

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

**Critical Media Literacy in Primary/Junior Classrooms**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Media literacy is an effective avenue through which to encourage students to be active, critical citizens in today's heavily mediated society. This qualitative research study examines the practices and strategies of primary/junior classroom teachers who are infusing critical thinking into their media literacy instruction. Through a case study approach, this research compares the current literature on the topic of teaching media literacy with the practices and experiences of three primary/junior teachers who are doing so in classrooms in Ontario. Identifying the essentiality of media literacy to 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom instruction, this research encourages teaching the subject through a critical pedagogies approach. The inquiry revealed that teachers utilize common key teaching strategies in their teaching and have diverse goals and motivations for doing so. As well, critical media literacy as a pedagogy was found to lend itself well to incorporating student interests and real world experiences, which contributes to it being positively received by students and educators alike.

**Key Words: media literacy, media education, critical pedagogy, critical thinking**

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### **Dedication**

This research paper is dedicated in memory of my Nana, Joyce Slorach, who continues to be my greatest teacher in so many ways.

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## **Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0 Introduction to Research Study**

Children are surrounded by more media today than ever before, whether it be in form of advertisements, popular culture, news or social media content (Roberts & Foehr, 2008). As such, the mass media play a significant role in the life and development of children (Anderson & Huston, 2001; Postman, 1995). Evidenced by the 2006 revisions to the Ontario Languages curriculum, this impact has caused media literacy to gain recognition as an integral component of effective literacy instruction. Today, teachers are no longer tasked with simply delivering content to students, rather the role of the teacher is now more focused on teaching students how to learn, think critically, and solve problems. In order to prepare students to navigate both today's media saturated society and the media environment of the future, teachers must equip them with the skills necessary to be critical consumers and producers of mass media.

The avenue by which to accomplish this has been coined by educational research as critical media literacy (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Gainer, Valdez-Gainer & Kinard, 2009; Kellner & Share, 2007). Drawing upon the current body of research, as well as my own conceptualization of the topic, critical media literacy is defined as the aim to encourage students to critically analyze and interpret diverse media messages and their relationship to power structures and audiences. In other words, critical media literacy aims to encourage students to think critically about the media they consume—to look closer at the biases, representations, and values contained within these texts. Being critical consumers of information can help students be active participants in democratic society. If we agree that this is an important and valuable skill to teach students, the question then becomes what is the best way to incorporate critical media literacy in classroom instruction and at what level of development can students begin to think critically

towards media sources.

According to Vivian Vasquez (2007), some do not believe in the need for critical literacies at the elementary level, however, she argues that young children are very capable and willing to participate in such complex conversations, especially about the things that are meaningful to them. Critical media literacy is not only something that can be grappled with at the elementary level, but represents an opportunity for educators to provide students with an avenue of thinking that will allow them to be active, critical citizens both throughout their schooling and their lives.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

As shown, the research on teaching critical media literacy has been primarily focused on theorizations of how to do so with students who are beyond the grade six level. While this research avenue has served as a basis for understanding what critical media literacy might look like in a classroom setting, it fails to take into consideration the developmental nuances, interests, and capabilities of students in the early years of their education. Therefore, the aim of this study is to gain insight into how primary/junior (kindergarten through grade six) teachers are teaching students critical thinking skills specifically towards media texts. In doing so, the main goal of the study is to uncover effective ways to teach critical media literacy in primary/junior classrooms. The study will explore the background, perspectives, and experiences of primary/junior teachers and the types of activities and discussions that occur in their classrooms to promote critical media literacy.

There has been a range of research on critical media literacy in education that has informed my understanding of the topic and increased my desire to contribute to this emerging area of scholarship. This research study builds off the critical literacy theorizations of Hobbs (2005, 2011), Kellner and Share (2005, 2007), and Vivian Vasquez (2007), all of whom advocate for



the inclusion of critical media literacy in general education settings. In addition to these influential scholars, many other educational researchers (Garcia, Seglem & Share, 2013; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Bennet, 2011; Burnett & Merchant; 2011) have also come to the conclusion that in today's media-saturated society, there is a need for critical media literacy in schools. However, it is not common to find such pedagogy in primary/junior classrooms in Ontario. From my own experience and interest in critical media literacy in schools, I have observed different examples of teaching 'media literacy' at the primary/junior level. I found that these efforts are often directed at producing media texts, including activities such as designing eye-catching cereal boxes or creating video game content. These may be meaningful media literacy activities "under the assumption that one cannot truly become a critical consumer of information without having experience...constructing media texts" (Hobbs, 2005). However, if not paired appropriately with other activities and discussions, they lack a level of engagement necessary to instill in students the ability to critique and understand media messages. Some researchers (Flores-Koulish, 2006; Torres, 2006; Robertson, 2011; Hobbs, 2011) have suggested this may be a result of faculties of education lacking adequate pedagogical instruction in critical media literacy, leaving teachers unprepared to teach the subject to their students. One aspect of this study is to gain an understanding of how the participants came to be involved with teaching critical media literacy, whether through their initial teacher education or some other motivating factor.

This study also aims to fill gaps in the existing body of research on critical media literacy. For example, there is a lack of attention on critical media literacy research focused at the elementary level. The research that claims to address the teaching of critical media literacy towards the younger grade levels often falls short of engaging students in critical thinking

focused activities (Ajayi, 2001; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Gainer, Valdez-Gainer & Kinard, 2009). Instead of encouraging students to think critical towards media texts, the research in general focuses heavily on teaching students how to produce media texts. The vast majority of the research on critical media literacy has also been from an American perspective, allowing this study to provide insight into the teaching of critical media literacy by primary/junior teachers in a Canadian context. Finally, few pieces of research suggest pedagogical strategies for critical media literacy; the ones that do (Gainer, Valdez-Gainer & Kinard, 2009; Gainer, 2010) do not take into account the perspectives of currently practicing classroom teachers.. Overall, this study aims to fill these mentioned gaps in the research by examining actual ways critical media literacy is being taught in primary/junior classrooms in Ontario.

## 1.2 Research Questions

This study will use a qualitative approach to uncover the perspectives and experiences of primary/junior teachers in Ontario who are encouraging students to question and think critically about media texts in their classrooms. The key question that will guide this research is: *In what ways, why, and to what extent are Ontario teachers applying critical literacy practices to media texts in primary/junior classrooms?* The following sub-questions were designed to help guide the inquiry:

- Is critical media literacy being taught as its own subject, or rather is it incorporated or integrated with other subjects?
- What are examples of the effective activities and discussions that occur in the primary/junior classrooms that successfully promote critical media literacy?
- What are teachers' backgrounds, perceptions, and understandings with respect to critical literacy, both in general and in terms of media texts?

In order to answer these questions, the research will take into account three case studies of teachers and their classroom practice. The case study method is best used to answer *how* and *why* questions, both of which are reflected in my key question and sub questions (Yin, 2003). The case study approach is especially pertinent to this line of inquiry because the method “usually addresses a problem or an intervention of interest to the researcher’s professional practice... firstly benefit[ing] the researcher undertaking the project and then, when new learning and knowledge are applied to practice, it can have utility for others” (Harland, 2014, p. 1114). In order to take into consideration multiple perspectives, this research will be conducted as a collective case study, where the issue of teaching critical media literacy in primary/junior classrooms will be analyzed and illustrated through multiple case studies of classroom teachers (Creswell, 2013). The data derived from the case studies will be collected through formal in-person interviews with currently practicing primary/junior teachers. In alignment with the collective case study method, the interviews will be conducted using the same questions for each participant in order to ensure congruency among the cases (Creswell, 2013).

### **1.3 Background of the Researcher**

I first became interested in the topic of critical media literacy during my undergraduate studies at the University of Western Ontario. As a student in the interdisciplinary Media, Information and Technoculture program, I studied a diverse range of topics, including political economy of media, media representations, advertising, and cultural theory. As I became more aware of the politics and subsequent effects of the media on our society, I began to develop the opinion that it is important for younger students to be provided opportunities to explore and interrogate some of these ideas. As such, I became interested in how these different topics could be discussed and explored at an earlier level of education. In addition to my passions for

education and children, it is primarily this line of inquiry that led me to the Master of Teaching program at OISE.

From my own interest in the topic of critical media literacy, I have been particularly interested in how teachers incorporate any type of media in their classrooms as a learning experience. I have observed that ‘media literacy’ activities in elementary classrooms have been more focused on producing media texts rather than on critical thinking towards media messages. I am of the opinion that this is not enough to prepare students to be active citizens and critical thinkers in our media saturated society. It is through this belief that I became interested in how we can teach primary/junior students to develop their critical thinking skills towards media texts.

