POLITICAL CONSCIENTIZATION AND MEDIA (IL)LITERACY

Paul R. Carr

CRITIQUING THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA AS A FORM OF DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

> People with high levels of media literacy will have a better understanding of the world, adopt a position, make their own conclusions, discern truth from fiction, not follow trends, and can have a better opinion and judgment on critical issues. On the other hand people with low levels of media literacy will be vulnerable, affected, impressed, and will have conflicts when digesting the information they receive. (*Jack, a teacher-participant in the research*)

During a time of globalized turbulence, or "permanent war" as Peter McLaren (2007) has described the quest for neoliberal hegemony, is it fair to ask if there is any pertinence to the media in relation to education? Is the patriotic fervor of the intense drum-beat of conformity (Westheimer, 2007) too overwhelming for there to be any meaningful learning experiences from and about the media? Are educators themselves critically engaged in using, dissecting, and translating the media in the classroom (Giroux, 1988)? Do the media connect with education in any substantive way that offers hope for critical engagement (Macedo, 2006)? In sum, what can be learned from the interplay between the mainstream media and education?

These questions, which are the focus of this article, are important because a fundamental part of critical and engaged learning is the quest for political literacy, which, necessarily, involves media literacy (Carr, 2008; Hoechsmann, 2006). If educators are ill-informed, discouraged, and weakly supported in promoting critical discussions, analysis, and action in relation to the media, then there will be clear implications for democracy (McLaren, 2007). Therefore, the process leading to political engagement and political literacy, what Freire (1970) labels as *conscientization*, is, or should be, an important component to achieving a more robust and meaningful democratic experience in education (Lund & Carr, 2008).

From a pedagogical vantage-point, little can be gained from avoiding a vigorous and broadly infused critical approach to the media. Critical pedagogy, as outlined by Kincheloe (2008) and Freire (1970), along with the seminal work on the political economy of the media undertaken by McChesney (2008) and Herman and Chomsky (1988), provide an indispensable framework through which the connection between the media and education can be interrogated and critiqued.

Macedo (2006) and Giroux (1988) have also contributed significantly to the field of critical pedagogy, undertaking detailed studies of the media, as well as the linkage with (critical and political) literacy, within a neoliberal context, and, thus, their work also provides a substantive underpinning to how media, media literacy and political literacy are developed and analyzed in this article.

Hoechsmann (2006) provides a useful interpretation of media education, which he contrasts with media literacy.

> Media education provides teachers and learners the opportunity to engage in the study of contemporary social and cultural values and to situate the curriculum in a meaningful manner in the lived realities of the students. It is a realm of inquiry that treats contemporary forms and practices as historically situated and thus enables the study of resonant social and cultural matters faced by young people. It is at once consumption and production oriented. Central to the project of media education is the teaching of critical interpretation techniques for decoding media texts and phenomena and technical skills for producing, or encoding, media products. (p. 27)

He teases out the notion of media literacy, arguing that it is "not something only learned from teachers," maintaining that:

> Inhabiting a media saturated world by necessity involves an immersion in the codes and conventions of media and a learning process, though later in childhood, equivalent to that of learning a first language.... On the one hand, there is the hand of the powerful in the mix—media corporations and those corporations whose products are pitched in the media. On the other hand, there is an insider knowledge already possessed by the learner, one which in many instances outstrips that of the teacher. (p. 28)

Complementing the above, Kellner and Share (2007) focus on *critical* media literacy, which:

> expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication and popular culture as well as deepens the potential of education to critically analyze relations between media and audiences, information and power. It 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. Media literacy helps people to discriminate and evaluate content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media. (p. 4)

Significantly, Kellner and Share (2007) emphasize the importance of having an

Paul R. Carr is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Foundations of the Beeghly College of Education at Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio.

understanding of "ideology, power, and domination that challenges relativist and apolitical notions of much media education in order to guide teachers and students in their explorations of how power, media, and information are linked" (p. 8).

Thus, together, Kellner and Share (2007) and Hoechsmann (2006) provide a critical framework, that is underpinned by Kincheloe's (2008) work in critical pedagogy, to understand the media literacy dynamic, emphasizing that the "vast majority of our students are consumers and fans of at least some media texts, and these texts are sites not only of pleasure and entertainment, but also of learning" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 28). In sum, the explicit as well as the implicit connection between the media, education and power is my primary concern in this article.

I will examine data drawn from two Master's level Sociology of Education classes at a university in Ohio with students who are already teachers. The course raises important questions about the potential for doing critical media literacy in schools as well as the general positioning of the subject by teachers. The focus on the media in a class for educators may not have seemed to be overly relevant to the students in the beginning but, based on comments and completed surveys provided by them at the end of the course, the connection to education and democracy is considered to be direct, deep and fundamental. The concern over how educators view or do not view education as a political enterprise (Freire, 1970) underscores the analysis.

