Seeking truth about Muslims:
Critical media literacies in an era of islamophobia

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ABSTRACT

Across various forms of media, Muslims are often portrayed as a homogenous group prone to violence, yet scholars have increasingly called upon schools and teachers to transcend stereotypes and prepare students to understand Muslims in more thoughtful and nuanced ways. This qualitative case study recounts how students and a teacher in a high school multicultural studies class investigated problematic media materials about Islam sent by an organization called the Christian Seniors Association. Drawing upon Mihailidis's (2014) 5A's of Media Literacy heuristic, I analyzed field notes from classroom observations, interviews, and student produced artifacts. Findings revealed how a teacher's use of questioning techniques and encouragement of close readings of texts supported students to critically analyze media materials. Yet, opportunities for students to address issues of power and take up activist-oriented roles in responding to media were limited. Implications are offered for research and practice.

Keywords: *critical media literacies, religion, Muslim, Islam, stereotypes.*

INTRODUCTION

Islam is currently the fastest growing major religion in the world (Lipka & Hackett, 2017), yet across their daily lived experiences, Muslims face increasing hostility because of their religious beliefs (Mondon & Winter, 2017). For example, Zine (2006) has noted that hatred and fear "of Islam and its adherents translated into individual, ideological, and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination" (p. 239). Most recently, this has included hate crimes through gun violence and mass shootings at mosques (Perez-Pena, 2019) and increases in other forms of anti-mosque activity such as vandalism (ACLU, 2019). Bigoted political rhetoric towards Islam and Muslims has also increased, as government policies and practices have threatened the human and civil rights for Muslim communities in response to their religious identification (Beydoun, 2017). Recently this has included an Executive Order issued in the United States initially barring entry to the country for immigrants, refugees, and other international travel from six predominantly Muslim countries (Liptak & Shear, 2108), later expanded to include six additional countries (Kanno-Youngs, 2020). Furthermore, across popular media in the U.S. and abroad, in video games, television, movies, and the news, Muslims are often portrayed as a homogenous group prone to violence (Samie & Malmir, 2017), despite the fact that Muslim identity varies greatly (Robinson, 2002).

Scholars have called for educators to address negative stereotypical positioning of Muslim cultures and people (Baer & Glasgow, 2010; Jackson, 2010) warning that homogenous labeling erases individuality of varied differences contributing to one's identities (Nieto, 2010). Given increasing Islamophobia (Beydoun, 2018) and renewed calls for attention to the credibility of media sources (Schulten & Brown, 2017), this study examines how one classroom teacher, Mr. Denker (pseudonym), supported students in his multicultural, social-studies elective course to critique a collection of anti-Muslim media materials including a letter, brochure, and survey sent by an organization called the Christian Senior's Association (CSA).

The CSA's collected materials, entitled "The Islamic Truth Project," were supposed "to show the American people what the *Koran* actually says" (emphasis original, CSA letter). However, the CSA's claims may be viewed as advancing disinformation. For example, the CSA's literature stated: "Yes, it's true that many Muslims in America are hard-working, good people, not

committed to violence against non-Muslims. But that's because they are Muslim in name only. They aren't really following the *Koran*, and the doctrines of Islam" (emphasis original, CSA letter). Consequently, the CSA believed it had a better understanding of the Muslim faith than actual adherents to Islam. Given the CSA produced materials designed to provide "truth" about Islam, I asked: How does a teacher in a multicultural studies class support his students' use of critical media literacy skills to analyze troubling media materials about Muslims?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study contributes to existing the literature base concerned with accurate teaching about Muslims and Islam within U.S. society and schools, the role of schools in supporting students' critical media literacies to prepare students for civic engagement across society, and understandings regarding the conceptualization and theories of "truth" in media. While these lines of scholarship exist independently and each could be considered on their own, placing them in conversation with one another extends understandings across fields. Therefore, this study contributes to the broader research base concerned with issues at the intersection of multicultural education, religion and schooling, and critical media literacies.

