills and habits necessary to critically examine films and ensure that students are not 'swept in' by the powerful narratives, ideas, and perspectives to which they are exposed on a daily basis. (p.146)

In a middle level United States social studies class, critical media literacy offers tools such as analysis that are necessary to interpret and understand information being presented to students through media (Sexias, 1997; Walker, 2006; Woelders, 2007). Students must begin to read not only what is at face value, but look beyond what is being presented and begin to read the world (Freire, 2000). Walker (2006) states

In 1991, the Media Commission for the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) warned that students who lack the tools to evaluate and work with non-print media will be unprepared to live thoughtfully and productively in the present and the future.

Therefore, the skill to read the message through the medium is as essential as the message. (p. 31)

Students must develop the tools necessary to critically analyze documents and media to prepare them to engage with the complex histories that are explored in a U.S. middle level social studies class.

Some of youth's first exposure to the complex histories that are explored in a middle level social studies class are taught to students through television and the six major corporations that own media before entering the classroom (Lutz, 2012; Kroin, n.d.; Sexias, 1997). These corporations have perpetually reinforced the dominant narrative and stereotypes that depict a one-sided version of history. Youth absorb this information from films, children's stories, television shows, and advertisements. Critical media literacy challenges students' perceptions using a reflective writing process prompted by visual imagery in media, followed by students engaging in discussion of controversial issues with their peers. Through this engagement with controversial issues, students begin to question their perception of the world and are introduced to their peers' various perspectives.

The process of developing democratic citizenship begins with engagement in controversial issues and increasing student engagement through a reflective process of their personal beliefs (Scott, 1999). A pedagogy that incorporates critical media literacy will encourage students to become literate democratic citizens that do not take messages at face value, but look to find out the who, what, where, when and why behind messages (Carr, 2009; Kellner & Share,

2007; Sexias, 1997). The foundation of social studies is to instill democratic values and principles in our students, and through the practice of critical media literacy students can be supported in becoming engaged, effective citizens (NCSS, 2000; Rossi, 2006).

Many social studies classrooms continue to teach through a traditional textbook approach, rather than offer a pluralistic account of history (Clabough, Philpott, McConkey, & Turner, 2011). With the textbook as the primary source of information, the curriculum often overlooks controversial issues and negates to introduce students to multiple perspectives. It is necessary that students are offered a pluralistic history of the United States since the United States is a multicultural democratic society, with many different histories to explore beyond the dominant narrative. Through the use of critical media literacy, students will be engaged in a critical examination of media. Critical media literacy will offer students a variety of perspectives on critical issues in United States history and allow them to explore multiple forms of text.

### **Critical Media Literacy: What is it?**

Literacy is defined as the acquisition of “skills and knowledge to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one’s culture and society” (Kellner & Share, 2005, p.369). Critical media literacy involves looking at various media forms through a critical lens. Yosso (2002), a leading researcher on critical pedagogy states,

Critical media literacy utilizes media as a pedagogical tool to facilitate students' becoming critically conscious of themselves in relation to the structures of power and domination in their world. These structures create and perpetuate multiple macro- and microforms of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination. It is crucial to focus on the intersections of oppression, because the images are racialized, gendered, and classed, and they effect racialized, gendered, and classed communities. (p. 59)

Through critical media literacy, students learn to see how various forms of media portray mainstreamed biased images and empowers students in transforming their understanding to look at the world through a more critical lens. Critical media literacy is a method of introducing controversial topics and issues within the classroom through multiple perspectives and multiple modes of media including text, images, and film. Critical medial literacy is a form of social justice pedagogy because it challenges students to look at the master narrative and reinterpret it (Gainer, 2010; Kellner & Share, 2005; 2007).

Gainer (2010) found that by integrating critical media literacy into the curriculum, educators can cultivate democratic practices within the classroom, giving students the tools to critically examine what they are learning outside of the classroom. Gainer encouraged his students to evaluate how their history was being portrayed and re-create it into something that better reflects them as individuals. Kellner & Share (2005) state that,

There is expanding recognition that media representations help construct our images and understanding of the world and that education must meet the dual challenges of teaching media literacy in a multicultural society and sensitizing students and the public to the inequities and injustices of a society based on gender, race, and class inequalities and discrimination. (p. 370)

Through critical media literacy, students are able to engage with and talk back to the master narrative, reclaiming their identities (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperaita, 2008).

Gainer (2010) concluded in his study that there are many different ways in which students view media and that they all bring with them their own interpretation of the text. This variation of interpretation demonstrates a socially constructed meaning around the analyzed media within the classroom. When viewing media with peers, students were able to co-constructed meaning of history by listening to multiple perspectives and interpretations of a text that was presented in various forms of video, audio, and linguistic text. Through participation in critical media literacy, students drew from their lived experiences while deconstructing, debating, and reimagining dominant narratives (Gainer, 2010). Students challenged dominant and oppressive realities such as racism and the myth of meritocracy. In traditional teacher-centered classrooms, students are treated as mindless recipients of knowledge, but through critical media literacy, students can begin to act as critical thinkers rather than mindless

consumers of curriculum, thus creating a more democratic classroom (Freire, 2000; Gainer, 2010; Kellner & Share, 2005; Kellner & Share, 2007).