The Process of Engaging Teachers in Media Literacy

As part of the class I teach to roughly 20 teachers each semester, I have designed several activities to sensitize them to the widespread, yet somewhat nefarious, influence of the mainstream media. The objective here is to determine how the media affects teaching and learning, and, more importantly, to be able to formulate strategies to more effectively inculcate media literacy in education.

Although this course, in isolation to other parts of the formal educational program, may only have a limited impact, the response, thus far, has been overwhelmingly positive. Students have often expressed stupefaction that people are generally such casual consumers of the media in spite of the far-reaching effect of the media at the macro-level, cultural level. I have no reason to believe that the teachers in my class are not effective, engaged and determined educators, which makes the findings of the study all the more interesting.

Being in North-East Ohio, where there has been a staggering dislocation of the economy over the past three decades, in an area with a large working-class population divided by a visible African-American inner-city and a donut-ring of White suburbs, there are many features to this landscape that undoubtedly resonate throughout the United States.

The course involves several weeks of discussions around the role of the media, especially in relation to education. The major culminating project has students, either individually or in small groups, monitoring, documenting, and analyzing at least two media outlets (within the television, newspaper, internet, and radio sectors) for a one-week period. They are to track what is said, how, by whom, when, and to what degree, and, then, importantly, formulate a daily analysis, which is then rolled into a more comprehensive global analysis at the end of the process. Some of the questions that are specifically asked are:

- *What is the context for the news?*
- *What perspectives are elucidated?*
- *Does the news vary from medium to medium or from newscast to newscast?*
- *How is race (and social justice) portrayed?*
- *What are the particular political vantage-points?*
- *How do the media connect with and to education?*

In sum, we are concerned with the shaping or "manufacturing" of consent, as Herman and Chomsky (1988) have labeled it, and what this might mean for social justice, democracy, and the potential for transformational change in education.

In order to prepare students, there are two fundamental activities. The first involves a critical analysis of the local newspaper, in which students comb through every page and section to dissect how the news is organized, where it is placed, what is prioritized, how advertising is infused throughout, how equity, and, particularly, race are treated, and, lastly, attempting to determine the editorial content and orientation.

The second preparatory activity employs a similar critical analysis of a 30-minute local nightly newscast. It is important to highlight that it is not considered consequential which station or evening is selected, as will be seen, since the mainstream news is presented, packaged, and developed in a similar way throughout the nation. In order to augment reflection and discussion afterwards, students are divided into five groups, each of which is asked to watch the news from one of the vantage-points outlined below:

Group 1—watch the news as you would normally;

Group 2—watch the news to determine the political perspectives and nuances that are evident and/or implicit;

Group 3—time the news, monitoring the flow, cadence, and prioritization given to each segment;

Group 4—observe how race (and identity) is a part of the newscast, including who is reporting on the news as well as what is being reported on;

Group 5—monitor how the newscasters and reporters present the news, from what angles and how.

In both of these activities, students engaged in small group and, thereafter, plenary discussions. My role was to get students talking about the media together, after which a more layered, contextualized analysis was developed. An important part of the process is to debate diverse vantage-points, aiming for a more nuanced critique of the media. It is helpful to undertake these preparatory activities without much background into the global economy of the media (McChesney, 2008), which then enhance the learning experience afterward.

This is the first time that many of the students will be looking at the media critically, so the exercise of discovering for themselves, in a structured way, the impact, nature, and formula of the media constitutes an important learning experience. It is necessary to stress that the objective is not to preach a certain, prescribed response or conclusion about the media, but rather to expose students to a critical pedagogical approach to understanding the media, especially in relation to education, and, significantly, extending this to the implications for democracy (Dewey, 1916; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Freire, 1970; McLaren, 2007; McChesney, 2008).

Toward the end of the course, students started to blog on the need for and existence of media literacy in education. Students were encouraged to structure a critical analysis, including the implications for education, and engage in dialogue with their colleagues. This component of the course was extremely insightful and

useful because it encouraged students to reflect on and interrogate the material and concepts covered together outside of the structures of the classroom environment.

Several techniques aimed at critically analyzing the media or other phenomena were introduced in order to assist students as they undertake their media projects, including:

- a *factor analysis*, stressing legal, economic, political, social, educational and other factors;
- a *stakeholder analysis*, seeking to understand issues from the diverse vantage-points of different groups (for example, minorities, teachers, students, administrators);
- an *ideological analysis*, examining ideological considerations and principles underpinning issues and approaches;
- a *bias analysis*, illustrating how everyone has biases, and that social phenomena should not be approached neutrally; and
- a *power relation analysis*, elucidating how (inequitable) power relations are infused into the media and throughout decisionmaking processes.