Curricula addressing Islam and Muslims in U.S. public schools

The concept of religion is often excluded from educational settings (Aronson, Amatullah, & Laughter, 2016; White, 2009) in part because many teachers feel unprepared to discuss religious beliefs that differ from their own faith traditions (Batelaan, 2004). Moreover, understanding religion is complex given that all major religions are comprised of different sects and have varying ideas about theology, rituals, laws, and practices (Nord, 1995). Despite these challenges, addressing religion in the public-school context is beneficial for promoting diversity of thought and encouraging students' participation in a diverse democratic society (Jackson, 2010; White, 2009).

In the context of U.S. public schools, teaching about Islam has received increased attention in curricula following the events of September 11, 2001 (El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; Nash & Bishop, 2009), even though its inclusion is often problematic. That is, many curricular materials for teaching about Islam are rooted in

stereotypes passed down from the troubled legacies of Colonialism and the Crusades (Wiseman, 2014) or serve to reinforce extremist views about Islam (Stoddard & Hess, 2016).

Lack of understanding about Islam and Muslims in U.S. society challenges teachers and schools serving Muslim students (Asher 2008; Taggar 2006), and carries important implications for this study since nine students in the class under investigation identified as Muslims, and Muslim students have encountered increased discrimination and surveillance (Ewing & Hoyler, 2008; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2009; Maira, 2009; Sarroub, 2013) in schools following 9/11. For example, El-Haj (2007) discussed how Palestinian-American youth struggled with the way they were positioned according to their ethnic and religious identities in schools, and Sabry and Bruna (2007) found that the curriculum and schooling of Muslim youth in the U.S. Midwest was beset by bias and inaccuracy. Conversely, in their study of Muslim American youth in New York City, Sirin and Fine (2008) found that youth spoke back to a political climate that positioned them as a threat to the nation-state. Through focus groups, surveys, and identity maps, youth made sense of their multiple identities and provided counter perspectives to educate the broader public about the positive ways that Muslims help contribute to a pluralist and multicultural nation (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

If schools seek to reduce prejudices and integrate curriculum that reflects a pluralistic society, they must include content about Islam and Muslims in instruction (Moore, 2009). For example, Baer & Glasgow (2010) have called for educators to employ experiential learning activities, such as Socratic seminars, to support broader understanding of Muslim identity by examining young adult literature about varying Muslim cultures. Additionally, Jackson (2010) called upon teachers to critically examine representation of Muslim identity across multiple forms of media from music, radio, television, film and so forth. She argued broad analysis of existing perspectives and perceptions of Muslim identity would help students, "develop an informed, independent, critical view of the group for themselves" (Jackson, 2010, p. 17). Ultimately, scholars have called upon teachers and schools to prepare students to understand Muslims in more thoughtful and nuanced ways, so that myths and wrong assumptions about Muslims and Islam are debunked (El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; Elbih, 2015; Klepper, 2014). However, despite calls to investigate the potential that schools broadly, and multicultural studies classes specifically have in

helping students understand varied perspectives about religion (Moore, 2006; 2009), few studies on the topic exist. This study extends Phelps (2010) work discussing the role of critical literacy and non-fiction texts to support learning about Islam.

Critical media literacies

Widespread contemporary media use underscores public, private, and family interactions, and is foundational to the ways in which youth engage across society (Gains, 2010; Livingstone & Wang, 2014), therefore the need for students to have media literacy skills is increasingly important (Mirra et. al. 2016). In schools, teachers should support students to evaluate the credibility of information they encounter online and identify divergent viewpoints on a variety of issues (Cohen & Kahne, 2012). The development of these skills is significant since gaps in media literacy may exacerbate gaps in civic participation and knowledge, especially regarding how one might seek out and evaluate credible sources of information (Livingstone & Wang, 2014).