Redmond (2012) explored media literacy but neglected to address racism and other media biases. This study states that the most beneficial form of media literacy is one that explores media literacy from an aesthetic standpoint because adolescents want to be consumers and fails to use media literacy as a tool to look at society through a critical lens (Redmond, 2012). Critical media literacy goes beyond the aesthetic pleasure of media to cultivate a critical mindset so students can begin to view the world and all forms of media through a critical lens. Critical media literacy further can be used to engage students with controversial issues which support students in constructing their understanding of the world (Freire, 2000; Gainer, 2010; Kellner & Share, 2005;2007).

Critical media literacy promotes multicultural literacy by developing a pluralistic approach to cultures and subcultures that represent a global and multicultural world. Critical media literacy practice teaches students to become informed democratic citizens by encouraging them to critique the media, resist media manipulation, and respond to media in constructive ways. Kellner and Share (2005) state the importance of including a critical analysis of media within the classroom by emphasizing that:

Critical analysis that explores and exposes the structures of oppression is essential because merely coming to voice is something any marginalized racist or sexist group of people can also claim. Spaces must be opened up and opportunities created

so that people in subordinate positions have the opportunity to collectively struggle against oppression to voice their concerns and create their own representations. The process of empowerment is a major aspect of transformative education and it can take many forms, from building self-esteem to creating alternative media that voice opposition to social problems. (Kellner & Share, 2005, p.371)

Critical media pedagogy involves a democratic process that shares the responsibility of learning between the teacher and the students (Gainer, 2010; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Students are often more enmeshed in media than their teachers and can therefore be co-constructors of the curriculum that relates to their lives (Gainer, 2010; Kellner & Share, 2005). Through critical media literacy, students develop critical analysis skills, and they begin to look at the world as critical thinkers. Students may learn to act as social change agents while they debate controversial issues such as race and social inequality in relation to their lived experiences.

### **Engaging In Controversial Issues**

Teachers often feel underprepared by their teacher preparation programs to discuss controversial issues in their classroom (Kaviani, 2006). However, teachers often feel that controversial issues are imperative and unavoidable to discuss in a social studies classroom (Clabough, Philpott, McConkey & Turner, 2011; Kaviani, 2006). Controversial issues are defined by “issues that deeply divide a society, that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems” (Clabough et al., 2011, p. 40). Controversial issues are

embodied in opposition of viewpoints and conflict. Critical media literacy can be used as an opportunity for teachers to discuss controversial issues within their classrooms. Through the use of various forms of media, students are more inclined to engage critically with controversial issues (Stoddard, 2009).

Various forms of media can be used to engage students in discussion around controversial issues including film and advertisements. “Visual images are not simply embodiments of social reality; they are indeed ideological sites embedded with powerful discursive sociopolitical meanings that exert strong influences on the ways in which people live their lives” (Sheng, 2005, p. 24). In Sheng’s study, *Media/Visual Literacy Art Education: Cigarette Ad Deconstruction* (2005), Sheng found that through participation in critical media literacy to deconstruct advertisements, students were able to integrate aesthetic sensitivity and social awareness that allowed them to look at the world through a critical lens. By allowing students to look at advertisements that promote negative societal issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, students engaged with controversial issues to reinterpret the advertisements to better represent how they felt. Students analyzed advertisements to deconstruct stereotypes and were encouraged to respond to the advertisements through discussion and recreation of their own art. This required the students to look at the world critically. The teachers’ enactment of that process greatly affected the level of student engagement with controversial issues. Teachers must carefully construct an environment that supports such a process by planning lessons that included

analysis and deconstruction of stereotypical advertisements (Gainer, Valdez-Gainer, & Kinard, 2009; Sharrer, 2005; Sheng, 2005).

Media must be presented to the students with much care and attention (Gainer, 2010). Stoddard (2009) found that with high school aged students, film and discussion increased the students' knowledge of the events that were being discussed and allowed students to think about the events through a pluralistic lens. This study found that students who had preconceived notions about the controversial events in the film were able to find bits from the film that fit into their previously established position and supported their stance. Students who had no preconceived notion about the events were more likely to take the position presented by the film or the teachers, therefore supporting that the intentionality and presentation by the teacher greatly affects students' emerging understanding of controversial topics (Kaviani, 2006; Stoddard, 2009). This study found that the students trusted both the documentaries and their teachers' perspectives as factual. The teacher's intentionality of the use of media within the classroom successfully opened a space that challenged students' assumptions and promoted democratic aspects within the classroom, including critical discourse.

Kaviani (2006), a researcher who conducted a study around practicing teachers in regards to the use of controversial issues in the classroom, found that all teachers within their study "feel that they can and should discuss a range of issues with their students" (p. 211). Kaviani found that the choices made about which controversial issues teachers choose to discuss with their students directly related to and was influenced by the social positioning of the teacher. Kaviani

also found that by looking at media critically to discuss controversial issues, teachers were able to cultivate a democratic mindset within their students (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Kaviani found that students brought in their lived experiences with media to the classroom, and that they wanted to discuss controversial issues to better make sense of their world. The teacher also brought in their experience with media and that determined what was discussed in their classroom (Kaviani, 2006). It is imperative that teachers do not deny their students a space to engage with controversial issues. Critical media literacy offers students a way to engage with such topics.