#### **1.4 Overview**

The format of this research paper is in accordance to the Master of Teaching Research Paper (MTRP) guidelines. Chapter one includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the key questions and sub questions that will guide the research, as well as my personal background, interest, and positionality in regards to the topic of critical media literacy. Chapter two will comment on the relevant literature that has helped shape my own ideas on critical media literacy. Chapter three outlines the methodology and procedure used in this study, as well as information about the three research participants and the data collection process. Chapter four identifies the participants in the study and describes their insights into teaching of critical media literacy. Chapter five will provide the findings of the study and provide the conclusions I have reached, recommendations for the practice of critical media literacy, and suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.0 Introduction

It is difficult to identify the specific origin of critical media literacy as a pedagogical concern due to its interdisciplinary nature. Generally speaking, the foundations of critical media literacy stem from early twentieth century thinkers belonging to the Frankfurt School. From the 1930s through the 1960s, these theorists developed a critical social theory to analyze the ways in which popular culture and communication technology encouraged certain ideologies and a level of social control (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944). This body of thought developed throughout the twentieth century, however, it was not until the 1980s that cultural studies research was applied to the field of education. Garcia, Seglem and Share (2013) credit Len Masterman's *Teaching the Media* (1985) with inspiring educators around the world to embrace media education "less as a specific body of knowledge or set of skills," but rather "as a framework of conceptual understanding" (p. 111).

The increasing pervasiveness of the media and its impact on our lives has inspired many scholars and educators to contribute to the field of critical media literacy in the last twenty years. The following analysis of the literature in this field will examine key definitions and themes that are relevant to this research project. The chapter will end by stating the gaps found within the body of literature and explain how this research aims to address some of these gaps.

### 2.1 Media Literacy

Renee Hobbs (2005), a leading authority on media literacy education, noted that the teaching of media literacy has been increasing in popularity amongst grade school level education since the 1990s. Many scholars (Domine, 2011; Hobbs, 2005; Stein & Prewett, 2011; Westbrook, 2011) who write about media literacy in education refer back to the definition put

forth by Aufderheide and Firestone (1993). The pair defines media literacy as “the ability to analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms (p. xx). In agreement with this definition, other scholars (Adams & Hamm, 2011; Hobbs, 2001) have since articulated that media literacy involves both interpretation and creation of information in the form of media. While many media literacy activities, especially ones that engage younger students, are directed at producing media texts, Hobbs (2005) later articulated the importance of going beyond simply producing media texts and having students engage with media in different, more in-depth ways.

Another common question that arises in the literature on teaching media literacy is: What exactly does it mean for a student to be media literate? At the broadest level, being media literate involves being able to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. MacDonald (2008), like Hobbs, is more focused on the interpretation component of media literacy. She provides specific examples through her description that being media literate involves accessing relevant information, comparing information from different sources, evaluating credibility, and developing conclusions from media texts. This conceptualization of media literacy lends itself to the opportunity of infusing critical pedagogy in the teaching of media literacy.

## **2.2 Critical Media Literacy**

Silverblatt and Eliceiri (1997) were the first to articulate critical thinking as a key component of teaching media literacy at the foundational level. They note that teaching about the media is focused on honing in on “a critical skill that enables audiences to decipher the information that they receive through the channels of mass communications and empowers them to develop independent judgments about media content” (p. 48). Whereas media literacy may teach students to derive meaning from media texts, critical media literacy, in addition to critical pedagogy in general, incorporates discussions about representation, biases, values, audiences and

power. This is because critical media literacy draws heavily on the notion that all media contain ideological and value messages.

Although a significant amount of the current literature concerning media literacy mentions critical thinking, there are a selective amount of researchers (Kellner & Share, 2007; Luke, 1994) who have chosen to focus their work on teaching critical media literacy specifically. What these authors have in common is that they all advocate for the need to incorporate critical thinking into any teaching about the media or media forms. Kellner and Share, who are two of the most recognized and well published scholars in the field, put it well when they wrote that “[critical media literacy] expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication and popular culture, and deepens the potential of education to critically analyze the relationship between media and audiences, information and power” (p. 4). They also note that this pedagogy involves critically analyzing media conventions, stereotypes, dominant values and ideologies. Luke (1994) describes these relationships as a way for critical media literacy to address larger social issues. She notes that critical media literacy “ties in with larger socio-political issues of culture, gender, class, political economy, nation and power” (p. 31). These views all suggest that critical media literacy is an expanded notion of literacy that includes different forms of mass communication and adds complexity to literacy instruction by encouraging an analysis of the different components that make up media messages.

### **2.3 Media Texts**

Both teachers and researchers who have written about using media texts in the classroom have chosen a wide variety of media texts on which to base their theorizations. Essentially, any form of communication can be interpreted as media and is therefore considered a media text. This broad category includes, but is not limited to: films, television, music, books, websites,

video games, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, radio, photographs, product packaging, and social media content, such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Some authors (Gainer, 2010; Gainer, Valdez-Gainer & Kinard, 2009; Vasquez, 2007) have focused on one particular media form in their specific articles. An analysis of these works will serve as both a way to describe how different types of texts are used in the classroom and to outline some of the theorizations of different authors in the field.

A popular media text that is often chosen as the focus of critical media literacy is advertisements. Advertisements, as a media text, are particularly effective in the teaching of critical media literacy due to their value-laden messages about different groups of people and audiences (Gainer, 2010). This coincides with the idea that critical media literacy is centred on value messages and representations of different groups of people. The following are a few select examples of how advertising can be used to teach students to be critical of media messages they experience on a daily basis.

Gainer, Valdez-Gainer and Kinard (2009) conducted a study where they used toy advertisements to teach critical media literacy. The authors conducted a classroom activity in which students “talk back” to the advertisements about the ideological values they contain. Although the article makes some assumptions concerning the critical nature of the students’ thinking, the study does suggest a concrete example of an attempt to encourage students at the primary/junior level to think critically towards a specific media text. Vasquez (2007) describes how the students in her kindergarten class participated in a discussion in which they unpacked the marketing tactics of the McDonald’s Happy Meal. Through the critical thinking focused classroom environment that Vasquez facilitated, the students were able to express their feelings about how McDonald’s promoted their product to children through offering toys. This is an



excellent example of how students at such a young age are able to understand the purpose of advertising and the messages it conveys. These two studies serve as examples of the types of activities that can be undertaken in an effort to teach critical media literacy, however, both lack adequate description of how the students were prompted to engage in such critical thinking in terms of advertisements.

Some authors in the field have focused their research on teaching critical media literacy through other types of media texts. Ajayi (2011) used *Sleeping Beauty* as a text to understand how his students brought their own background knowledge to interpreting a text. Gainer (2010) used different television shows to explore the politics of representation among a group of middle school students. Other media texts that have been focused on one particular media text have been Rodesiler (2010), who analyzed student response to a US Army promoted music video and Burnett and Merchant (2011) write about using social media content in general in teaching critical media literacy. These authors demonstrate the broad media texts from which the teaching of critical media literacy draws.

## **2.4 Importance of Critical Media Literacy**

Due to the rapid speed at which society continues to evolve and change, teachers need to equip their students with the necessary skills to participate in a constantly evolving society. According to Freire (2004), “media literacy is arguably more important than ever. Cultural studies and critical pedagogy have begun to teach us to recognize the ubiquity of media culture in contemporary society” (p. 263). Kellner and Share (2007) note the importance of critical media literacy to democracy. They argue that students need to be able to analyze media texts in order to fully participate in twenty-first century democracy. In addition to being able to participate in an increasingly mediated society, Lundstrom (2004) noted some of the benefits that

come with effectively teaching critical media literacy. Some of these include: improved reading and listening comprehension and increased engagement amongst marginalized students.

Another reason for teaching critical media literacy is that it lends itself quite nicely to issues of equity and social justice. This is due to the fact that the work of critiquing media messages and structures involves “unveiling the political and social construction of knowledge, as well as addresses principles of equity and social justice related to representation” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 10). The issue of what groups are most often represented in the media, and in which ways can reflect political and social issues in society. Not only can these be discussed from a media literacy standpoint, but the media can also be used to explain some of these broader social issues. Kellner and Share (2005) summarize Luke’s opinion that “it is the teacher’s responsibility within the classroom to make visible the power structure of knowledge and how it benefits some more than others” (p. 10). Luke (1994) insists that “a commitment to social justice and equity principles should guide the media educator’s work in enabling students to come to their own realizations that [some] texts oppress and subordinate others” (p. 44). Through critical media literacy, social justice educators can examine issues of racism, homophobia, classism, sexism and so far in their classrooms by examining media and popular culture (Garcia, Seglem & Share, 2013).