However, preparing students for media literacy alone is not enough. Kellner and Share (2005) argued for media literacy education that draws upon critical pedagogy and cultural studies to address issues of social and multicultural difference. Specifically, critical media literacies "involves cultivating skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 4). That is, *critical* media literacy challenges students to analyze codes and conventions to assist students in confronting issues of power, inequality, and oppression (Janks, 2010). Critical media literacy also advances understandings for how cultural, economic, and political ideologies shape media messages (Luke, 2012) which is especially important since notions of power continually shift in digital worlds (Avila & Pandya, 2013). Classroom teaching that supports students to become critical consumers of media messages includes investigating the ways people make meaning of, challenge, take up, or not, the media they encounter (Pandya & Golden, 2018; Johnson & Vasudevan, 2014). Youth need safe environments in which they can learn to deconstruct messages and separate facts from falsehoods (Jenkins et. al., 2006). This is especially pertinent for youth who develop a sense of self in response to broader community participation. For

example, students should learn how to interpret biased messages, share their opinions in a respectful manner, and make sense of controversial social issues that inform their own positions as they engage across mediated spaces (Moffa et. al., 2016). While researchers have examined critical media literacies across ethnicities (Baker-Bell, Jones, & Everett, 2017; Sperry, 2006) and languages (Black, 2009), less empirical research exists that examines the role of critical media literacies around the topic of religion and multicultural studies and this study contributes to those understandings.

THEORETICAL FRAME

This study draws upon scholarship discussing the role of truth in media and Mihailidis's (2014) "*5As of Media Literacy*" heuristic. Specifically, while philosophers and scholars have long debated the nature of truth, including whether or not truth exists at all (see Burgess & Burgess, 2011), within the field of civics education and media studies, understandings of veracity in reporting, framed as truth, have received increased attention (Journell, 2019). Kavanagh and Rich's (2018) book *Truth Decay* examined the diminishing role of facts in American public life. The authors theorized four trends: cognitive biases, changes in information systems, competing demands of the educational system, and polarization contributing to the increasing influence of opinions over facts resulting in declining trust for sources once deemed reputable and respected. In this so-called "post-truth" environment, preferences precede actuality. Tellingly, Oxford Dictionaries' (2016) word of the year was post-truth which they defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Since many of the claims advanced by the CSA make strong emotional appeals, a post-truth perspective provides a helpful context for analysis.

Mihailidis's (2014) framework for critically analyzing media also informs this study's analysis. The framework, borne out of a gathering of 51 students from over 15 countries who took part in a consortium on global exchange and media, advances a new conception of media literacy emphasizing representation, flexibility, and inclusiveness. Mihailidis's framework provides youth with "a common structure for media competencies in digital culture" (2014, pg. 129). He situates the "5As" as a continuum – moving from access to action based on the following tenets: (i) *Access* to media; (ii) *Awareness* of media's power; (iii)

Assessment of how media cover international and supranational events and issues; (iv) *Appreciation* of media's role in creating civil societies; (v) *Action* to encourage better communication across cultural, social, and political divides (Mihailidis, 2014).

Each of Mihailidis's "5As" are further divided into four sub-categories informed by seven to nine core questions. For example, under the access umbrella, Mihailidis (2014) poses questions such as, "who controls access to the information?" Therefore, discussion about access is rooted in who controls the information (ownership); what barriers there are to accessing information; the role of technology in accessing information (digital); and the ways in which these platforms serve to facilitate how people comment, share, and participate. Taken collectively, each of the subdivisions for the 5A terms are grouped together by Mihailidis in an ecosystem represented in figure 1 below.

While Mihailidis's framework was developed by extending the work of Hobbs (2010) and Kellner and Share (2009), due to its relative newness, existing studies outside of Mihailidis' use of his own framework are limited. Therefore, my study will advance a new use of this framework in an empirical study. In applying the 5As framework to my study, I take up Mihailidis (2014) suggestion that there is not a "singular mechanism" (p. 141) for applying the 5As and will follow his admonition to remix, shift, shape, and re-appropriate the framework to fit the priorities of this study.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study of Mr. Denker and his students drew on a single case design which Yin (2017) argues is beneficial for providing insights about social processes, such as teaching practice, related to a topic of interest, in this study: how a teacher and students engage in critical media literacies. Specifically, this line of inquiry utilizes data collected from a larger ethnographic study that took place during the 2016-2017 school year where I engaged weekly as a participant observer in two social studies classrooms at Hallandale High School (pseudonym), a Title-One school in a mid-sized Midwestern city. The sequence of lessons took place in January 2017 in Mr. Denker's multicultural studies elective course. Specifically, I draw upon observational field notes from four sequential classroom observations. Clasroom classroom artifacts included: annotations of a letter and survey produced by the CSA, completed worksheets in which students synthesized their learning

across the four lessons, and written reflections on an exit slip. Following each classroom observation, I wrote analytic memos. In addition to artifactual data, I conducted interviews with Mr. Denker and two focal students. Multiple sources of data allowed for crystallization (Richardson, 1994) to provide a deeper, complex, understanding of the topic. The following (Table 1) provides an overview for the lessons I observed for this inquiry.