### **Cultivating Historical Inquiry through Critical Media Literacy**

Within social studies classrooms, it is essential to engage students in a process of thinking like an historian (Wineberg, 2001). Historical inquiry is a method of supporting and encouraging students in looking at history like a historian by posing complex questions and researching those questions as a process. Students look at both primary and secondary source documents and use them to provide evidence of their emerging historical understanding. Walker (2006) states,

The decoding and comprehension skills required to make sense of a text are complicated by the fact that a text can take on different meanings, depending on the situation, context, usage, culture, or historical period. Historical literacy skills or the ability to interpret and understand a text by analyzing its meaning to the participants

and their culture provide students with the tools to develop a historical understanding. (p. 31)

A classroom teacher that uses critical medial literacy to engage students with controversial issues must also teach students to think like historians. Historical thinking supports a critical examination of primary and secondary source documents, deepening a students' engagement with controversial issues (Lesh, 2011; Mayer, 2006; Singer, 2009). Students become engaged in this process because it opens up history to be more than a timeline and allows them to relate with history by examining it as a process. History should be developed from a pluralistic perspective and be open to interpretation—not the norm in most history classes within the United States (Shor & Freire, 1987). Engaging students in critical discussions is imperative in all aspects of social studies and students should be engaged in the analysis of documents and media. The use of film is one method to inspire and encourage discussion amongst students (Stoddard, 2009).

In order for students to engage in historical understanding of a person, place, time period, or event students must engage with historical literacy. Historical inquiry through film must be scaffolded for students in a certain way. Films are a motivator in engaging students to conduct historical inquiry. Film can authentically demonstrate how historical knowledge is constructed and engage students in critical examination of media representations (Woelders, 2007). Historical literacy skills offer students the tools to understand a text from a historical time period. Rather than using film as factual representations of history,

films should instead be used to engage students in a way that encourages them to think beyond what is being presented at the surface level. Students can engage with film through historical thinking practices such as analysis and interpretation. Films are cultural artifacts and can be used as primary source documents. Through careful scaffolding by the teacher, students can engage in critical thinking using primary source work to look at films, which provides students opportunities to develop their own ideas rather than memorize what has been presented as facts (Walker, 2006).

Not only should students be encouraged to read films actively, but they must also engage with historical inquiry. A study conducted by Woelders (2007), found that “Historical inquiry requires teachers to model and encourage students to develop the skills necessary for active responsible citizenship in pluralistic media-dominated communities. Learning these critical-thinking habits that transfer into their leisure activities, such as watching the latest blockbuster film” (p. 146). Woelders (2007) found that use of K-W-L (Know, Wonder, Learn) charts and anticipation guides scaffolded students’ exploration of historically-themed films. These charts also acted as an engaging tool for historical inquiry. Middle school students do not have the same skill sets that high school and college students have to conduct discipline-rich research and evaluate information; therefore, more scaffolding of this type of thinking is required with middle school students. The teacher must model historical inquiry skills and guide the students towards developing the skills of historical thinking. The teacher must further build on students’ prior knowledge and challenge them to

develop inquiry-based processes of learning. In order for middle school children to connect with history, the lessons must be created to scaffold their learning so that it is accessible, building on students' prior knowledge. The students must see the purpose of the task as meaningful. Lack of accessibility to the content can lead to students failing to understand the importance of history.

### **Historical Literacy**

In order for students to engage with historical inquiry, they must develop historical literacy skills (Mayer, 2006; Woelders, 2007). Research conducted by Reidel and Draper (2009) found that

For social studies educators engaged in the work of democratic education, preparing their students to comprehend what they read is simply not enough. They must also help their students acquire the skills and dispositions to question what they read and to creatively and actively respond to all types of texts—written and visual. (p.126)

They insist that social studies teachers must not only take up the role of teaching literacy in their classrooms, but that they must be prepared to teach critical literacy that goes beyond the instruction received in language arts classrooms and supports students in their acquisition of skills and dispositions that encourage them to question what they read. They must further encourage students to respond to texts and make sense out of them. Historical literacy also prepares students to become critical democratic citizens, which will support them throughout their lives.

Reidel and Draper (2009) conclude that there is not distinct methodology for critical literacy, but that there are a number of practices used by educators across disciplines that support student engagement with critical literacy. These include: (1) reading supplemental or multiple texts to investigate subjectivity of an author; (2) reading from a resistant perspective to understand the lack of truth in a text; (3) creating a counter text as a way to incorporate marginalized voices and perspectives; (4) engagement in dialogue about texts to engage with other voices; (5) offering opportunities for research topics; (6) taking social action (p. 125). These steps cultivate students as meaning-makers, critics, and actors rather than passive receivers of information. This critical engagement with literacy supports students in becoming active citizens in a multicultural democratic society.

Many content area teachers, including teachers of social studies, believe that it is not their job to teach literacy to their students. Research shows that through teaching preservice teachers critical literacy, they still, however, often fail to include critical literacy into their curriculum (Reidel & Draper, 2011). Many teacher training programs do not prepare preservice teachers to support and engage students in critical literacy, and research shows that a teachers' own personal stance towards critical literacy will be directly reflected within their classroom. Therefore, it is imperative that teacher training programs support preservice teachers by offering them the skills and tools necessary to effectively engage their students with critical literacy (Reidel & Draper, 2011).