## **2.5 Suggestions for Practice**

There are a few different models and processes that have been put forth to suggest ways of accomplishing critical media literacy pedagogy. One weakness in the literature as a whole is that many of the suggested general guidelines fail to provide tangible connections to classroom practice. For example, Hobbs (2005) refers to a four-step inquiry process where students reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes about mass media, learn how to gather information from

different media and points of view, develop critical thinking skills in order to analyze and evaluate messages and create media texts. The Center for Media Literacy articulates their view on how to teach critical media literacy by noting that media literacy education in general is based on five core concepts. These concepts represent the basic ideas that inspire critical media literacy education. The notions, broadly interpreted state that: media messages are constructed; media messages use their own language, with unique codes and conventions; media is focused on a particular audience that interpret the same message differently; media contain value messages and embedded points of view; and media are organized to gain profit and/or power. While these frameworks serve as good starting points to guide the teaching of critical media literacy, the research does not relate back to practice, which would be helpful for a teacher who is looking to learn how to incorporate critical media literacy into their classroom.

A more practical suggestion commonly referred to in the literature on teaching critical media literacy, is a bottom-up approach in which students bring their own preferences and experiences into the classroom. The interests and ideas of students provide the starting point for the teaching of critical media literacy. While some authors have articulated the importance of paying particular attention not to spoil students' enjoyment in the media they consume (Gainer, 2010; Burnett & Merchant, 2011), others have expressed the importance of allowing students to bring the media culture they are most familiar with into the classroom for critique (Kellner & Share, 2005). Alvermann and Hagood note that students are active meaning makers who find it worthwhile to examine texts that are a part of their daily lives (2000). This is because, as Ajayi suggests, "students' interpretations are not decontextualized, and rather are rooted in specific cultural values and therefore it is important for teachers not to discount the cultural knowledge that students bring to the classroom in terms of literacy" (2011, p. 396). Kubey and Baker

articulated that often this occurs through giving up authority and teacher-centred instruction and replacing it with student-centred pedagogies (1999). Masterman (1985) reiterates this idea by stating that the teaching of critical media literacy challenges the traditional hierarchical transmission of knowledge that is common in most classrooms. He notes that the teacher should not advocate one particular view but instead encourage reflection about media texts and teach students the analytical skills that will help them develop their own views. Gainer (2010) suggests that this can be accomplished through a participatory process that allows for collaboration between students. He suggests that teachers should allow students to debate media with each other and discuss differences in meaning and representation. Overall, there is a consensus among the researchers of the importance for student collaboration and self-driven analysis in the teaching of critical media literacy.

## **2.6 Competing in a Crowded Curriculum**

Despite the fact that media literacy is included in the Ontario curriculum, some might think that other subjects deserve more attention from teachers and students. This can result in critical media literacy receiving minimal attention via classroom instruction. Scholars based in the United States have cited the problem that in an education system so heavily focused on standardized testing, there is simply no room for subject areas like critical media literacy in the classroom (Domine, 2011; Kellner & Share, 2005). Even with a focus on the importance of critical media literacy coming from media education experts, teachers are being heavily burdened by an emphasis on standardized testing. The result is that only a small proportion of students receive critical media literacy-focused instruction (Kubey & Baker, 1999). In Ontario, where there are so many curriculum expectations to be accomplished in a school year, teachers in Canada experience similar pressures to prioritize their teaching.

Adding to Masterman's idea (2001) of media literacy being a framework for conceptual understanding, Lundstrom (2004), Kubey and Baker (1999), and Kellner and Share (2007) have each specifically suggested that critical media literacy can be used as a method to teach curriculum across different subjects. According to Lundstrom (2004), time should not be set aside specifically for teaching media literacy, but rather it can be viewed as a way of thinking applied to the entire curriculum. Kubey and Baker (1999) add to this idea by noting specifically that Health, Social Studies, Language, and Art are subjects that lend themselves nicely to critical media literacy instruction. This cross curricular, framework style approach can also be considered as one of the benefits and motivations for teaching critical media literacy.

## **2.7 The Ontario Curriculum**

Although no authors have yet to explicitly incorporate any Canadian curriculum into their theorizations on teaching critical media literacy, it is important to understand the accessibility of the topic as it relates to the Ontario curriculum. In 2006, the Ontario Ministry of Education mandated a new Language curriculum that included media literacy as a strand alongside oral communication, reading, and writing. According to the document, "media literacy explores the impact and influence of mass media and popular culture by examining texts such as films, songs, video games, advertisements, television shows, newspapers, photographs, and websites" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 13). The document differentiates media literacy from traditional literacy: "Whereas traditional literacy may be seen to focus primarily on the understanding of the word, media literacy focuses on the construction of meaning through the combination of several media "languages" -- images, sounds, graphics, and words" (p. 13).

In terms of critical literacy towards media texts, the document notes that the media literacy strand "focuses on helping students develop the skills to understand, create, and *critically*

*interpret media texts*" (2006, p. 14). As early as grade one, students are expected to identify overt and implied messages, initially with support and direction in simple media texts. The example given compares the overt message of a toy advertisement that shows two boys playing with a car (the toy is fun) and the implied message (the toy is for boys). Again in grade one, students are expected to begin to identify, with support and direction, whose point of view is presented in a simple media text and suggest possible alternative perspectives.

The curriculum outlines overall expectations for media literacy teaching from grades one through eight. To varying degrees of depth and complexity, students at every grade level are expected to: “demonstrate and understanding of a variety of media texts; identify some media forms and explain how the conventions and techniques are used to create meaning; create media texts for different purposes and audiences; reflect and identify their strengths as media interpreters and creators, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in understanding and creating media texts” (2006).

## **2.8 Other Obstacles**

There is a great deal of important pedagogical instruction that occurs in initial teacher education programs, however, one cited reason for the lack of critical media literacy in elementary classrooms is that the pedagogy may not be a key focus of initial teacher education programs. According to Kellner and Share (2005), most teacher training and staff development in the United States rarely mentions media education or discusses media literacy concepts. They also note that teacher training programs that specifically focus on media education are almost non-existent. In the Ontario context, it will be interesting if the expanded duration of initial teacher education has an effect on the range of topics being discussed. In their article about teaching teachers about critical media literacy pedagogy, Torres and Mercado (2006) “document

the urgency for including this new literacy in school and teacher education curricula given the crucial role of media as they touch every issue impacting human life in society” (p. 260).

## **2.9 Gaps in the Literature**

There are a few significant gaps in the literature regarding teaching critical media literacy. One is that there is a lack of focus towards primary/junior level classrooms. Also, there is very little written from a classroom teacher’s perspective, which would be valuable to the field. The literature that does include insight into how to teach critical media literacy is either too shallow, excluding practical suggestions, or on the other side of the spectrum, too narrow, only highlighting one specific example. This results in a lack of practical strategies that classroom teachers can use to teach critical media literacy in their own classrooms. In addition to this problem, a lot of the literature is heavily focused on theoretical concerns and lacks a practical and accessible connection to classroom teachers. This study aims to fill these gaps by examining effective, tangible ways current teachers are incorporating critical media literacy in primary/junior classrooms. The study will accomplish this by discovering ways in which teachers are applying critical literacy practices to media texts in primary/junior classrooms.

## **Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.0 Introduction**

This chapter will illustrate the research design and methodology undertaken in an effort to strengthen the validity of the study. First, the research approach and procedures will be discussed and the instruments of data collection will be outlined. Next, a description of the participant sampling and recruitment process, as well as relevant biographical information for each participant, is provided. Following this is an explanation of how the data was analyzed and a discussion of the ethical considerations pertinent to the study. Both the strengths and limitations of the methodology will then be explored. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary and rationale of the methodological processes used based on the objective of this research.

### **3.1 Research Approach and Procedures**

Using a qualitative research approach, this study was designed to gain insight into the experiences of teachers who encourage their students to think critically towards media texts in primary/junior classrooms. The research was conducted through a two-fold process which includes a review of the relevant literature and face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with currently practicing educators. The qualitative nature of this study provides the opportunity to delve into the experiences and perceptions of classroom teachers. In doing so, the research aims to uncover the nuances of implementing this type of media literacy instruction in primary/junior classrooms from the perspective of those who are immersed in the field. Instead of basing findings on quantitative data, which would likely be focused on a one dimensional look into student achievement in the form of graded assessment, this method allows for greater depth through an inquiry into the processes, experiences, and opinions of educators who promote



critical media literacy in their classrooms. In conducting this research within a qualitative framework, the goal of the study is to explore the perspectives of individuals in a particular setting: teachers in a classroom. For this reason, a qualitative approach is appropriate as such research “seeks to understand the world from the perspective of those living in it” (Hatch, 2002, p. 7). Furthermore, through interviews, the qualitative methodology allows for an exploration into the meaning-making processes of the participants. In his book, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research*, Irving Sideman (2006) advocates for the value of qualitative research in education. He speaks to the benefits of using interviews as a means of data collection: “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). This method will allow for an exploratory look into the personal insights of classroom teachers, as their opinions are valuable to answer the research questions. Overall, the qualitative nature of this research is aligned with the goal of the study, as the focus is on how teachers are encouraging their students to think critically about the media messages that affect their everyday lives.