Table 1. *Lesson sequence for "The Islamic Truth Project"*

Lesson One	Lesson Two	Lesson Three	Lesson Four
Students read and annotated a letter and survey sent by the CSA Students engaged in an initial discussion about the letter and survey Students wrote on post-it notes one word and one sentence for how the material made them feel Students affixed their reflections to a large sheet of poster paper as they left class	Students continued their discussion about the letter and survey, extending upon ideas presented in the previous class Students used the internet to research the CSA organization, and the sources and people behind The Islamic Truth Project	Imam Hakeem from a local mosque came as a guest speaker to the class Imam Hakim responded to claims made in the CSA's letter and survey Students asked Imam Hakim questions about Islam	Students wrapped up discussion, including comments made across the three prior lessons Students completed a worksheet that helped them synthesize their learning across the week

In alignment with my commitments to humanizing approaches to research (Paris, 2011), and following an ethnographic approach, I seek to center my learning with and from Mr. Denker, a White male with 15 years of classroom experience, and his 28 students. Based on how students self-identified their race/ethnicity, the class was comprised of: 3 Asian males, 1 Asian-American male, 1 Asian-American female, 1 Arabic male, 5 Arabic females, 4 Black females, 4 Black males, 1 Latino male, 1 Latina female, 2 White males, and 5 White females.

Data analysis was ongoing and iterative throughout the data collection process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). To code data, I analyzed four days of classroom observation notes, student artifacts including 26 exit slips and 22 synthesis worksheets, and interview data with Mr. Denker and two students, which I transcribed verbatim. During a first round of closed coding, I read through the collected data. I assigned descriptive codes for each data source according to the continuum of Mihailidis's 5A theoretical framework: access, awareness, assessment, appreciation, action. I then organized these codes into tables to compare within and across data sources. For example, I coded Mr. Denker's question "This packet came to me in the mail over break" as access. During a second round of coding, I aligned first round codes to the core questions associated with the 5A's in Mihailidis's framework. For example, in considering the tenet of access, Mihailidis asks: "What kind of different types of information can be accessed?" Therefore, across the data set, I coded each instance that aligned with the seven to nine core questions as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. *Second round codes*

5A Categorization	Core question	Example from data set (classroom observation)
Access	Where does the information originate?	• This packet came to me in the mail over break. (Mr. Denker) • We don't know anything about this organization. (Mr. Denker) • The letter came from someone. We should look him up. (Mr. Denker)

Following this coding scheme, I found that the majority of my data set focused on addressing core questions related to issues of access, awareness, and assessment. While codes for appreciation and action were present in the data, they were not as prominent. To allow for further specificity for how Mr. Denker supported students' critical media literacies, during a third round of coding, I aligned each of the second-round codes to the specific sub-areas identified in Mihailidis's framework. For example, in answering the above question, "Where does the information originate?" I identified the role that *ownership* played as students worked to identify how the CSA controlled access to the information it disseminated under the guise of "The Islamic Truth Project." This fine-grained analysis also provided for more nuanced understandings of Mr. Denker and students' multimodal investigation into the CSA's materials. As data condensed across the three rounds of coding (Miles et. al., 2014), I was able to note recurring patterns and themes. Specifically, I found that Mr. Denker used questions and pointed out textual features to help students consider notions of access, to draw their attention to issues of awareness, and to support them as they assessed the media sources. However, mostly missing from the data set were codes aligned with the later part of Mihailidis's continuum, especially the part concerned with taking action.