Students can be encouraged to read history through film and reflect on their interactional analyses of history through critical media literacy. A study conducted by Walker (2006) on *Historical literacy: Reading History Through Film* found that focal attentiveness was the only skill assessed by the mentor teachers over the four-year period of the study and saw this as a missed opportunity to scaffold the students to engage in historical thinking. In using film in a classroom to engage students in historical inquiry, it is essential to avoid a film that has a biased version of a particular time period by analyzing it for use of bias first. This then supports a focus on the use film as a primary source document so that students can look at artifacts and interpret a time period for themselves. Walker (2006) states,

More active and meaningful learning will result when students think, construct, or solve, rather than memorize information. Teachers who use films merely to communicate some historical information or fact, however well intentioned they may be, accomplish no more than teachers who rely solely on textbooks and lecture. Films read as literal text often generate the same level of passive receptivity among students as printed textbooks do. History teachers must set active, higher level expectations for their students in every educational endeavor, including the use of films in the classroom (p.34).

Critical media literacy is as a vehicle for teachers to incorporate a variety of texts into the classroom and scaffold students to engage in a discussion and interpretation of controversial issues.

### **Scaffolding Democratic Citizenship Through Critical Media Literacy**

Discussion is a useful strategy to support students in historical inquiry and historical literacy. “Through classroom discussions, students might learn to interact with others about issues of common interest, an ability that is critical for a democratic system of government that values input from its citizens” (Rossi, 2006, p. 181). Students can engage in critical media literacy by analyzing media and discussing different interpretations and perceptions with their peers. A common misconception about discussion is that the teacher should be hands-off to allow for students to come to their understandings on their own. On the other end of the spectrum, teachers try to control the conversation too much, wanting the students to come to a desired outcome, doing the thinking for the students rather than allowing them to think for themselves. The topic must be discussion-worthy and students must hold a strong information base to engage in meaningful discussion. The classroom climate must be created to serve as a safe, nonthreatening space where students’ questions are encouraged while maintaining mutual respect for each other’s ideas (Rossi, 2006). Dialogue and discussion are essential to creating a classroom climate that cultivates the development of democratic citizens. Students that are exposed to frequent discussion of controversial issues are more likely to develop complex, tentative, and skeptical dispositions towards knowledge. Rossi (2006) states,

Dialogues among students about controversy go to the heart of what it means to teach social studies. Researchers confirm that teaching about controversy in an open climate and with defined rules and a solid knowledge base engenders attitudes that promote democracy. Yet planning and implementing an exciting and thoughtful discussion of controversy is not an easy task. (p. 119)

While discussion is invaluable to democratic social studies classrooms, not all teachers see the value in discussion (Larson, 2000). In order for students to engage in a democratic classroom to prepare them to be democratic citizens, they must be prepared to engage in discussions with their peers—and middle school students want to engage with controversial issues and discussion with their peers (Hess, 2002). Critical media literacy is a starting point for students to engage in discussion about controversial issues and engage in a collective process of inquiry with one another. A classroom that develops norms so students can be challenged at higher levels of thinking such as engaging in discussion is essential to successfully engages students with critical media literacy (Larson, 2000; Rossi, 2006).

Critical media literacy engages students in critical thinking, community building, and thoughtful disciplinary content. Critical media literacy prepares students to look at the world through a critical lens and to become thoughtful democratic citizens. In a study by Marri (2009) that focused on who is and is not participating in a democratic society and who social studies teachers can support active and informed citizenship, defined critical thinking as “a process of actively

and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication” (p. 15). The teacher who was the focus of the study wanted students to be critical thinkers, felt that students needed to understand multiple viewpoints and perspectives, and that disagreements are okay. The teacher-researcher emphasized the importance of social action but did not promote it with his students. His pedagogy was informed by social critique and structural analysis that is closely aligned with structural change in society. The study found that by encouraging a classroom climate that valued positive relationships, resolution of conflicts, and group problem-solving skills, students were able to engage in discussion and social interactions with students from different backgrounds. While the intentions of this action research study were evident, the teacher-researcher failed to state his bias toward his own students and the small size of the population in which he studied, which compromises both the transferability and the credibility of this study. With critical media literacy, it is essential to move beyond good intentions in the classroom and persevere through the complex instruction that is necessary to promote democratic values and principles in the students.

### **Research Question**

A critical consciousness must be created in middle school students so that it can be carried with them into their high school and adult lives as informed democratic citizens (Freire, 2000; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). By implementing critical media literacy in a middle school social studies classroom, I can begin to

support the development of a critical consciousness in my students that allows them to begin to see how the perpetuation of stereotypes affects their lives and the lives of others (Yosso, 2002). It is essential that students come to this awareness on their own through my careful and intentional creation of curriculum and classroom dynamics. Students will develop a critical consciousness through their practice of critical media literacy, which will better prepare them to become active democratic citizens.