The routine, seemingly natural experience of watching, reading, and listening to the news is, therefore, the focal-point of this academic exercise. One of the underlying motivations for this activity is to underscore how the media are not neutral, and, further, how the extremely selective and homogenized view of the world portrayed though the plethora of media outlets, despite the illusion of competition and diversity of opinion, can serve to constrain debate and political literacy (Winter, 2007).

Similarly, another key reason for undertaking this project is to emphasize the direct linkage to education, especially in relation to the entrenchment and reproduction of social and class relations (McLaren, 2007) as well as a viscerally ingrained patriotism (Westheimer, 2007) which are a result of a less than vibrant and culturally relevant mass media. The resultant connections to democracy, with the well-known narratives of "freedom of press" and "freedom of speech," therefore, hinge, to varying degrees, on the viability of the media to "hold the government to account" and to assist in providing a vehicle through which citizens can be empowered to achieve "liberty."

The media literacy of teachers, and their students, then, becomes critical as it significantly influences the orientation and salience of reality, affecting the degree to which people are engaged and are able to contest hegemonic representations of what is considered to be in the collective interest of society, including wars, policies to deal with the environment, racism, poverty, and the framing of the role of education in society (McChesney, 2008).

Methodology

The electronic discussions (or blog) through WebCT that students undertook in the last part of the course, which focus on the media and media literacy, were analyzed, generating several themes, trends, reflections, and strategies. Students provided their consent to use their work on an anonymous basis, and their comments are provided as they were originally presented. All names attached to the narrative comments are pseudonyms.

In the state of Ohio, all teachers must complete a Master's degree to maintain their certification. The students in these classes, who are teachers, are, therefore, largely representative of the general teaching population, as they are not a self-selected group that is pursing graduated studies for purely academic reasons. Almost all of the teachers participating in this study are White, the majority of whom are female, with most of the sample coming from the regional area within close proximity to the university. Although there is a diverse ethnic demography in the sample, most are from working-class backgrounds.

It should be emphasized that, although I (the instructor) do have some definitive ideas about politics and education, my role was to facilitate, cultivate, and provoke critical thinking around media literacy, and not to elicit a particular response. Rather, I view the notion of media (and political) literacy as a process, one that is strongly supported by the critical pedagogical approach, to become engaged seeking to critically interrogate the meaning of identity, societal justice, politics, and (inequitable) power relations (Kincheloe, 2008).

The actual sifting through the blogs, categorizing, organizing, and developing themes, is undertaken within the lens of a critical pedagogical framework (Kincheloe, 2008), using the tools enunciated for a research *bricolage* (Tobin & Kincheloe, 2006), which calls for the blending of methodological approaches and vantage-points. Similarly, within the qualitative methodological approach (Merriam, 1988; Schram, 2006), I analyzed the data from a range of perspectives, seeking to crystallize themes that resonate and speak clearly to the subject-matter explored.

The research, inevitably, is aimed at bolstering media literacy, and is not meant to be judgmental of the particular identities, realities, and experiences of the participants. Teasing out the meaning of the narrative provided by participants required a certain depth and range of knowledge and exposure to critical media literacy, which enables a more robust and critical assessment of the themes generated.

Findings

During our on-line discussions, students were asked to respond to the following question: Do we teach about and for media literacy in education? By this time, we have covered a certain number of issues, concepts, and concerns in relation to the media, media literacy, and media education, and students also became engaged in group projects that served to immerse themselves in critically assessing the media. As eluded to earlier in this article, students become significantly more critical about their own implication in education as the course progressed to the role, effect and presence of the media in education. What follows are seven themes that emerged from the research.

Theme 1: Superficial Treatment of Media Literacy in Schools

Most of the students concurred that they felt that their particular school environments were not predisposed to a concerted effort to inculcate media literacy in the classroom. Several participants enunciated a common refrain, that efforts aimed at addressing the media were generally superficial.