### **3.2 Instruments of Data Collection**

The primary source of data collected in this study is transcribed responses to semi-structured interviews with currently practicing educators. Interviews of this nature are common in qualitative research, allowing responses collected from both predetermined, open-ended questions, as well as from other questions and dialogue that emerge through the interview process (Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, 315). This format is beneficial as the researcher can gain insight into the experiences and opinions of practicing educators, as well as learn about different aspects of the topic that perhaps were not considered in the literature or by the researcher beforehand. In addition, semi-structured interviews require the researcher develop a keen

understanding on the topic beforehand in order to be able to design relevant and meaningful questions (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). In the present study, this understanding was achieved through the literature review. Since all participants will be asked the same questions to ensure validity, the format of semi-structured interviews provides “a certain degree of standardization of interview questions” but at the same time, “a certain degree of openness of response by the interviewee” (Wengraf, 2001, p. 62).

In order to ensure the security and confidentiality of the data, interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and stored on a password protected hard drive. Interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and similarly stored. The interview questions were designed to provide a platform in which participants were encouraged to speak openly and develop ideas concerning their background, experience and opinions as they relate to the research topic. A complete list of interview questions asked can be found in Appendix B.

### **3.3 Participants**

This section outlines the sampling criteria that was established for recruiting research participants as well as the methods undertaken to locate them. Biographical information on the participants is included in order to provide insight into the participants’ backgrounds and experiences as they relate to their teaching practice. For purposes of confidentiality, each participant has been designated a pseudonym.

#### *3.3.1 Sampling Criteria*

Since the goal of this research study was to gain insight into the teaching experiences of educators who teach media literacy through a lens of critical thinking, the ideal participant for this study was meant to be a currently practicing teacher doing so in a primary/junior classroom

located in Ontario. Participants will have a minimum of one year of experience teaching in a classroom to ensure adequate practice with this type of instruction, while at the same time not excluding the value and passion of teachers in the beginning stages of their careers. This was an important consideration because according to the research, educators who have recently graduated from initial teacher education programs are more likely to have been instructed on the importance of teaching both critical thinking and media literacy. Due to the limited number of research participants outlined by the structure of the Master of Teaching Research Paper, participants will be selected based on their experiences across the Kindergarten to Grade Six range. Since there were only three participants, their ability to speak to a wide range of experience with different grade levels was important to the study.

### *3.3.2 Sampling Procedures*

A purposeful sampling design was used as this research study required its participants to meet the specific predetermined criteria described above. As Barbour (2001) states, this strategy offers researchers a level of control in choosing their participants. This was essential as the participants needed to be able to speak to their experience as educators who utilize media texts to engage their students in critical thinking activities. Marshall (1996) notes that this sampling technique allows the researcher to “actively select the most productive sample to answer the research question” (p. 523). In addition, convenience sampling was utilized to recruit participants. This technique, in which the researcher selects participants who are most accessible, was utilized due to the fact that, at the time of publication, I am immersed within a community of teacher colleagues and mentors who are more broadly connected to currently practicing educators. In addition to this, participants were also recruited from meeting contacts at various professional development sessions on the topic of critical media literacy. When seeking out

potential participants using convenience sampling, my contact information was shared by my personal contacts with their colleagues who fit the sampling criteria; this was done to ensure that the teachers were willing to participate in the study rather than feeling obligated or pressured to do so.

### *3.3.3 Participant Biographies*

**Rebecca** is an Ontario certified primary/junior teacher in her seventh year of teaching within the Toronto District School Board. She completed her initial teacher education in the concurrent program at York University. In addition to teaching grades one, three, and four in a classroom setting, she also worked within a school as a media literacy rotary teacher for students ranging from kindergarten to grade five. Rebecca also has completed additional qualifications in Special Education, Librarianship, and Mentoring; she also has her specialist qualifications in Media and Reading.

**Thalia** is an Ontario certified primary/junior/intermediate teacher who has been teaching for twenty-three years in the Toronto Catholic District School Board. She completed her initial teacher education at York University and has experience teaching kindergarten, grade one, grade two, grade five, and grade six. Thalia has her additional qualifications in Special Education, Religious Education, and Reading.

**Sophie** is an Ontario certified primary/junior teacher who has seven years of teaching experience in the York Region District School Board. She completed her teacher education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. In different capacities, she has taught all grades ranging from kindergarten to grade eight, with most of her experience teaching in a grade six gifted classroom. She also has taken additional qualifications courses in Special Education and Reading.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Using the audio recording from the interviews, I listened to each individual interview again before undertaking the transcription process. After the initial listening, I began directly transcribing the interview into a word document in order to better analyze the data. After the transcription process was complete, interview responses were read, reread, and analyzed for relevant themes that would help answer the research questions. Each transcript was coded individually and different categories were established from the responses. This process of thematic analysis was used as it enables the inclusion of “a wide variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people” (Boyatzis, 1998, p.5). Important quotes and insights were highlighted and then used to identify key themes that either aligned with the literature review or emerged independent from the current body of research. The data that emerged across the individual transcripts was then synthesized in order to draw similarities and differences across the three participants.

Out of this process, four key themes emerged. The themes were then compared to existing research in the field in order to examine if the different aspects of the teachers’ experiences either aligned or contrasted with what was found within the current literature. Null data was also taken into consideration in order to gain insight into different themes or concepts that were not prevalent in the interviews but may still be relevant to the research topic and study. Finally, the themes were analyzed and reflected upon in order to establish their significance for broader educational practice.

### **3.5 Ethical Review Procedures**

This research study was conducted in accordance with the ethical review procedures for the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Each interview participant was given a letter of informed consent (see Appendix A) prior to the interview. The letter outlined the purpose of the study, the interview questions to be asked (see Appendix B), and described how the data will be collected, stored, interpreted, and disseminated. Participants were informed of their right to refrain from answering any questions throughout the interview and their right to withdraw their contributions to the study at any time prior to its publishing. The described procedure outlined in the letter was strictly followed and great effort has been made to ensure the security of the data collected. Audio recordings and transcriptions of the interview were stored on a password-protected hard drive on a personal computer. Interview participants signed two copies of the letter indicating their willingness to participate in the study. One original copy was kept by the participant for his or her record and the other was sent back to me as the researcher. There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study, however, to ensure that all participants felt comfortable with the responses they contributed, respondents were given the opportunity to review the transcripts in the case they wished to clarify or retract any contribution before the data analysis process was undertaken. In addition, all participants were assigned a pseudonym and any identifying markers related to their schools or their students have been excluded or otherwise named. These ethical considerations were diligently adhered to in order to ensure that the rights and dignity of the participants were respected throughout the entire duration of the research process.

### **3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths**

The described research methodology of this study has been designed to enhance the overall validity of the study. Although this research provides an opportunity to gain knowledge concerning the classroom practice and experience of educators teaching critical media literacy, it is not without limitations. One of the main limitations in this research study is the small sample size of participants. Due to the time constraints and academic demand of the Master of Teaching program, a sample size of 2-5 participants is suggested by the MTRP guidelines. Despite the participants' invaluable and insightful contributions, this data collected cannot be generalized to a larger population of teachers. Additionally, the guidelines did not allow for multiple methods of data collection, such as classroom observation and student perspective. Although the multiple methods could have enhanced the validity of the findings, Silverman (2009) notes that a single method of data collection used in a qualitative study can in fact "add theoretical consistency and elegance to the research design" (p. 122). The single method of data collection can also be seen as a strength because the research question aims to address the lived experiences of classroom teachers and therefore their personal opinions and reflections collected by interviews were an effective means to collect insightful data. Furthermore, by giving voice to teacher experience, educators are provided opportunity to conceptualize their practice and rationalize their pedagogical decision making.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, key aspects of the methodology undertaken by this qualitative research study have been outlined. By using the sampling criteria and procedure outlined, respondents were recruited for their ability to contribute their experience to the research in the form of semi-structured interviews. The thematic coding process described aided in the meaning

making process in order to illuminate the experiences of teachers who implement strategies to teach critical media literacy. The following chapter will discuss the research findings that resulted from the data collected by the interview process.



## Chapter 4: FINDINGS

### 4.0 Introduction

The aim of this research study has been to explore the experience of primary/junior teachers who incorporate critical thinking activities into their classroom media literacy instruction. Thus far, background into the researcher has been outlined to provide context to the stated research questions, a review of the current literature in the field has been provided, and the methodology undertaken by this study has been explained.