Limitations

This study is limited to the interactions that took place in one classroom across four days of instruction. While I am optimistic that the approaches used by Mr. Denker to cultivate his students' critical media literacy skills are one's other teachers could use, the goal of this study is not to generalize. Additionally, the multicultural composition of the class under investigation with an assets-based approach to diversity might differ from schooling contexts that are less culturally and linguistically diverse.

FINDINGS

Findings focus on two ways Mr. Denker supported students' use of critical media literacy skills to analyze media texts about Muslims. First, I discuss how raising questions supported students' inquiry of the CSA's materials, then I discuss how close reading of textual features allowed students to critique media. I support these findings using the language of the 5A's from Mihailidis's framework across the two themes.

Raising questions to critique media

When initially presenting the CSA's materials to his students, Mr. Denker noted: "We don't know anything about this organization. Do we know if this even is an organization? You should be asking those questions, is this a legitimate organization?" As part of this opening investigation, Mr. Denker and students questioned how and why he received the CSA's mailer. For example, students asked Mr. Denker: "Did they send this to your house?" "You said they sent it to your friend, is he Caucasian too?;" and "Why did you guys only get the letter?" Following an initial reading of the CSA materials, one student asked, "so, who are they aiming for?" Across these examples, students' queries interrogated potential reasons for how and why access to media materials vary based on one's identity. That is, questions students raised interrogated how access to media messages may vary for people based on identity characteristics such as their racial, gender, ethnic, and religious backgrounds (Mihailidis, 2014). This was significant as Mr. Denker did not publicly disclose his religious affiliation, nor was he a senior citizen.

The CSA materials mailed to Mr. Denker were print-based, but during the second day of instruction students moved their investigation online. Mr. Denker wanted students to interrogate the organization behind "The Islamic Truth Project." Therefore, students used personal devices, such as phones, to engage in online research, while Mr. Denker used the classroom's technology suite to interrogate sources students found. Determining the origin of the CSA proved challenging. Google searches for the CSA led students to: a domain name purchasing site, a website called The Right-Wing Watch, and "thetruthproject.org." However, when Mr. Denker typed that address into the web browser, a different religious organization's initiative appeared. Mr. Denker asked, "how did you come up with the truth project?" Where is it coming from?" Here, use of a follow up question pressed the student to consider the context of his search, and its accuracy, since the result did not lead back to the CSA. Only after Mr. Denker guided the students to consider looking at a Wikipedia site for the Traditional Values Coalition (TVC), the parent organization for the CSA, which was referenced at the bottom of the CSA's materials, were they able to get closer to the original source. Even then, only a tangential connection was formed. The actual website for the TVC did not have an explicit or direct connection to the CSA's Islamic Truth Project, save for one bullet point listing the TVC's commitment to "securing the

Constitution against the growing threat of Islam and Sharia law" (Traditional Values Coalition, n.d.). Ultimately, the class struggled to access the host site and domain for the group behind the CSA, suggesting those behind "The Islamic Truth Project" might have intentionally made online access challenging.

To further support awareness for why an organization like the CSA would send out biased media materials about Islam, Mr. Denker noted, "We have to stop and ask questions. This is what I would call part of the culture war--groups that get signaled out for hatred or discrimination." He noted, in a follow-up interview, "I wanted kids to see that people can manipulate information to serve a purpose." To extend students' inquiry stance, Mr. Denker asked them to identify one word and write one sentence that summed up their interactions with the CSA's materials. Table 3 provides illustrative examples of student's responses.

Table 3. *Students' responses to "The Islamic Truth Project" materials*

Word	Sentence
Propaganda	This material made me feel at a loss for words but also very angry and want to speak out
Wrong	Made me feel like this thing is a cult
Confusing	This made me feel uncomfortable and I just felt very confused
Sad	I wasn't sure if the information I got was accurate
Biased	This material made me feel uncomfortable a bit because it was so against Islam and Muslims
Islamophobic	I am quite surprised from this and I also think it's a failure
Xenophobic	It makes me feel that people are just trying to make Islam look bad by making statements without a true understanding of Islam
Prejudice	I was surprised that there are whole organizations like this
Unrealistic	This made me feel like I should think "all Muslims" ARE bad
Conceal	As a Muslim, it was sad to see someone who hates Islam lie and say that ISIS/Extremist = TRUE ISLAM and that 1.6 Billion people must not know the true teaching and are just "Muslim by name".