As a middle school humanities teacher, discussion of race and other social biases and stereotypes, must be included in my classroom. As a student teacher teaching U.S. history in a 7th/8th grade social studies using critical media literacy, I hope to create a classroom environment that allows students to critically explore racial issues throughout the history of the United States. Critical race theorists believe that “social reality is constructed by the formulation and the exchange of stories about individual situations. These stories serve as interpretive structures by which we impose order on experience and it on us” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p.57). Most students are inundated with inaccurate accounts of history and stereotypes are often perpetuated through media. From a critical race theorist standpoint, students’ social reality is being constructed through the media, and if images of stereotypes and inaccuracies of history are imposed upon them, students will begin to construct an understanding of the world through that lens (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). My hope is that through the careful implementation of critical media literacy, students’ social realities will be awakened to new stories and new histories. Through my approach to critical

media literacy, I hope to explore how to engage students with controversial issues within a United States history curriculum. The question I then pose is: What happens when I use critical media literacy to engage students in discussion of controversial issues in a U.S. history classroom?

## CHAPTER 2 — METHODS

### **Study Participants**

The study was conducted in a small suburban public middle school with a performing arts focus in western Washington state. The school population at the time of this study was 300 students. The racial and ethnic demographics of the school, according to the district website were 65% white, 12% hispanic, 10% Asian and 2% black. The majority of the students come from more affluent homes and the free and reduced lunch rate is 32%. The school prides itself on its academic accomplishments, and uses a traditional approach to academic schooling. The students in this study reflect the overall makeup of the school. These students will support me in understanding how I can create a curriculum and classroom environment that use media to engage students with controversial issues, which is not commonly implemented in this school.

### **Action**

The goal of social studies education is to support the development of active democratic citizens that are critically engaged with the world around them. Through critical media literacy, students are encouraged to develop a critical consciousness that encourages them to view media actively rather than passively. It is essential that students develop a critical consciousness through their own development, and it is my job as a social studies teacher to create an environment and curriculum that supports their development and learning. This study used movies, articles, propaganda and images with the goal of engaging students in looking at the history of the United States with a critical lens.

Engaging students in critical media literacy includes active discussions of controversial issues in the classroom. While teaching U.S. history in a 7th/8th grade social studies class and using a critical media literacy framework, I created a classroom environment that allowed students a critical exploration of issues during the early colonial period of the United States. I planned lessons that supported students in their analysis of various forms of media including text, images, and film. I created a space a structure for discussion post engagement with analysis of the various forms of media. The three week unit from which I collected my data from was a unit on the early colonial history and some specific accounts such as the Boston Massacre and the Declaration of Independence. I wanted students to understand that there are multiple versions of history, and I wanted them to engage with critical media literacy and thinking like a historian.

When I was planning my lessons, I kept in mind my students' favorite memories and how they enjoyed being engaged in the classroom. I structured my lessons to involve document analysis, so that students would be analyzing historical images from the Boston Massacre. The students were new to this type of work in a social studies class so I had to scaffold lessons carefully, which is something I noticed that I did well at times, and at other times I vastly underestimated the amount of scaffolding it would take to transition my students from the traditional model in the classroom to an environment that engaged in them in historical thinking and dialogue with their peers. Through my careful implementation of critical media literacy, students social realities began to be awakened to new stories and new histories.

## Data Collection

In my study, I used various types of data to help me to understand how students felt about and engaged with media in the classroom. I conducted: 1) two separate surveys; 2) maintained a reflective journal; and 3) recorded video. The recorded video was used to help me understand how the students were engaging in discussion of controversial issues. The surveys were conducted at the beginning and the end of my research to help frame my understanding of the students engagement with critical media literacy and discussion of controversial issues. The video I captured was during a seminar on the Boston Massacre and I paid particular attention to the the kinds of discussion the students were having. I noted who was speaking and what they were saying. This helped me analyze the surveys and gave me the ability to see patterns throughout the whole class. The research journal I reflected in consistently throughout the process. These various forms of data helped address my research question by allowing me to see how discussion occurred in the classroom. It also allowed me to go back and check my understanding about what happened in the discussion, and compare that with my reflective journal entry on the same lesson.

The first survey I conducted allowed me to see what students' favorite and least favorite memories from previous social studies classes were, which helped me understand how students enjoyed learning about social studies. This survey was conducted during the first few days of my research and was analyzed at the beginning of the unit to help guide my thinking in planning my lessons. Students were not allowed to remain anonymous because I wanted to know about them as

individuals and how I can best serve them as their teacher. I later used a second survey that focused on students' connection to media and discussion which was conducted at the end of the unit. The surveys were open-ended so that I was able to guide the students' understanding to help me see how media and discussion guided their thinking about controversial issues.

The surveys helped inform my research by allowing me to see what students thought about social studies from previous positive and negative experiences. The final survey allowed me to reflect on my research question by allowing me to see what my students thought about the process and what they thought about the use of media in the classroom. It also allowed me to see how students felt about discussion in the classroom and if the use of media supported them in discussion of controversial issues.

Through the use of a personal reflective journal, I was able to assess my planning and action in the classroom. I wrote reflections in my journal pre-planning, during planning, and post-planning about my thoughts on how the lesson would engage students with critical media literacy and discussion, aspects of the lesson that could be revised, and how the students appeared to engage with the lesson. This reflection journal further allowed me to reflect on my positionality in the classroom as a white middle class woman who has a passion for social justice and zero tolerance for maintaining the status quo. This reflective journal allowed me to reflect on my teaching throughout the unit. It also reminded me to see how I was keeping in mind the original survey results I had coded on

the students positive and negative past experiences in their social studies classrooms while planning and reflecting on my lessons.

Table 1.