The current chapter will report the research findings derived from three interviews conducted with classroom teachers who are teaching media literacy through a lens of critical thinking. In an effort to answer the overall inquiry into how, why, and to what extent primary/junior teachers are applying critical thinking practices to media texts in their classrooms, the data collected from the interviews has been interpreted and organized into four overarching themes and several corresponding sub-themes. The main themes are as follows: 1) Participants described their use of effective teaching strategies and activities across curriculum areas to teach critical media literacy; 2) Participants reported incorporating student interests and real-world connections into critical media literacy instruction; 3) Despite lack of inclusion in initial teacher education programs, participants were strongly motivated and had diverse goals in teaching critical media literacy; and 4) Participants experienced their teaching of critical media literacy being positively received by students and other educators. The following is an analysis and discussion of the themes, which will include their significance in relation to the current body of research in the field.

#### **4.1 Participants described their use of effective teaching strategies and activities across curriculum areas to teach critical media literacy**

The three participants identified a number of common key strategies as being integral to the success of their media literacy instruction. The first common strategy among the teachers was their balanced approach between analyzing and producing media texts. Secondly, all three teachers emphasized the importance of questioning by both teacher and students when interacting with media texts in the classroom. Next, the three teachers also discussed using gradual release of responsibility to guide students towards performing independent critical thinking. Two of the teachers also found that facilitating and encouraging open-ended discussions was an important aspect of their instruction. Lastly, all participants had in common the practice of incorporating media literacy across different curriculum areas. The frequency and consistency of these strategies being mentioned by the participants suggests that these are effective strategies to encourage critical thinking towards media texts in primary/junior classrooms.

##### *4.1.1 Analyzing and Producing Media Texts*

When discussing their media literacy programs, the three teachers demonstrated the importance of focusing on both analyzing and producing media texts. In addition to describing the tools of analysis they teach in their classrooms, each teacher gave multiple examples of media texts that their students produce. Thalia mentioned that it was important for her to provide her students with an avenue by which to deliver their thoughts and opinions. Although they each focus on both media consumption and production in their own teaching, Rebecca and Sophie differed on their view of how this balance is being achieved in other classrooms. Referring to the media literacy triangle (media text, audience, production), Rebecca was of the belief that the

production piece was often forgotten. Contrastingly, Sophie shared her observation that “a lot of teachers when they teach media literacy...they focus just on ‘okay, create a poster or commercial’. They start and end with kids creating the media”. Sophie went on to explain how she incorporates both the analyzing and producing pieces into her own classroom:

We spend a lot of time looking at media through a lens in which you can understand the conventions and techniques, the purpose and the audience, and then we reflect before we create anything and apply the techniques that we have learned.

Blending the two components is an effective way to ensure that students learn the skills involved in becoming effective communicators as well as critical consumers of information.

Multiple scholars in the field have also addressed that media literacy should involve both interpretation and creation of media texts. Hobbs (2010) demonstrates this by defining media literacy as the ability not only to analyze and evaluate media texts, but also to create them. Thoman and Jolls (2004) further explain the importance of both by stating, “If our children are to be able to navigate their lives through this multi-media culture, they need to be fluent in both ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ the language” (p. 19). This common theme found in both the participants’ experience, and the research suggests that effective teaching of critical media literacy includes both critical analysis and meaningful production of media texts.

#### *4.1.2 Purposeful Questioning*

Questioning was a key strategy in all three participants’ teaching of critical media literacy. This specific strategy played dual roles for each of the teachers. First, all three participants mentioned the need to design purposeful questioning in their teaching. Sophie articulated this idea by describing that the critical thinking aspect is embedded naturally when she poses questions. Second, each participant expressed the importance of allowing students to generate

questions of their own towards media texts. Rebecca mentioned that as part of her questioning strategy, she tries to “make the familiar, unfamiliar” so that students can delve deeper to generate their own questions. For Thalia, part of encouraging students to be active viewers of media was to promote their asking of why towards texts. Sophie shared her strategy of developing students’ ability to question media by “looking at it with the knowledge that the media is trying to persuade them, or is biased”. The notion of instilling in students the ability to generate their own questions to guide discussion is related to Kubey’s idea (1999) that central to the teaching of critical media literacy is the need for teachers to replace teacher-centered instruction with student-centered pedagogies. The role of questioning clearly plays a significant role in encouraging students to be critical thinkers and can lead to meaningful discussions guided by students’ thoughts and opinions about media.

#### *4.1.3 Gradual Release of Responsibility*

Another common strategy amongst the participants was utilizing gradual release of responsibility in their media literacy instruction. All three teachers mentioned that they begin their instruction by frequently modelling examples of critical thinking towards media texts. The teachers all in some way mentioned that there is the need to teach the fundamental skills of critical thinking before expecting students to complete critical media literacy tasks independently. Sophie emphasized the importance of whole group discussions where she can be involved in prompting students to extend their thinking. Rebecca described what this process looks like in her classroom. “My students have already had experience looking at media...all that pre-teaching is done, so this isn’t something brand new that I’m giving them. They’ve done it with me and now they’re doing it a little more independently”. Although the literature on the topic does not include many practical suggestions for possible processes of teaching critical

media literacy, Gainer, Valdez-Gainer and Kinard (2009) mention the importance of teachers “scaffolding students’ learning as they explore and analyze multiple forms of text” (p. 675). This common experience amongst participants demonstrates that designing instruction that gradually leads to independence is an effective method to teach critical media literacy.

#### *4.1.4 Open-Ended Discussion*

The last common strategy described by two of the participants as being central to their teaching of critical media literacy was facilitating open-ended discussions and lessons. Sophie shared that to encourage critical thinking, she chooses topics and asks open-ended questions that do not lead to just one answer or consensus. Rebecca also articulated the importance of open-ended debate in her critical media literacy lessons. She stated that “if the students don’t come to a conclusion in that forty minutes when they do that lesson, that’s a good lesson, right? Because critical thinking isn’t black and white. There is always a huge grey area”. Masterman (2001) addressed this idea by advocating that teachers should not be supporting one particular view, but rather encourage debate about media in an effort to teach students critical thinking skills that will lead to them developing their own ideas. Similarly, Gainer (2010) noted that teachers should provide opportunities for students to debate media by discussing differences in meaning and representations. Thus, discussion and debate is shown to be not only an imperative aspect of teaching critical media literacy, but also a practical strategy of how to do so.

#### *4.1.5 Delivering the Ontario Curriculum*

All three participants expressed the importance of using the Ontario curriculum in their teaching of critical media literacy. While they all agreed that their media literacy instruction should be grounded in the overall and specific expectations located within the Ontario

curriculum, they also expressed the challenge of working with a “crowded curriculum” in which there is “so much content” to get across. All three teachers suggested explicitly that by connecting their media literacy instruction across different curriculum areas, they were able to ensure that their teaching of critical media literacy can take place when there are so many other expectations to cover in the span of a school year. Rebecca, who believed that “integration is really key” to teaching critical media literacy, has connected this teaching to a social studies unit in which her students created a digital photo journal that considered “the changes that were happening within the local community and if the changes were helpful, not helpful, how they felt about them and how they affected their everyday lives”. Thalia noted, “Because media literacy develops an understanding of audience, purpose, text forms, conventions, and techniques...those are all concepts that we read about have to address in other subjects, such as reading, writing and art”. Some examples that Thalia used in her class include: connecting to the reading strand of the Language curriculum through a picture book analysis; connecting to Art when analyzing logos; addressing the Social Studies curriculum by discussing current event issues; and extending media literacy to relate to the idea of living things in Science by debating whether media characters are real or not real. Sophie also spoke to her commitment to involving media across different curriculum areas. Some specific examples she provided were: designing packaging for a math board game, looking at public service announcements related to Social Studies and Art, creating a news broadcast about healthy eating in Health, and publishing a blog from the perspective of being in outer space for Science. The number of examples provided by the three teachers demonstrates the versatility of media literacy and its ability to be applied across the curriculum.

The research also has articulated the importance of this cross-curricular teaching. In their work, Lundstrom (2004), Kubey and Baker (1999), and Kellner and Share (2007) all suggest that

critical media literacy can be used as a framework to teach across different curricular areas. In his foundational work on the subject, Masterman (2001) described media literacy in general as being a way to develop conceptual understanding that can be used as a lens through which to analyze other topics in the classroom.

#### **4.2 Participants reported incorporating student interests and real-world connections into critical media literacy instruction**

A common theme among all three participants was the desire to make the teaching of critical media literacy meaningful to their students. In order to do so, the teachers were selective in the types of texts they brought into their media literacy instruction. Although the three teachers expressed broad views on what could be considered a media text, they paid particular attention to incorporate texts that their students would be interested in. Another way in which the participants made their media literacy instruction meaningful was to connect it to the world outside the classroom. Through incorporating student interests and real-world connections, the three teachers reported achieving a high level of student engagement, something that will be discussed further in the fourth theme.