Students' responses showed their overall skepticism about the CSA's materials with several students feeling uncomfortable or confused. Some students took issue with the "truth" behind "The Islamic Truth Project." For example, the student who wrote the CSA "are just trying to make Islam look bad by making statements without a true understanding of Islam." Tellingly, one Muslim identifying student pointed out their belief that the CSA was lying about Islam. Collectively, by asking questions about the CSA, its materials, and students' responses to them, Mr. Denker raised awareness for the problematic message's media may send and supported students to assess the CSA as a source of accurate information.

Close readings of media texts

In addition to asking questions, Mr. Denker supported his students' critical media literacies by encouraging them to engage in close readings of texts.

Mr. Denker stated, "Look at [the materials] and think about what features stand out to you? What features of this text jump off at you? What is purposeful? What does the author want you to notice?" The letter and survey itself contained a variety of such features, including bold, underlined, and italicized texts in different fonts and font sizes. For example, a donation reply page at the end of the letter had a response box with the following information:

I also look forward to you distributing information in this booklet via print advertisements, TV, radio, the Internet, YouTube, and social media… so that every American will understand how dangerous Islam really is to America. And please send me your *Jihad Alert Newsletter*.

For example, one student drew attention to the letter's claim to "bypass the liberal news media." A different student noted his anger and sadness for the way

the CSA positioned "Islam as a threat to civilization." and referenced a section of the letter which stated:

"Because of corrupt media, most American's are only vaguely aware of the *world's #1 threat to civilization*. That threat is Islam. Not just "radical" Islam. Islam." (emphasis original, CSA Letter).

Mr. Denker directed the class's attention to the textual features that stood out to him. He asked students, "Did you notice that I have a voter ID number listed?" Mr. Denker clarified for students that such a number was "meaningless" because "I [already] have a voter ID; it's called my driver's license." Here, Mr. Denker identified how a fictitious 'voter number' seemed to add legitimacy and authenticity to the materials, but should be met with skepticism. Since most students in the class were not of legal voting age, Mr. Denker purposefully directed students' awareness to attention-grabbing features in the text.

Discussion around the fictitious voter ID number subsequently revealed Mr. Denker's commitment to building students' ability to engage in the assessment of media sources by focusing on their accuracy. For example, in discussing the CSA's materials a student noted "the person behind this [is] trying to make it sound legitimate with the polling." The CSA's materials included numerous references to survey data, but did not provide full citations. For example, the letter claimed: "Only 57% of Muslims worldwide disapprove of Al-Qaeda. (SOURCE: Pews Survey, 2013). The student further noted, "they are using research to prove their point, but who is being asked, and what are their religious beliefs?" He added, "I looked up Pew, but couldn't get much on it. I don't think it's fake, but it was hard to get at the poll." That is, the CSA's use of research-oriented survey data without direct citations to specific polls made locating and verifying survey results difficult.

In further soliciting what stood out to students as they closely read and annotated the CSA's materials, Mr. Denker called upon Leah, a sixteen-year-old Muslim identifying youth born to Somali parents. She referenced this part of the CSA's letter:

The truth is Islam's holy book, the *Koran* repeatedly commands Muslims to wage a perpetual war against non-Muslims (infidels) until the entire world is governed by Islam: "*I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore, strike off their heads and strike off every finger tip of them* (Koran 8:12) (emphasis original).

Leah shared with her classmates, "I searched it, right, in the Quran where it's talking about it in non-believers in general, and in battle, not just every disbeliever in general." This perspective was later reinforced when an Imam from the local community visited the class. He cautioned students about a "copy and paste" approach applied to religious texts. Imam Hakim noted the tendency for anti-Islamic groups to quote from the Quran without revealing the context of the verse:

They won't tell you the verse before or after. They won't tell you this took place in the city of Medina where the Muslims were under attack. This came in the context: you can attack them if they attack you. They are in the context of oppression. They are not general in nature; you cannot apply this anywhere you like.