> Although I might think that I am trying to teach students to understand media and question things that are going on around them, I'm not sure that they necessarily get that from my lessons. In most cases they are just trying to get done with whatever they are doing so that can move on to the next thing. We do look at different websites and talk about their validity, or at different articles that are written in magazines and newspapers...but I'm not sure that they really understand why. So in my thoughts, some schools and teachers may be trying to implement the use of media literacy in their classrooms, (but) they just don't explain what it is to their students. (*David*)

> In my opinion, there is very little instruction about and for media literacy in schools. While some classes do receive newspapers to examine, how much classroom time is really available to analyze the newspaper's content critically? I do think students need to receive instruction

about how the media operates, along with using critical thinking skills to decipher what motives are behind news presentations. (*Joanne*)

I have found no evidence that my school supports teaching media literacy in school. Yes, it should and can be taught in school, but is it? … Technology continues to influence how we teach and we have all too often heard the stories of media used by students in inappropriate ways…. Students need to understand beyond the fun and games how very serious the media is whether it is good or bad. (*Suzanne*)

Participants raise concerns here about how teachers may be out of step with the plurality of technologies and media that young people are exposed to and use. In highlighting how critical media literacy is not a common feature of the formal education experience, they are also raising issues about how school boards, departments of education, and governments, in general, do not place a premium on media literacy at the same level as the standards, evaluation regime, and neo-liberal conceptual framework that is well-known to educators.

Participants may have differed on the reasons for which media literacy was not taught in schools but there was almost universal agreement that media literacy was not a focus of either the general or specific curriculum.

Teachers are supposed to teach about media literacy in our schools but unfortunately this does not happen for various reasons. There is a great demand on the teacher's time, especially in preparing students for the standardized test to an extent that there is no time left for media literacy lessons. On the other hand, school district curriculum does not accommodate media literacy, as a subject matter to be taught is schools. (*Nathan*)

I do not feel that we educate our youth very much about media literacy. Due to the fact that we are responsible for so many other concepts such as standardized tests, we have been ignorant toward teaching them about this topic. That certainly does not mean that it is not a significant topic, however. In my opinion, I think that we need to make a more collective effort to expose them to the current events that are taking shape in their local communities, their state, their country, and even the world. (*Eugene*)

The reality of a significant time-constraint combined with a prescriptive, limited curriculum make it extremely difficult to engage students in meaningful media literacy activities and processes. Macdeo (2007) argues strongly that the "media represent a mechanism of ideological control," and the

disarticulation between what goes on in the classroom and socio-cultural, economic, and political realities that shape, guide, and determine the educational enterprise have led to a *de facto* construction of not seeing, proving once again the old proverb, 'The eyes do not see; they only record while the mind sees.'" (p. xix)

Theme 2: The Media Includes More than Traditional Outlets (Newspaper, Television, Radio)

Students became sensitized to the all-encompassing nature of the media, and started to view it as a force that is infused into and through education, either overtly or covertly, something that is not always acknowledged. For example, in addition to the traditional media outlets, such as the newspapers and the written press, television, and the radio, today's educators must also now contend with myriad other forces, including the internet, advertising, political messaging, and diverse forms of social organization.

It can be quite difficult to teach about media literacy simply because of the type of information it exposes our children to. The information presented in the news can be complicated all on its own; let alone the advertisements we have to deal with in order to get through media. No matter how the news is presented to our students, they will be subject to some form of advertisement…. We as teachers need to be critical of the media findings we present. (*Beverly*)

I do not believe that we teach students enough information on how to fully analyze and critique the media. Not every source is credible and students may have a hard time understanding that at a young age. Also, think of all the media advertisements that students are surrounded by on a daily basis. Almost everything we read, hear or listen to has some sort of hidden message on trying to shape who we are by telling us what to buy or how to dress. How are students supposed to be creative and unique individuals, when much of our media portrays how a person should look, feel and act? (*John*)

As Hoechsman (2006) highlights, young people are now engaged in social networking, such as Facebook and MySpace, that are largely foreign to most teachers. Information travels quickly, and there is great potential for both engagement and alienation. At the same time, cyber-bullying is now a concern that did not exist a decade ago. Youth now make and disseminate their own media through YouTube video clips, blogs and internet discussion-groups.

As noted in the participants' comments above, there is also significant concern about the effect of explicit and implicit advertising and marketing, which makes it imperative for teachers to be able to assist students in understanding the ramifications and potential harm they may cause if not examined critically. The predominance of pop-cultural manifestations—reality shows such as *American Idol*, *Survivor*, and *Do You Want To Be a Millionaire?*, and movie stars and musicians—flood the formal airwaves and educational space, creating the illusion that diverse representations of reality are insignificant.

Educators need to be not only aware of this but also prepared and encouraged to engage students in deconstructing how the media plays a role in propagating certain (sur)realities, which may be detrimental to minority and marginalized voices, and also reinforce stereotypes and inequitable power relations without critical interrogation (McChesney, 2008).