##### *4.2.1 Student Interests*

From each of their interviews, it was clear that all three participants were mindful to incorporate topics that were of great interest to their students in order to ensure their engagement with the subject. When deciding what kind of texts to bring into the classroom, the teachers focused on what their students were interested in and what media texts might appeal to them most. Rebecca articulated this by mentioning that the first thing she thinks about “is the needs of the particular group of students you are working with and what they are interested in generally”. Across participants, this focus on student interests has led to incorporating such topics as

Halloween costumes, cereal boxes, superheroes, and toys.

The idea to incorporate toys, something of great interest to students, into the teaching of critical media literacy is a common theme in the literature. Gainer, Valdez-Gainer and Kinard (2009) used toy advertisements to engage students in critical thinking about the messages contained in these texts. To draw upon an example that was mentioned in a previous chapter, Vasquez (2004) used McDonald's Happy Meal toys as a way to encourage her Kindergarten students to think about how the company was using the toys to appeal to them as a specific audience. This strategy of bringing in something that all children can relate to, or are interested in, demonstrates the accessibility of these complex topics to young students. Additionally, by utilizing a text that is appealing to students, their level of engagement is heightened.

Rebecca and Thalia shared the experience that by tailoring media literacy lessons to topics that their students were interested in, they were able to effectively reach their struggling learners. Rebecca felt that this was so because a lot of her media literacy lessons related to equity and she felt that struggling learners are able to understand these ideas through an equity stance, because often they feel different from their peers. Luke (1994) speaks to this point in his research by stating that through media literacy and critical thinking, classroom teachers can work to expose the fact that knowledge and information exist within a structure of power that benefits some and excludes others. Thalia, who also felt that there were no real barriers to prevent these students from participating in these critical thinking activities, shared an example where a struggling learner in her class was able to apply a number of critical thinking strategies to a picture of Santa Claus to determine if he was real or not. In his research, Lundstrom (2004) expresses that being able to engage marginalized students is a potential significant benefit of teaching critical media literacy, and can lead not only to increased engagement, but also to improved reading and



listening comprehension.

#### *4.2.2 Real-World Connections*

Another common theme amongst the participants was connecting media literacy instruction to real-world examples. For Rebecca, the importance of making authentic real-world connections was evident throughout multiple facets of her teaching. She explained that wherever possible, she tries to use examples from her students' everyday lives, such as the local community and Halloween costumes, as an entry point for her media literacy lessons. From there, she encourages her students to come up with their own connections to the real world. To her, this is an essential aspect of teaching critical media literacy, evidenced by her statement that "if you're not connecting students to the outside world, what's the point of school, right?". As discussed previously, Thalia and Sophie also emphasized the importance of incorporating media that impacts their students' everyday lives. This strategy aligns with the research conducted by Alvermann and Hagood (2000) who believe that students are active meaning makers who find it worthwhile to examine media texts that are a part of their everyday lives.

### **4.3 Despite critical media literacy being inadequately included in initial teacher education programs, participants were strongly motivated and had diverse goals in teaching critical media literacy**

Due to the complexity of the teaching profession, there are many topics that need to be addressed in the span of an initial teacher education program. Through the initiatives set out by governing bodies, such as the Ontario College of Teachers and educational institutions, and the professional judgment of each individual instructor, some pedagogical concerns may take priority over others. As it would be impossible to address every single aspect of the profession, there are certain topics that may not be covered in initial teacher education programs. The three

research participants have articulated their belief that neither media literacy nor critical thinking was sufficiently included in their programs. Despite this common experience, these teachers have been motivated by factors outside their teacher education to be passionate towards teaching critical media literacy. Through this motivation, they have developed specific goals that guide their teaching of the topic.

#### *4.3.1 Initial Teacher Education Programs*

All participants shared the experience that neither critical thinking nor media literacy was adequately addressed in their initial teacher education programs. Of the three participants, two attended York University in the concurrent education program and the other received a Bachelor of Education from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. When asked to what extent, if at all, was media literacy and/or critical thinking included in her initial teacher education, Thalia replied “I thought about that for a while and I think I have to say not at all. Definitely not explicitly. I can’t even remember any links”. Sophie was the only participant who found that critical thinking and media literacy was mentioned in her initial teacher education program, but only extremely briefly and because of one professor’s interest in the topic. This common experience is not surprising considering the research conducted by Kellner and Share (2005), who found that media education is rarely mentioned in most teacher education programs.

#### *4.3.2 Motivations for Teaching Critical Media Literacy*

As Hobbs states in her research, “Many factors may lead a teacher to begin incorporating media analysis and media producing activities into the curriculum” (2005, p. 75). Despite a lack of focus given to critical thinking and media literacy in their initial teacher education programs, all three participants had other experiences that led to their motivation to teach critical thinking

towards media texts. For Rebecca, she was first exposed to the idea of critical literacy through a practicum teacher. This introduction influenced her decision to take the additional qualification courses in media, where she had the opportunity to complete a large project specifically focusing on critical media literacy. In addition to this, she also notes that she also draws upon initiatives set out by both the Ministry of Education and her school board. For Thalia, in addition to having developed a personal interest in teaching critical media literacy, she mentioned that she is constantly reinforced due to the interest other teachers express towards her teaching. She also drew upon a quotation from Rick Shepherd of the Association for Media Literacy that effectively encapsulates her motivation for teaching the pedagogy: “Media education has been called the perfect curriculum: it’s timely, it’s multidisciplinary, it’s easily assimilated into the classroom, and it promotes critical thinking skills”. For Sophie, it was through her undergraduate studies in media that she became motivated to teach the subject to her students. Hobbs explains the significance of these experiences in her belief that “The diversity of motives and approaches (coming from diverse aims and goals along with so many distinct content areas and approaches) is a source of strength” (2005, p. 92) in the field of media literacy education.

#### *4.3.3 Goals in Teaching Critical Media Literacy*

In addition to the participants’ motivations, the teachers also shared a number of common student-centered goals for their media literacy instruction. All participants stressed the importance of using critical media literacy to help prepare students to become active, responsible citizens. They also hoped that their instruction would “provide students with the tools of analysis” needed to play an active role in understanding and thinking about media texts. There was a common notion amongst the participants that they wanted their students to be prepared to participate in an increasingly media saturated society and that critical thinking was a way to

accomplish this. This idea is mirrored in the literature that discusses the importance of teaching critical media literacy. As Freire articulated, due to the “ubiquity of media culture in contemporary society” (2004, p. 263), it is important for media literacy to be taught through a lens of critical pedagogy. Similarly, Kellner and Share (2007) note that young students need to be equipped with these analytical skills in order to prepare them for participation in today’s media-driven democratic society.

#### **4.4 When participants taught critical media literacy, this was positively received by both students and other educators**

Due to the possibility of sensitive topics arising through discussions about the media, the teachers were asked to describe if they had ever experienced any challenges from parents, administrators, or other teachers towards their teaching of critical media literacy. All three participants expressed that they have always received positive reaction towards their teaching of critical media literacy. This was especially true in terms of interest generated among other educators who wanted to learn more about how to effectively teach media literacy. Additionally, the three teachers also spoke to the enthusiasm towards media literacy they receive from their students.

##### *4.4.1 Student Reaction*

All three participants described that their teaching of critical media literacy has been met with positive reactions from their students. They observed that in general, students had fun, were engaged and passionate, and found the lessons memorable. The participants believed that because of this enjoyment, their lessons had a significant positive impact on their students and their thinking. Both Rebecca and Thalia noticed that as their instruction of critical media literacy continued throughout the year, students become more aware of the world around them.

Additionally, Rebecca described an example showing her students' enthusiasm for her teaching of critical media literacy. She said that when she taught media literacy exclusively in one school:

Students were engaged and they would remember it. They would come up to me in the halls and start asking me questions about what they were learning about in media and they wanted to continue that work, so I think that, you know, they just had fun with it.

The literature that addresses specific classroom examples also provides instances where students react positively to lessons in critical media literacy. Gainer, Valdez-Gainer, and Kinard (2009) described an example of when fourth-grade students were asked to respond to advertisements, they showed their eagerness to discuss their ideas amongst their peers. Similarly, in Vasquez's experience (2004), her kindergarten students showed ongoing engagement and persistence in the critical media literacy projects she undertook with them.