*Data Collection Grid*

Type of Data	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Wk 6	Wk 7	Wk 8	Wk 9	Wk 10
Initial Student Survey	x					x		x		
Personal Reflection Journal					x	x	x			
Video				x				x		
Final Survey									x	

### Data Analysis

I approached the analysis of my data with an open mind allowing patterns to emerge out of my data. I analyzed my initial survey after it was completed by my students, because I wanted to use it to guide my thinking as to how I would approach and implement my lesson plans. The patterns that emerged from that data demonstrated how I could engage my students with social studies, and it affected how I interacted and planned lessons for the time I was with my students. It encouraged me to create lessons that reflected their positive

classroom experiences and to avoid planning lessons that reflected their negative past experiences.

My reflective research journal guided my thinking throughout the unit but I coded it at the end of the unit. Within this analysis of my research journal it was harder for me not to think about the things that were on my mind throughout the unit. I approached the coding with an open mind, and tried not to go into the analysis looking for specific information, however I think due to my investment in this part of the data, that was nearly impossible. My reflections were guided by my thinking about how students would engage with the lessons focused on critical media literacy and discussion of controversial issues. Consequently, my biases were present during the analysis of this set of data.

The remaining data, the video, reflection journal, and final surgery, was analyzed after my student teaching experience ended. I was genuinely curious as to what my data was showing me about how students experienced and engaged with my lessons. As I began to analyze this data, I began to see themes arise that showed that students were engaged in the critical media literacy and discussion of controversial issues lesson plans.

The video I coded by noting how many students talked during discussion and how often, as well as what the students were saying. In analyzing the post survey I made a chart characterizing the students' responses about positive and negative experiences. This was a very similar approach as to how the initial survey was coded. I decided to code students' positive experiences as reflections that seemed hopeful or that had students state they liked the activity or

discussion. I decided to code things as negative due to students stating things that they felt unprepared or weren't interested in the activity.

The coding of the personal reflection journal was the most complex piece of data to code due to the investment of my personal biases and experience in the classroom. In coding the journal, I looked for reflections that stated whether the lesson seemed successful, or areas of growth that I can use to strengthen my understanding of what I need to do to best prepare students to engage with a process of critical media literacy and discussion of controversial issues within the classroom.

As a teacher-researcher, the credibility of this study is compromised because it is very difficult to remove one from one's practice. Through the surveys, I was able to conduct a member check to strengthen the credibility of my research. Due to the unique nature of my school site, the transferability of my study is compromised. However, I have provided a rich thick description of my process and practice to strengthen the transferability of my research (Mertens, 2009).

## CHAPTER 3 — FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

### **Planning and Structuring My Data Collection**

This research project examined how critical media literacy scaffold students to engage in discussion of controversial issues. In order to analyze this question, I collected a variety of data including surveys, video, and a personal teacher reflection journal where I reflected on my lessons as well my observations of students as they engaged in the lessons. In approaching the analysis of my data, a series of themes emerged. I found the three following themes: 1) classroom activities that effectively engaged students; 2) scaffolding necessary for critical media literacy and discussion; and 3) how critical media literacy engagement leads to enhanced student discussions of controversial issues. I initially noticed students' interest in non-traditional classroom activities in their initial surveys and then was reinforced by their participation in class discussions and lessons. I began thinking about the need to scaffold students into discussions of controversial issues from the initial surveys and revisited this throughout my reflection journal. My final theme emerged out of my reflection journal, student video, and the final survey as to how critical media literacy led to the engagement of students in discussion.

#### **Classroom Activities That Effectively Engaged Students**

Through the initial survey I conducted, I found that students saw social studies as their most difficult subject and that their most favorite memories of social studies were activities that allowed them to engage with their peers and

move beyond the use of the textbook. This initial survey helped me understand what my students saw as interesting or engaging in school. I was curious about things such as what they thought their toughest subject was, what their favorite and least favorite memory was within a social studies class and also what their interests and lives were like outside of the classroom. I planned to use this information to help me understand my students and to help me plan my lessons with them in mind. I wanted to know more about my students so that I could help them find ways in which they would be able to relate to history, because I found that students have a hard time relating to history and I thought by getting to know personal and meaningful pieces of information about my students, I could use that to plan lessons in a way in which it would be more accessible to them.

One finding that emerged from the initial survey was that students thought that social studies was going to be their most difficult class this year. In a close second, many students thought that their math class was going to be a difficult class for them as well. I was slightly surprised at the large response as to why the students thought that social studies class was going to be their most difficult class and looked further into what were their favorite memories and least favorite memories about a social studies class to better understand why it was that they thought social studies was going to be their most difficult class. In looking at their past memories I found a large array of things that they were interested in about social studies. Students liked getting good grades, playing games in class, having class discussions, learning about a particular time period, giving presentations, and learning new strategies. The responses were all over

the place but it seemed as if what students were most interested in were things that were out of the normal flow of direct instruction. Themes emerged out of the data that suggested that students' favorite memories in social studies were activities that impacted students' learning in ways that were fun, allowed them to interact with their peers, and allowed to learn through something outside of the norm of direct classroom instruction or textbooks. I was still curious as to why it was that they thought social studies was going to be their most difficult class, and so I asked a few students directly about it. They told me that social studies usually takes a few hours a night for homework and they don't seem to be able to get the right information for the test which results in them getting a bad grade. It appeared that many of the students were putting out a lot of effort, but were getting few positive learning experiences as an outcome.