Theme 3: The Corporate Infiltration in the Mass Media

The concern over the corporate domination of the media was a common theme highlighted by students, and many commented that they were previously unaware of how much of the media is infused with corporate messages and control. This led to some interesting discussions about how the media may be dissuaded from, or timid about, examining certain issues, policies, products, and/or personalities owing to corporate oversight.

Participants critiqued the corporate sector in how it buttresses, shapes, and "manufactures" the reality generated and espoused by the mass media. This corporatization has myriad implications for how schools address the media, and also for how teachers and students understand and are able to dig under, around, and between the messages generated for mass consumption.

Corporations gain the opportunity to promote their product by using the media communications in schools. Schools use the items with the companies' logos as incentives for activities and special events and teachers use them as part of their curriculum to motivate students. In other words, schools and teachers get free give always and the company gets and easy and cheaper way of marketing their company and the products. (Jack)

Personally, I watched Channel One every morning from 1993-1997 and yet I feel I was totally illiterate to what was taking place around the world. As an educator I feel to improve our media illiteracy is

not only to watch Channel One but also to read newspapers, watch other news channels and take time to discuss and have assignments on what we view in the media. (*Sandra*)

These comments highlight the direct, yet what some might consider necessary, infusion of the corporate sector into the classroom. Within the neo-liberal sphere of contemporary education (Hill, 2008), most schools need to look elsewhere for part of their funding, beyond the scope of the State, thus exposing the obvious inequalities between schools and districts. Which schools receive what kinds of support and contracts, and what are the stipulations? Can educators critique these contracts that provide schools football stadiums, uniforms, and equipment but not necessarily any enhancements to teacher salaries, service learning, and educational materials, etc.?

The news that is funnelled into the classroom, replete with commercials, can have have a deleterious effect on the educational experience of young people as well as an obvious societal impact of not cultivating a politically literate populace.

Theme 4: The Omni-Presence of (Neo-Liberal) Standards Overrides Media Literacy

Another hindrance to media literacy pertains to having the relevant and appropriate media resources available to educators. Given the over-arching framework of neo-liberal reforms, which privilege standardized testing, currricula, and outcomes, some form of critical media literacy, or even just a moderate approach to critiquing the media, may be considered too light-weight and superfluous to find a place within the formal educational program.

> In my district, I am not allowed to read the newspaper or even have it out in my room during the day. The principal does not want students or teachers looking at it during the school day because it will take away from the learning time that students need to spend on OGT standards. (David)

> Why isn't media literacy a mainstay of U.S. education? The answer is complicated, but a major obstacle to media literacy is simply that Americans generally don't see the media as an important influence on our lives. With budget crises, testing, and the need to teach basic skills, many educators see media literacy as a waste of resources. But there are many compelling reasons to include media literacy programs in the schools. However, convincing those that control the educational process of its importance is another story. (*Gene*)

. . . media literacy is more than being able to use the latest technology to access information, it is how you critique and analyze the information for making sound, wise judgments.

Another specific concern, and perhaps a reticence, about teaching for and about media literacy is the overarching mission of education, which can coalesce into a quasi-obsession at some levels, to generate certain learning outcomes aimed at meeting the "standards."

> And there it is again, standardized curriculums are not critical thinking skill oriented. In order to function in our democratic society, citizens need to be able to analyze media reports as to the motive that fuels them. With so much emphasis on test scores and teaching content for the test, little time is left to teach about media literacy. In order to make good decisions based on what the media presents, media literacy needs to be a part of a student's education. (*Joanne*)

> As with teaching everything else, media literacy is another bystander that gets pushed to the side by the demands to teach ONLY the curriculum…. as educators we need to take time to ensure that our students understand the difference between the "good life" and real life and how to pick out and critique the news they are presented with. (*Cynthia*)

These comments underscore the stark difference between the formal and informal (hidden) curriculum; and addressing the former only will certainly have a negligible effect on the latter (Kincheloe, 2008). Students are exposed to a broad and never-ending range of mass media images, messages and content that can be influential in how they construct their identities, experiences and perspectives, which, if left unchecked, can diminish the attachment that they may have to democracy and their own involvement in society.

Theme 5: Media Literacy Needs To Be Approached from Multiple Vantage Points

The debate over media literacy, ultimately, needs to involve a range of sectors, stakeholders, and interests, and should not be isolated to a single course or teacher. While there seems to be strong agreement around the need to teach for and about media literacy, participants in this research argued for a broader level of political literacy in order to engage students as a means of enhancing a critical awareness of the media.

As is the case when thinking about social justice and democracy, media literacy can, and should, be incorporated into, and interwoven throughout, the educational experience. It is interesting to note that participants suggested many innovative ways to approach media literacy.