#### *4.4.2 Collaborating with Other Educators*

Each participant described the experience of other educators being eager to learn more about their work in teaching critical media literacy. Although the participants acknowledged that they share their work through different avenues, the fact that these teachers are able to spread their knowledge of teaching critical media literacy demonstrates that other educators are also interested in learning how to teach this pedagogy and are seeking out opportunities to learn how to do so. The three teachers also mentioned a variety of resources they use to get ideas for their critical media literacy lessons. For Rebecca, it was when she was teaching media literacy to multiple groups of students within a particular school, that she was able to model for the classroom teachers how critical media literacy can be taught. Her impact was evidenced by these classroom teachers utilizing her lessons the following year when they were responsible for their own media literacy instruction. Sophie also shares her media literacy teaching resources and

units with other teachers within her school. Thalia has been a leader in the field of critical media literacy within the broader educational community. When the new Language curriculum was newly released in 2006, she was asked to develop a workshop to share the new media literacy strong with other teachers within her school board. Since then, she has spoken on the topic multiple times at the annual Reading for the Love of It Conference in Toronto. She described that she often receives interest from other teachers to share her knowledge and experience of teaching critical media literacy.

Considering the research conducted to date, there has not been any explicit focus on how exemplary teachers of the subject are sharing their expertise with other educators. However, some of the authors in the field are currently practicing classroom teachers themselves and therefore their work can be considered an avenue by which they communicate and share their knowledge. For example, Vivian Vasquez (2004), Nancy Valdez-Gainer (2009) and Timothy Kinard (2009) directly relate their research to their classroom experience in the hopes of perhaps guiding others in their own teaching of critical media literacy. Evidently, although not all classroom teachers have the opportunity to be formally published, the research participants have illustrated that there are other avenues available where they can share their work with the broader educational community.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

Comparing the experience of three teachers with the current research in the field of critical media literacy education has resulted in uncovering four themes that are essential to the pedagogy. First, there are a number of instructional strategies that are integral to the teaching of critical media literacy. Second, incorporating student interests and real-world connections leads to meaningful instruction. Next, teachers are motivated by factors other than their initial teacher

education and have strong goals that guide their practice. Lastly, the teaching of critical media literacy has received positive reaction in the educational community.

The three participants practiced common teaching strategies to encourage their students to think critically towards media texts. In addition to achieving a balance between analyzing and producing media texts, the teachers also commented on the importance of questioning in their media literacy instruction. Additionally, in scaffolding their instruction and encouraging open-ended discussions, the teachers gradually build student autonomy in their critical thinking towards media texts. These strategies are also implemented across different curriculum areas wherever possible.

A goal of all the participants was to make their media literacy instruction meaningful to their students. In order to accomplish this, the teachers reported incorporating media texts that pique students' interests. Another way the teachers ensured the relevance of their instruction was to utilize examples from students' lived experiences. These strategies resulted in a high level of student engagement and represent a true strength of teaching critical media literacy.

Next, it was a common experience across the three participants that neither media literacy nor critical thinking was a main focus in their initial teacher education. Despite this fact, the teachers gained their motivation to teach critical media literacy from other experiences. In addition to this, the three participants also expressed similar, student-centered goals that guide their media literacy instruction.

Lastly, according to the participants, the teaching of critical media literacy has been received with great enthusiasm. Students have been intrigued by the subject and show an eagerness to interact with media text in a critical way. As well, other educators have shown interest in learning more about how they can bring critical media literacy to their own

classrooms.

The following chapter will discuss implications of the findings both in the context of the broader educational community and for myself as an educator and researcher. Based on these, recommendations for the practice and development of teaching critical media literacy will be communicated. Next, suggestions will be made for future areas of research that if undertaken, would further add to the field. The chapter will conclude by explaining the overall significance of the project.



## **Chapter 5: IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.0 Introduction**

The goal of this study has been to explore the experiences of primary/junior teachers who endeavor to teach media literacy through a lens of critical thinking. In order to do so, the research findings have been positioned within the extant literature pertaining to teaching critical media literacy. To draw significance from the themes outlined in the previous chapter, this next section outlines the implications that have been deduced from the findings. In an effort to extend the reach of the study, this chapter will conclude by offering recommendations for the educational community and suggesting possible directions for further research on the topic before providing final comments on the significance of this research.

### **5.1 Overview of Key Findings**

Following an analysis of the data collected from the three participant interviews, four key themes were revealed: 1) Participants described common strategies that were implemented across the curriculum in order to teach critical media literacy; 2) Participants articulated the importance of incorporating student interests and real-world connections in their instruction; 3) Although critical media literacy was not adequately addressed in their initial teacher education, participants shared their motivation and goals for teaching the subject; and finally 4) All participants noted that both students and educators responded positively to their teaching.

The first theme presented by the data was that participating teachers utilized common key teaching strategies in their media literacy instruction to encourage critical thinking. In order to do so, the teachers commented on their use of effective questioning techniques and open-ended discussions to promote a critical thinking lens towards both analyzing and producing media texts.

The participants also noted that the strategies were an important aspect of incorporating critical thinking and media literacy across various curriculum areas.

The second theme derived from the participants' experience was the importance of motivating students by purposefully selecting media texts that the students were interested in and applying their discussions to real-world contexts that impact students' everyday lives. These strategies afforded teachers with a heightened level of student engagement and a willingness to spend time and effort interrogating aspects of these media texts through a critical thinking lens.

The third theme that was common across all participants was the experience that critical media literacy was not at all included in their initial teacher education programs. At the same time, the teachers expressed other sources that have contributed to their motivation to incorporate critical thinking in their media literacy teaching. As well, the teachers all expressed that student-centered goals were a significant aspect of their motivation for teaching critical media literacy.

The final theme that arose from the data collected was the positive reaction received from various stakeholders in the education community towards this teaching. The participants articulated that in their experience, students have been highly motivated to critically interrogate media texts and receive great satisfaction from doing so. As well, the participants noted that colleagues of theirs have expressed an interest in their teaching of media literacy and are eager to learn how they can incorporate critical media literacy in their own classrooms.

## **5.2 Implications**

The present study has significant implications for various stakeholders in the educational community. Broadly speaking, this study has shown that there are a multitude of accessible and effective methods to infuse critical thinking in media literacy instruction at the primary/junior level that culminate into meaningful learning opportunities for students. These effective teaching

strategies have served to illuminate tangible methods to accomplish the broad frameworks set out in the research (Hobbs, 2005; Luke, 1994) and show that this pedagogy can be utilized for young elementary aged students. As well, critical media literacy has been positioned as a way to connect across curriculum strands, engage students and prepare them to be responsible, critical citizens as teachers aim to prepare students for a future that is difficult to imagine. This last point has been articulated best in the literature by Kellner and Share (2007) who advocate that the ability to critical analyze media texts is crucial for active participation in our ever-evolving democratic society.

This study also offers important and specific implications for teachers, faculties of education, and professional learning initiatives. For teachers, this study has demonstrated that it is possible to teach critical media literacy at the primary/junior level. Despite the strong indication by the research that critical media literacy should be reserved for students older than grade six (Ajayi, 2011; Gainer, 2010; Rodesiler, 2010), this study provides tangible ways to encourage students' critical thinking skills specifically towards media texts starting from as young as Kindergarten. Another important learning opportunity for teachers is that it is both possible and beneficial to infuse the critical media literacy across curriculum strands. In doing so, teachers can ensure that media literacy does not exist in the background of their teaching, and instead can result in meaningful and connected learning opportunities for students. This is also a way to reduce the stress of a crowded curriculum as articulated in the research (Domine, 2011; Kellner & Share, 2005; McBrien, 2005).

This study has also revealed that media literacy and critical thinking are inadequately addressed in initial teacher education programs, and consequently teachers may not be fully prepared or inclined to incorporate such pedagogies in their classroom instruction. Although this

study has been conducted using teachers who completed their initial teacher education in Ontario, this experience has been echoed in the literature based in the wider context of North America (Torres & Mercado, 2006).

This research has also revealed that currently practicing educators have consistently expressed an eagerness to learn about incorporating critical thinking in their media literacy instruction because of the perceived potential benefit. This was evidenced by the participants' experience of acting as a resource for other educators. However, inasmuch as the participants were able to share their knowledge with fellow educators on a more local scale, they also revealed their concern that media literacy is often taught in limited or superficial ways. Therefore, the implication is there are is gap between these knowledgeable teachers and their colleagues who would benefit from learning about teaching critical media literacy to enhance their own instructional methods.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

The aforementioned implications correspond specifically to a number of recommendations for teachers, faculties of education, and those that establish professional learning initiatives. As such, three relevant and specific recommendations will be outlined below: 1) Critical media literacy instruction should begin at the primary/junior level and work across various curriculum strands; 2) Initial teacher education curriculum should address the pedagogy of critical media literacy to inform the practice of beginning teachers; and 3) Professional learning communities should be established in which one teacher representative from each school meets to learn best practices of teaching critical media literacy.