Collectively, Leah, Imam Hakim, and Mr. Denker noted the importance of assessing sources in their full context. These approaches modeled for students the importance of assessing how the accuracy of a text is changed when certain information is intentionally left out of the message (Mihailidis, 2014).

In supporting his students' close reading of the texts, Mr. Denker oriented students' initial investigation into the CSA's materials with the following questions: "what is the purpose of the survey? What is the goal of the survey, are they different, why or why not?" As students synthesized their learning across the four days of interaction with the CSA's materials, they responded in ways both matter of fact and critical: "to see how you view Islam;" "to get others' opinions and statements about the religion;" to "change the view of American people about Islam and Muslim people all being bad and dangerous" and "to scare Christians specifically of the threats of Islam and make some sort of movement to the government to stop allowing Islam [sic] immigrants to come here." Collectively, Mr. Denker's blend of questioning techniques and close readings of the text supported students' analysis of the CSA's media messages.

DISCUSSION

The above findings illustrate how a teacher supported his students' use of critical media literacy skills to analyze media texts about Muslims. Specifically, I found that the multiple, varied questions Mr. Denker asked his students along with his encouragement of close readings of texts supported students' ability to critique various media sources. Students' assessment of the CSA revealed the

organization to be highly problematic. Not only was the organization itself difficult to track down and verify using a multitude of approaches, the accuracy of the sources the CSA cited throughout their materials were also fraught with issues of authenticity. For supposedly helping individuals to learn "the truth about Islam" (CSA letter) there seemed to be a variety of errors and misconceptions that would readily be identified for anyone outside of the CSA's core audience. As one student noted in her synthesis sheet, the goal of the CSA's survey was to "falsely educate uneducated people, so they're on their [CSA's] side; make uneducated people fear Muslims." Since the series of lessons allowed for prolonged engagement with media materials, students were given the time to assess the CSA in depth aligning with Kellner & Share's (2007) charge to develop youths' critical media literacy skills to "discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses" (p. 4). Moreover, as a guest speaker with direct knowledge of Islam, Imam Hakim provided additional support for students' critical media engagement. As he spoke with the class, he noted: "As I talk to you, you don't have to take my word for it, you should research. You have the Internet. Never believe things without investigating and researching them." Despite Mr. Denker's varied approaches in supporting students' critical media literacies, the overall sequence of lessons did not go far enough to address issues of power because students' critiques did not lead to critical action.

(In)Action in addressing issues of power or "truth"

Collectively, the series of lessons generally fell short of helping students to take up roles as active change-agents. For example, during the first lesson, Mr. Denker told students they should call the phone number listed by the CSA and interact with the organization about their materials. Yet two days later he framed the action only hypothetically. He stated, "If we were going to call this organization, think about what you would like to ask them. Turn to a partner and tell them what you might say." Students shared in pairs and then with the whole class. One student noted, "I would say, 'where are you getting all the data you cite?'" Another student stated, "I would say, 'if you are such Christians, why are you so hateful to [Muslims]? That's not what Christians do.'" During that same lesson, the student who discovered the "The Islamic Truth Project" domain name was for sale shared, "we should buy [it] and make it a pro-Islam

website" suggesting promise for enacting critical media literacies toward social action.