While I found it inspiring that students' favorite moments were those that used alternative methods of instruction as opposed to a teacher-centered approach, I began to wonder why students thought that social studies was going to be their most difficult class this year and if it had anything to do with their least favorite memories and the traditional approach to social studies that they were used to. I finding that emerged was that students found that note-taking, test-taking, and high stakes essays called classroom based assessments (CBA's) were their least favorite memories in the classroom. This confirmed my assumption that students needed something more in the classroom rather than the traditional approach. This left me hopeful that the students would be

interested in engaging in critical media literacy as it had nothing in common with what the students were disinterested in or held as their least favorite memory.

Throughout my teaching, I maintained a reflective journal where I recorded and reflected on how my lessons went, and how students responded to the lessons. Through this journal I was able to see how I could have improved on my future lessons and use the information I gathered to plan future engaging activities for my students. There were a few themes that I found that connected to the previous survey data. I found that students became more engaged with the historical content in the classroom when I planned lessons that were outside of the traditional teaching model of using a textbook, direct instruction, and note-taking. The students stated this in their final survey and I made note of comments in my reflection journal of students stating things such as, “This is so different from what we usually do and I think I’m actually understanding the history of America”. The students became more engaged with the content when I structured lessons that allowed them to work with their peers, used media to introduce content, and engaged them in discussion. I found that students were interested in discussing concepts of fairness due to their engagement with the discussion on the Boston Massacre, which gave me an entry point to support them in discussion of controversial topics in early colonial United States history.

### **Scaffolding Necessary For Critical Media Literacy**

In analyzing the initial survey, I found that the type of activities and lessons I had planned for the students were very different than the type of activities they were used to in their social studies classes. The initial survey helped me to

understand how to engage students with my research question and how it could support me in planning lessons that were engaging for them by showing me what students enjoyed and were used to. This survey also guided me in planning lessons that would allow me to connect with my students, and allow my students to connect with history in a more authentic way because I was able to connect it to their lives through the intentional planning of lessons. I specifically wanted to understand how to engage students in discussion of controversial issues within the history of colonial America and wanted to know how to use their interests to support them in looking at history through a the lens of critical media literacy.

In the initial survey, I found that students had not yet engaged in document analysis or any form of critical media literacy. I wanted students to engage in looking at media and historical documents with a critical eye, and engage in analysis of primary source documents supported by document analysis worksheets. After the first document analysis workshop we did in the classroom, I noted in my research journal that the students needed to be carefully scaffolded in the lessons because the process was new to them. These lessons and activities further engaged students to create positions and use evidence from their critical media literacy lessons where they analyzed historical documents to support their position and engage in discussion with their peers. This was all new to my students and I found that I had to carefully scaffold them through the process so that they would be properly supported in their learning. These findings were apparent throughout my collection of data, and continued to mold how I approached planning of my future lessons.

### **Critical Media Literacy Engagement Leads to Enhanced Student Discussion**

Critical media literacy, a way to analyze various forms of media through a critical lens, engages students in non-traditional activities in the classroom. My students were used to traditional classroom activities and I found that if they were properly scaffolded into discussion through the process of critical media literacy, they would engage in complex discussions with their peers. Critical media literacy holds the students at the center of the learning and allows them to engage in discussion with their peers and other forms of small group work. Through the initial interest survey I conducted with my students, the findings that emerged allowed me to think of how I can plan my lessons to engage students in critical media literacy within the classroom and scaffold them to engage in discussion of controversial issues with their peers.

Through my reflection journal, a finding emerged that showed that students were successfully engaged in discussion through a process of critical media literacy. Reflecting on my lessons where the students were engaged in historical thinking, analyzing primary source documents and various other forms of historical media with a critical lens, I noticed that they were eventually able to connect and engage with their peers. Students at first were reluctant and unsure as to what it meant to do a document analysis workshop with their peers. I wanted to engage them with this type of thinking, which was different than their typical activities of engaging with the textbook and taking notes. I noticed that I could have offered them more on what it looked like to work in groups and provided further scaffolding as to what it meant to work in peer groups as the unit

progressed. However, students became engaged in noticing things about their documents such as that within the historical documents multiple perspectives and accounts of history were present, and they began sharing their ideas with their peers and challenging to their peers to use evidence to support their thinking. Students were interested as to why there were two different accounts to the events of the Boston massacre, which got them thinking about history in a new way and got them thinking about how history has multiple perspectives. This encouraged them to think like historians and got them to start thinking about what it means to hear a version of history and how there can be different accounts of history.

When we finally got to the discussion of the controversial issue after our critical media literacy workshops with document analysis, the students were beyond excited to take their position as to whose fault they thought the Boston Massacre was and use the evidence they found to support their argument. Upon reflection I realized that I should have been more direct with what the students were going to need to engage in discussion in the seminar setting, and could have offered them other ways to construct their argument rather than a letter to the editor. However, the discussion went smoothly and students were building off of each others ideas and introducing connections to current controversial issues such as gun rights. Students used evidence from their critical media literacy document analysis and their argumentative letters to support their claims. They asked questions of their peers to clarify their positions, and they made room for

all students to be a part of the discussion by inviting voices in to the discussion that we had not previously heard from.