This study offers two specific recommendations for classroom teachers. First, teachers should be incorporating critical thinking activities towards media texts in their classroom starting

from Kindergarten and continuing frequently throughout the subsequent primary/junior grades. Teachers can look to this study in order to gain an insight into how to do so meaningfully and at appropriate developmental levels that correspond to their students. In addition to this, teachers should incorporate critical media literacy throughout various curriculum strands in order to make their instruction more meaningful and attainable. In doing so, teachers can ensure that media literacy does not get forgotten amongst all the curriculum expectations that must be accomplished during the school year.

The next recommendation that has resulted from this study is specifically directed for initial teacher education programs. These institutions should focus on devoting more time for media literacy and critical thinking in their curriculum. This is especially relevant at the present time because, in Ontario, the length of teacher education programs has been extended, thus allowing for greater opportunity for inclusion of the pedagogy. In addition to mandating that media literacy be more of a focus in the teacher education curriculum, faculties of education should look to hire instructors who are knowledgeable and passionate about teaching media literacy in order to achieve a more holistic approach to teaching language pedagogy.

One final recommendation is to improve the collaboration between educators who are experienced in teaching critical media literacy and those that have a desire to do so. To bridge the gap previously mentioned, a specific recommendation is to create a targeted and collaborative professional learning community. In order to reach a wide number of classroom teachers, this professional learning initiative would ideally function in a way that would have representatives from different schools come together to explore best methods of teaching critical media literacy and then in turn share their learning with teachers at their respective schools. This would ensure both that these representatives are developing innovative methods in teaching

critical media literacy and that all teachers in primary/junior classrooms are exposed to effective methods of infusing critical thinking in their media literacy instruction.

#### **5.4 Areas for Further Research**

Although the present study has aimed to extend the scope of the existing body of research on the topic of teaching critical media literacy, it has also uncovered some areas of research that would be worth exploring through further educational research. Firstly, this study represents an extremely focused analysis into how critical thinking and media literacy can be incorporated at the primary/junior level. There would be great benefit in undergoing further investigation, across a more expansive geographical area, specifically focused on the early grade levels in order to add to the extant literature which is mostly directed at older students. Furthermore, research that is focused on long-term student outcomes as a result of teaching critical media literacy throughout the primary/junior grades would provide educators with tangible evidence of the benefits of teaching students to think critically towards media texts. This potential study could serve to capture the perspective of students, an important voice that is missing from the current literature. Another suggested area for future research has been extrapolated from the notion addressed by the participants in which critical media literacy activities were exceptionally accessible to learners who may typically struggle in areas of the language curriculum. As such, it would be interesting to examine the ways in which critical media literacy can be utilized to differentiate language instruction for students. Overall, further educational research into these described areas would continue to uncover the potential impact of teaching critical media literacy.

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined key implications that have resulted from this study, such as the importance and benefit of teaching critical media literacy starting from as young as Kindergarten and yet the lack of teacher preparedness to do so. In order to bridge this gap, practical suggestions for teachers, faculties of education, and professional learning initiatives have been outlined. In exploring this inquiry into how, why, and to what extent primary/junior teachers are applying critical thinking practices in their media literacy instruction, critical media literacy has been positioned as a worthwhile pedagogy that can be accomplished through a variety of practical strategies. These strategies then result in impactful learning and engagement on behalf of young students, while working to promote their critical capacity to become active citizens in today's increasingly mediated society.

The present study is of particular importance because as impactful and contemporarily relevant of a pedagogy that this study has described critical media literacy to be, there is still work to be done to ensure that all students receive quality media literacy instruction from an early age. Drawing upon the conceptualizations by Kellner and Share (2007) and Luke (1994), critical media literacy must be used to prepare our students to critically interrogate dominant ideologies that will in turn result in making the world a better place. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers, school communities, and faculties of education continue to strive towards reaching this goal through increased and focused teacher training and collaboration.

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**Appendix A: Letter of Consent**

Date:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Alanna Osborne and I am a student in the Master of Teaching (MT) program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Educational at the University or Toronto (OISE/UT). As part of my degree program, I am conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. The purpose of the present study is to gain insight into the teaching experience of primary/junior school teachers who through their instruction encourage their students to develop critical thinking skills specifically towards media texts (which will be referred to as critical media literacy). This study aims to uncover teachers' perspectives and experience on how to teach their students to think critically about the media messages that impact their daily lives. The teachers participating in this study will be selected based on their experience and enthusiasm in teaching critical media literacy. I believe your knowledge and experience will provide insight into this topic.

This study will be carried out in the Greater Toronto Area under the supervision of Ken McNeilly, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE. The data is being collected for the purposes of a Masters of Teaching Research Paper (MTRP) and will be disseminated through the University of Toronto's online research portal (T-Space).

Participating in this research involves one face-to-face interview which will last approximately 45-60 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked various questions about your personal experience teaching media literacy through a lens of critical thinking. Interview questions will be sent to you via email one week prior to the interview date for you to review. Each interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Afterwards, this data will be stored on a password protected hard drive. A copy of the transcript will be sent to you for your revision in the case you wish to clarify, add, or retract any of your contributions. You will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used in the writing of the MTRP. As well, any identifying markers, such as names of individuals and schools, will be removed. All data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You maintain the right to refuse to answer any question(s) during the interview or withdraw your contributions at any time up until the time at which the MTRP will be submitted (February 2016). Upon your request, you are also welcome

to receive a final copy of the MTRP once it has been completed.

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign the consent form below. The second copy is for your own records. Thank you in advance for your consideration in participating in this research project.

Sincerely,

Alanna Osborne  
OISE/University of Toronto  
Email: [alanna.osborne@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:alanna.osborne@mail.utoronto.ca)

Ken McNeilly  
OISE/University of Toronto  
Email: [kenneth.mcneilly@utoronto.ca](mailto:kenneth.mcneilly@utoronto.ca)

### Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand my right to withdraw from this research study at any time up until the submission date.

I have read the letter provided to me by Alanna Osborne and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

### **Introductory Script**

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The aim of this research is to gain insight into the experiences of teachers who through their classroom instruction encourage their students to think critically about media texts. The interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes and will ask you a series of 21 questions based on your background as an educator, your experience teaching critical thinking and/or media literacy, and your opinion on the impact and importance of this type of instruction. I would like to remind you of your right to refrain from answering any particular question. Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Section 1: Background**

1. For how many years have you been teaching?
2. What grades have you taught? What grade(s) are you currently teaching?
3. Have you completed any additional qualifications? If so, what ones?
4. Where did you complete your teaching degree?
5. To what extent (if at all) was media literacy and/or critical thinking included in your initial teacher education?

### **Section 2: Teacher Practice (What/How?)**

1. What do you think critical thinking in general looks like in a primary/junior classroom? Can you provide examples?
2. Can you describe any teaching strategies/lessons you use to encourage your students to think critically towards media texts?
3. What types of media texts (if any) do you use in your classroom to engage students with critical thinking?
4. Can you describe some activities/lessons you use in your classroom that encourage critical thinking towards media texts?
5. Can you describe some of the discussions that arise from teaching critical media literacy?
6. Do you have any anecdotal examples of how students typically respond to these lessons?
7. Can you speak to your experience with teaching critical media literacy with struggling learners (ie. accommodations, their reactions)?
8. In your opinion, what should a teacher's goals be in teaching critical thinking towards media texts?
9. What considerations do you take in teaching critical media literacy to different grade levels?
10. Are there any resources you use/recommend to get ideas for these lessons (ie. professional development, websites)?
11. To what extent is your teaching of critical thinking towards media texts tied to curriculum expectations?
  - a) Do you connect this teaching across different subject areas?

### **Section 3: Beliefs/Values (Why?)**

1. To what extent do you feel that it is important to teach critical thinking towards media texts? What has motivated you to do so?
2. In what ways do you feel that this teaching has impacted your students and their learning?

**Section 4: Next Steps/Challenges (What Next?)**

1. What are some of the challenges (if any) you have faced in teaching critical thinking towards media texts (ie. from parents, administrators, or colleagues)?
2. Is there a way you share your work with other educators? In your opinion, what would collaborating on the teaching of media literacy look like in an ideal situation?
3. What advice would you give to other teachers who want to encourage critical thinking towards media texts in their own classrooms?
4. Do you have anything else you would like to add that we have not already discussed?

**Concluding Script**

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me today. Your insights on the topic are very much appreciated as they will greatly benefit this research project. If you have any questions about the project, please feel free to contact me via email at any time. A copy of the transcript of your interview will be sent to you at a later date for your review. If you wish, I can also send you a copy of the final product once it has been completed. Thank you again for your time.