Applying Mihailidis's 5As on a spectrum from access to action, Mr. Denker's attempted to move students along the continuum ended at the assessment of sources, leaving action-taking mostly unrealized. Since scholars recognize a key aspect in cultivating students' critical media literacies is to address issues of power, privilege, inequities, and oppression (Janks 2010; Luke, 2014; B. Yoon, 2016) additional support is needed to achieve the belief that critical media literacies should inform civic engagement (Mihailidis, 2014). By extension, Mr. Denker did not ask the class to consider the onto-epistemological claims about "truth" the CSA purported to share about Islam. Consequently, the CSA move may be understood as a more powerful religious group's attempt to oppress another religious group through disinformation, and the spreading of the CSA's perceptions about the Islamic faith rather than what Muslims themselves claim about their faith. Therefore, when supporting students to interrogate media claims, teachers should work to address fallacies and move beyond prefabricated schemes of interpretation. Teachers should not only provide space for students' self-reflection, but for addressing limitations that can impact how and why truth claims are made.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study have implications for practicing teachers and teacher educators. First, findings demonstrate the benefits of multicultural education for enhancing students' critical media literacies. Mr. Denker's students came from a variety of backgrounds and faith traditions, some identified as Muslim, others as Christian or Buddhist, and several as non-religious. Discourse remained civil across the lessons and students participated actively, even though some students might have held problematic ideas they did not express verbally. Therefore, while teachers may feel uncomfortable talking about issues they deem controversial including those that deal with religion (White, 2009), my findings align with Moffa et. al., 2016, who posited that students must learn how to share their opinions in a respectful manner to make sense of controversial social issues that inform their own positions when engaging across mediated spaces. Since the media continually focuses on a small body of extremist Muslim practitioners and the violent actions they take resulting in a stereotypical view of Muslims (Beydoun, 2018), teachers must provide broader

perspectives of Muslims, such as the ones that Imam Hakim brought during his visit and interactions with the class. Such approaches also affirm Phelps's (2010) belief that teaching for critical literacy involves questioning stereotypes and perceptions through debate and discussion.

Second, in regard to pedagogical choices, teachers must carefully select the media materials they critique. Even though Mr. Denker essentially took a junk mailer and turned it into a compelling sequence of lessons that sustained students' interest and engagement across time, use of "The Islamic Truth Project" content was problematic given the classes composition. Specifically, the CSA's materials were inflammatory and potentially hurtful to the nine Muslim-identifying youth in class. Concurrently, teachers concerned with finding specific genres or types of media for students to analyze and critique likely have many options from which to choose. By drawing upon traditional means of analysis such as asking questions and engaging in close readings of texts, teachers may support students' critical media literacies, however other forms of mediation and meaning-making are possible. For example, Imam Hakim's visit to class provided students with a significant opportunity to extend their voices beyond socially constructed borders and divisions (Mihailidis, 2014). As Imam Hakim informed the class, "we should have a diverse understanding of the world so when we interact we won't have malice and hatred. You will work with others from different backgrounds, you already do this in class." In challenging students to consider varying forms of expression, Imam Hakim led students to value different cultures and perspectives and clarify misconceptions. This aligns with Elhib's (2015) suggestion that inviting Muslim leaders to class helps humanize Muslims for students and with Koppelman and Goodhart's (2005) call for interfaith dialog and improved education about religion in public schools. Overall, teachers should take up a variety of pedagogical approaches to help students to become critical consumers of media, including approaches that extend beyond traditional means. However, they must also ensure that in supporting their students' media literacy development, they draw attention to issues of power, privilege, inequities, and oppression (Janks 2010; Luke, 2014). Additionally, in a post-truth era, teachers should help students to interrogate how emotion and belief shape opinions, as facts, for some, are less influential when interacting and responding to media messages. Ultimately, teacher education and professional development must both explicitly draw connections to

social action and critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) as essential aspects of critical media literacies instruction.

A final implication from this study is an extension of Mihailidis's (2014) framework. Overall, the 5A's were a productive, comprehensive lens for analysis, however, given the multicultural composition of Mr. Denker's class, one way to build with Mihailidis (2014) would be to bring in additional voices of youth from non-Western countries and see how their knowledge and understanding might further shape the framework. Specifically, one possible extension would be centering the autonomous individual in alignment with Mihailidis's "A" theme. That is, the framework could become more robust by placing the individual at the center of the ecology to better attend to how a person's lived experiences, their religion, race, ethnicity, and other lived experiences shape their interactions with media.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how one teacher, Mr. Denker, supported his students' use of critical media literacy skills to analyze media texts. As students engaged with Mr. Denker's questions, they spoke out against negative views and positioning of Muslims, even if their agentive action to directly confront issues of power and fully interrogate "truth" was unrealized. Given the increasingly negative stances and rhetoric toward individuals from predominately Muslim countries, teaching that assists students to have broader views of the Islamic faith is essential. By cultivating critical media literacies, students can take up the ideals of multicultural education to advocate for a more just and inclusive society.

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