Students also engaged in critical media literacy and discussion of controversial issues surrounding the Declaration of Independence and who was included and excluded from that document. I chose a video that had popular actors because I knew my students were interested in performing arts so having a video that had actors allowed my students to be more connected with the content. The video introduced the Declaration of Independence and how that was used to offer privileges for white, male, landowners. The students picked up on this and after the video we had a discussion of the Declaration of Independence and the students immediately began engaging in discussion of who was included and given rights, and who was left out and not given rights. The students were interested in discussing this, and were genuinely curious as to why some people were included, and others excluded. The students wanted to talk about the controversial issue of marginalized voices, and the video offered them a way to engage in that discussion.

As I reviewed video of classroom discussion, I found that students referred to the prior work of engaging in critical media literacy while discussing the Boston Massacre. This led to the finding that after students engaged in a process of critical media literacy, they engaged in a discussion of a controversial issue with their peers. In the video, the students referenced the various forms of media (letters, eye witness accounts, and visual art) to support their arguments during discussion. One student, stated "I think that the Boston Massacre was the fault of

the British because when I analyzed Paul Revere's painting, it clearly showed that the British initiated the massacre". In another video while we were discussing the declaration of Independence, another student stated that "In the video that guy said that not everyone was included in the rights being put on people and only white people got those rights". Both of these students' statements demonstrate how critical media literacy supported them in discussion of controversial issues with their peers and are reflective of similar comments made by other students.

In the students final surveys, an overwhelming amount of students said that they liked to watch videos and that the analysis worksheets helped them to think more complexly about the information. Students were supported in their discussions due to the analysis of media prior to discussing. Some students (42%) stated that they were not as happy to do discussion and others (48%) stated that they really enjoyed talking about things they are learning about with their peers. The remainder of the students were neutral towards discussions.

### **Implications For Future Teaching**

Through this action research project I was able to see that students generally liked to talk with their peers about things that they are learning and that critical media literacy is one way in which to engage students in discussion. I can now take this information and continue to find ways to support students in creating a classroom filled with dialogue.

Classroom activities that effectively engage students are imperative in regards to getting students to connect with classroom material in authentic ways.

Students stated that they were more interested and engaged in activities that involved them interacting with their peers instead of working through their textbooks. Freire (2000) talks about teaching in way that supports students in reading the world as opposed to reading the world, and this notion supports my findings that students want to be engaged in interactive activities. I will take this understanding and use it in my future teaching so that I remember that students simply reading the word is not sufficient, but that they must instead learn how to read the world and learn in interactive ways.

Students must be scaffolded into complex ways of learning and engaging in discussion of controversial issues. It became apparent to me in findings that students must be supported through classroom activities to engage with critical media literacy and discussion of controversial issues. Wineberg (2001), supports this idea through a process of engaging students in historical thinking. As I go forward and teach future social studies classes, I will keep in mind that I must support students through thinking like a historian to allow them to use those skills to engage with critical media literacy and discussion of controversial issues.

Using critical media literacy appears to be one way in which students will engage with discussion of controversial issues. In my future teaching, I will keep in mind that analyzing media (text, video, images) through a critical lens is one way to support students in discussion of controversial issues. This is not the only way to support and scaffold students in their learning, and I am left with wondering what other ways I can support and scaffold students into discussion of controversial issues.

I am now left with a few unanswered questions such as whether or not students would engage in discussion of controversial issues without critical media literacy and if critical media literacy is something that students will take with them to think critically about the world. I will engage in future research about critical media literacy and discussion of controversial issues to support my future implementation of these classroom practices. I will also further look into how to support and scaffold students in discussion of controversial issues.

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## APPENDIX: SURVEYS

**Student Survey**

**Please be as honest in your responses as they will help me create a more engaging, useful class.**

**It is useful for me to gain an understanding about your past so that I can best support you in the present.**

1. What words would you use to describe your experience with social studies up until now:

2. What is your favorite past memory in a social studies class?

3. What is your least enjoyable memory in a social studies class?

**I would like to get to know you a little better...**

4. What is your attitude toward social studies? Explain.

5. What do I need to know about you as a person if I am going to be an effective teacher for you?

6. Who and/or what matters most to you?

7. Which classes do you anticipate to be the most difficult or demanding this year?

8. List three areas of greatest interest to you. Put a star next to the area that interests you most.

9. Please check all that apply  
I have a computer at home  
I have internet access at home

10. What are your areas of greatest strengths and weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses

11. Do you play any sports? How long have you been in sports?

12. Is there anything that I should know that makes school challenging for you?  
Is there anything that makes it difficult to get your homework done?

13. Is there anything that you would like to share with me about your family?

**I'm also interested in where you are headed in life...**

14. What are your hopes for your high school experience?

15. What are your hopes for after high school?

16. What do you want to leave this class having learned, done, and accomplished? Explain.

## Critical Media Literacy and Discussion Survey

What is your general overall feeling towards US History or Social Studies?

Tell me about your experience with films in a Social Studies Class.

What is your experience with analyzing pictures? Have you ever analyzed old articles or advertisements?

Tell me about your experience with discussions in Social Studies class?

What do you think the goal of discussions is?

What would help you become more engaged in discussion?

Tell me what you think about using various forms of media to support discussion.