> I don't believe that we as educators really do teach about media literacy in our class rooms today. I guess in this fast-paced, digital world in which we teach and live, how much of this "stuff" do we as teachers really understand? Let's face it, our students (or at least a great majority of them) are more technologically savvy than we are. What a great learning opportunity, whereby the tables are turned and the students can now teach the teachers. But media literacy is more than being able to use the latest technology to access information, it is how you critique and analyze the information for making sound, wise judgments. Media literacy would serve as a great opportunity for Language Arts and Social Studies teachers to get together and team teach concepts which would help our students to become better informed citizens and provide them with opportunities to become better critical thinkers. (*Jordan*)

> Media by definition is the form of communication used to influence a wide amount of people. Literacy is being able to read or write. Media literacy is the ability to read and discern the communication that you are presented. I now see the importance of empowering my students to be their own person and think for themselves. I use music as a vehicle to teach media literacy because often times young people are influenced by the music they allow themselves to be engrossed in because of the superstar that they see daily on television. I ask them what type of music they listen to and why. The majority of them listen to RAP, rhythm and poetry, and R & B, Rhythm and Blues. I do not condemn them for what they listen to but I do have them listen to the words of the songs and tell me what the writer was trying to get across. After studying the lyrics they are shocked to see what they allowed themselves to digest in their minds. After doing this activity, I find that students are more critical in their thinking pattern when observing the news, videos, music, books, etc. (*Anthony*)

> English class always seems like the gateway to address the media, but other core content subjects can easily contribute to teaching media literacy. Social studies can tie in current events as well as comparing and contrasting news around the world. Science can use the news to discuss environmental changes taking place, the weather patterns, and reading

weather maps. Math on the other hand can be a little more challenging, but even in math class the students need to learn about the misleading graphs and data analysis represented by corporations in order to get you to buy their products. Even though teaching media literacy may not be a large topic of interest in schools, it can and should be incorporated into the curriculum when possible. (*Angie*)

In other words, any subject can (and should) be addressed from a critical vantage point, thus augmenting the teaching and learning from a range of perspectives and lived experiences (Banks, 2008; Kincheloe, 2008). Macedo (2007) warns that not confronting the problematic nature of bias and propaganda can lead to the perpetuation of grave injustices and catastrophe, thus strongly making the case for confronting patriotism. While acknowledging that media literacy should not be marginalized to a single area, discipline, or educator, it is equally important to ensure that educators know how to teach, and are engaged in the process, about and for media literacy, which requires training, materials, support, and a critical thinking framework to provide teachers with concepts, principles, and strategies to teach about the media in a critical way.

Theme 6: The Marginalization of Diverse Groups in the Mass Media

The final media projects that students completed, emphasized in particular how racial minorities were visibly marginalized in the content and presentation of the mass media news. The students discovered, through their projects, that newscasters, journalists, analysts, and others of importance in delivering the news were largely White, although, at certain times, there might be a small number of minority people involved, especially on weekends and later at night. The concern is not only about who is packaging the news but, more importantly, who decides on what stories and angles will be covered.

> Media can actually shape a culture or possibly your views concerning a culture or a people. For some time now, the media has presented African Americans as people who are criminals, people who are slaves, and people who are dropouts or possibly video girls. The media has presented young African American children the false reality of becoming millionaires overnight by challenging them to become rap stars or famous athletes. It is sad that the media does not advertise youth excellence as much in the Black community. In the school where I teach, I now see the importance of making my students aware of the options that they have in choosing their destiny. (*Anthony*)

. . . as teachers, when teaching for media literacy, we must be careful to not persuade our students according to our viewpoints but to teach them how to make an educated decision after researching many sources . . .

As exemplified above, and this also came through in class discussions, the media can be extremely disempowering for some individuals and groups, who are either routinely omitted or portrayed as not being a full part of society (for example, the over-representation of African-Americans in crime and sports stories). An important realization for participants is the demystification of what Winter (2007) terms the "myth of competition" and the "cult of objectivity."

In essence, minorities are often stigmatized and marginalized under the guise of an open flow of ideas and "fair and balanced" (the moniker of FOX News) reporting in spite of the mass media being tightly controlled by special interests that are generally disinterested in social justice. Therefore, educators need to be vigilant about not engaging in critical media literacy, as avoidance to do so may reinforce disengagement and vilification of the "other."

Theme 7: The Effect of the Course on Media Literacy

One of the areas of interest in this research, apart from attempting to understand how educators perceive and work with media literacy in their teaching, is to determine if a university course focused on media literacy can have an impact on educators' conceptualization of, and engagement with, media literacy. Although it is not possible at this time to assess how participants are actually using what they have learned, it is fair to note that, in general, all participants experienced changes in their attitudes and commitment to media literacy as a result of the process of critical reflection and interrogation.

Many found the experience to be enlightening, as they had not considered the media in a critical manner before. For some, the deconstruction of the media, which involved trying to understand propaganda, bias, corporate control, and the editorial hegemony exercised by a small group of interests, led to discomfort as it altered their conceptualization of society. The process could, therefore, be empowering in some cases.

> Personally, I have never put much thought into what I watched on television or heard on the radio before this course. The media was just entertainment or a way to pacify time. Now, I am looking more critically about how ads are portrayed and trying to figure out the messages that are being sent. I do not think that in education there is a strong urge to deal with media literacy. It is something that should be more important, but at the same time we need to teach educators about media literacy before they can pass on this knowledge to the students that they teach. Also, from this course I am definitely more in tune to what the media is showing and I see the effects that it could potentially have on children, but I also strongly feel that no matter what is shown on television it ultimately comes down to parenting and how you raise your children. (*Melissa*)

> After taking this class, I have realized that our educational system is lacking in teaching for media literacy. Most of us are focused on standards and how to fit everything else in that is expected of us. ... we do not take the time that is needed to really have students critically think or analyze the media. Partially, I feel that we were never taught this way and this class has been an eye opening experience to the different vantage points that certain media sources can take. On the other hand, as teachers, when teaching for media literacy, we must be careful to not persuade our students according to our viewpoints but to teach them how to make an educated decision after researching many sources. ... As a high school student, the teachers really never made an effort to help us connect to the news or to inspire us to question what was being said. Maybe they felt that if we began to question the news we would begin to question their ways as well. (*Julia)*

> As educators we must do our best to promote media literacy in our students by making them aware of how to analyze and critically think for themselves. Honestly, before taking this class I wasn't even aware of how much of the media is very straightforward and simplistic. Students need to be taught that not all vantage points are normally discussed in the media and therefore students have to be like detectives, in a sense that they must do their own researching and investigating to really understand what is going on in our world. (*Maria*)

While participants appear to feel that focused exposure to critical media literacy,

as was the case in the course framing this research, is beneficial at many levels, they also exhibit apprehension owing to the structure and neo-liberal framework of education. A common question, therefore, is: how do you teach about and for media literacy when there doesn't seem to be the support to do so (Carr, 2008)? A connected area of concern pertains to the notion of being perceived as impartial or doctrinaire. Educators must feel a certain comfort in how they address controversial issues, and also how they understand the notions of bias, propaganda, and power (Brinkley, 1999; Claire & Holden, 2007).

Discussion

This research raises a number of questions about the contemporary state of education, which, undoubtedly, connect with the potential for transformation within a context of neo-liberal reforms (Hill, 2008). If there is a tendency for teachers to not be overly engaged in, or exposed to, media literacy, it is important to understand the degree to which this is encouraged, facilitated, and codified by the overarching framework of neo-liberalism, which has de-emphasized social justice at the behest of employability, the market-place, and a pedagogical regime aimed at meeting established standards. Nevertheless, the importance of infusing more relevant and critical media literacy into the education experience was flagged by virtually all of the participants in this study.

Hoechsmann (2006) reminds us that "the best education is dialogic and foregrounds the background and experience of the learner" (p.34), thus making the case for a more critical engagement on the part of educators, who may not be in touch with the diverse media exposure that youths are exposed to. He also stresses the importance of educators being immersed in the actual development of media.

> Media educators do need to have the conceptual tools to undertake analysis and interpretation of media texts and the sources of media production. As well, media educators increasingly need to have the capacity to produce media of all types though the interesting wrinkle that has emerged as new technologies became cheaper and more accessible is that learners across multiple spectrums began to come into media education settings with adequate or better knowledge bases in production. This too has revolutionized media education settings and unsettled the relationship between teacher and learner. Ultimately, what media educators need more than almost anything else is an open mind and the capacity and desire to read youth writing their lives. (p.34)

This enhanced engagement with media literacy links to political literacy, which underscores the political nature of education (Freire, 1970). Critical pedagogy offers a conceptual framework to think through the process of critical engagement in relation to the media in education (Kincheloe, 2008). There are several concerns here that, collectively, participants have enunciated as requiring attention:

- how teachers are trained, certified, and supported in their quest to be media literate;
- the absence of a clear and relevant conceptual framework in education that creates the conditions and impetus to undertake media literacy in schools;
- if standards, high-stakes tests, and other barometers of the neo-liberal reform period continue to rule the day, it would be important to, at the very least, develop and require the usage of specific standards and outcomes related to media literacy, the absence of which will further perpetuate the myth that this is only an add-on or supplementary concern;
- a support-network and curriculum-base from which teachers could draw on for appropriate resources, activities, strategies, and evaluation-measures to formalize the media literacy experience in schools is needed;
- students, as exemplified in the educational experiences of the participants, are not generally afforded an educational experience that fully and freely acknowledges political and media literacy, which can be a significant impediment to creating a more robust and critical educational experience;
- the media plays a significant role in defining the youth educational and cultural experience, and to omit or diminish a concerted effort at media literacy in schools would have the effect of, ultimately, working against the interests of an engaged and productive citizenry which will be called on to make decisions about social justice, war, poverty, and the fabric of democracy (Lund & Carr, 2008; Westheimer, 2006).

This study also speaks to the importance of culture and identity in relation to the media. Since the media is everywhere, and is infused into people's daily lives, it is imperative that educators are aware of who is included and excluded. In other words, if a critical media literacy approach is not advocated, it is likely that rampant stereotypes in the media about, for example, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Aboriginal peoples (American Indians) will be perpetuated and largely unchecked.

Such marginalization of diverse groups and peoples will be further entrenched given the absence of a politically literate and engaged populace. White power and privilege, which has been gratuitously presented as the norm in society through the media, and by extension in education, should be understood through the lens of a critical pedagogical approach to media literacy (Carr & Lund, 2007).

Lastly, it is important to emphasize that media literacy is not about a lesson plan, a list or menu of options, a resource, or an individual event or personality. Rather, media literacy is about a process of engagement, one that offers the opportunity for reflection, interrogation, and debate (Macedo & Steinberg, 2007).

While there is a definite formal structure needed to foster media literacy in education (i.e., standards, curriculum, resources, the requirement to teach the subject, etc.), in keeping with the main principles of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2008) the more fundamental aspect of media literacy education must involve the commitment to, and the process of, personal and collective critical engagement.

However, in teaching about and for democracy (or "radical democracy," as Kellner and Share label it), anti-racism, social justice, and citizenship, the formal structure and requirements will only go so far. To have a meaningful impact, there needs to be a more comprehensive and broad-based approach to critiquing the shape, form, and meaning of education for media literacy, bolstered by educators who are willing to be innovative, critical, and cognizant of inequities and entrenched power relations. Such efforts can and will be a significant enhancement to the education of all parties involved.

References

Banks, J. (2008). *An introduction to multicultural education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Brinkley, E. (1999). *Caught off guard: Teachers rethinking censorship and controversy*. Needam Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon..

Carr, P. (2008). "But what can I do?": Fifteen things education students can do to transform themselves in/through/with education, *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, *1*(2), 81-97.

Carr, P., & Lund, D. (2007). *The great White north? Exploring Whiteness, privilege, and identity in education*. Rotterdam, The Neth-

erlands: Sense Publishers.
Dewey, J. (1916). *Education and democracy*. New York. Free Press.
Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.
Giroux , H. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
Herman, E., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
Hoechsmann, M. (2006). Bono for pope? A case for cultural studies in media education, *Taboo*, *10*(2), 25-35.
Hill, D. (2008). Resisting neo-liberal global capitalism and its depredations: Education for a new democracy. In D. Lund & P. Carr (Eds.), *Doing democracy: Striving for political literacy and social justice* (pp. 33-49). New York: Peter Lang.
Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). Critical media literacy, democracy, and the reconstruction of education. In D. Macedo & S. Steinberg (Eds.), *Media literacy: A reader*. (pp. 3-23). New York: Peter Lang.
Kincheloe, J. (2008). *Critical pedagogy: A primer*. New York: Peter Lang.
Lund, D., & Carr, P. (2008). *Doing democracy: Striving for political literacy and social justice*. New York: Peter Lang.
Macedo, D. (2006). *Literacies of power*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
Macedo, D. (2007). Deconstructing the corporate media/government nexus. In D. Macedo & S. Steinberg (Eds.), *Media literacy: A reader* (p. xvii-xxxvii). New York: Peter Lang.
Macedo, D., & Steinberg, S. (2007). *Media literacy: A reader*. New York: Peter Lang.
Merriam, S. D. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
McChesney, R. (2008). *The political economy of media: Enduring issues, emerging dilemmas*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
McLaren, P. (2007). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Boston: Pearson Education.
Schram, T. H. (2006). *Conceptualizing and proposing qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
Tobin, K., & Kincheloe, J. (2006). *Doing educational research: A handbook*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
Westheimer, J. (2006). *Pledging allegiance: The politics of patriotism in American schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.