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Recommended Citation

Venegas, E. M. (2016). Moving beyond Apartheid Schooling and “Adequate Education.” In L. Scott & B. Purdum-Cassidy, *Culturally affirming literacy practices for urban elementary students* (pp. 117–126). Rowman & Littlefield.

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Chapter Ten

Moving beyond Apartheid Schooling and “Adequate Education”

Empowering the Minoritized through Critical Media Literacy

Elena M. Venegas

Though the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and/or national origin, contemporary society within the United States is all but free from discrimination. The Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling and other landmark legislation passed during the Civil Rights Movement pushed our country toward a path of tolerance and the end of discrimination. Yet, despite these tremendous gains, discrimination still occurs not only at a societal level, but also in terms of schooling (Bakari, 2003; Ferguson, 2003; Harris & Schroeder, 2013; Mackinney & Rios-Aguilar, 2012.)

Through critical media literacy, youth—particularly those who are minoritized—can be participatory in debunking discriminatory rhetoric. Critical media literacy provides youth the skills to combat marginalizing societal norms by equipping them with the tools necessary to create a counternarrative to discriminatory practices.

This chapter will expose discriminatory educational policies and practices that stand to make U.S. schooling highly detrimental for minoritized student populations as well as give examples of how to use critical media literacy to empower minoritized students.

APARTHEID SCHOOLING AND AN “ADEQUATE EDUCATION”

Within the United States, groups who share a particular racial identity have often been subjected to prejudicial treatment in both law and practice. However, race is a social—not biological—construct (Coates, 2013). The term *minoritized* refers to such groups who are socially subjected to deferential treatment (Benitez, 2010). In the United States, people identifying as Asian American, Black, Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander comprise racially minoritized groups (Stewart, 2013).

Despite a national history of minoritizing various groups of people through colonization and proselytizing, many Americans claim that the contemporary United States is devoid of racism (Wise, 2011). Some may consider the election and reelection of Barack Obama, the first African American president in U.S. history, as evidence of “living in a post-racial society”; however, this is simply not the case. Voter identification laws, for example, are veiled attempts at once again limiting the voting rights of minoritized groups (Childress, 2014).

The Supreme Court’s *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) ruling inherently nullified the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Consequently, many of the states and counties previously under the jurisdiction of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 have enacted voter identification laws. Supporters claim such laws prevent voting fraud, yet they are intended to prevent people of low socioeconomic status, racially minoritized groups, college students, and women from voting (Childress, 2014).

The enactment of voter identification laws illustrates that we are in fact not living in a post-racial society. Author and anti-racism activist Tim Wise refers to the notion that racism in our contemporary society has been eradicated as “Racism 2.0” (Wise, 2009). Racism 2.0 refers to white supremacist notions that undergird our “post-racial” society. Unfortunately, many current educational policies and practices illustrate the prevalence of Racism 2.0.

Public schools are becoming increasingly racially segregated (Rothstein, 2013), and linguistically minoritized students are neglected in terms of differentiation. For example, English learners in Texas and Massachusetts are denied accommodations on the state exit-level standardized exam (Texas Education Agency, 2010; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015).

Some U.S. neighborhoods and school districts stand in stark contrast to the societal advancements toward eradicating prejudicial policies and practices made during the Civil Rights Movement. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was monumental in that it mandated the integration of U.S. public schools. Conversely, educational activist Jonathan Kozol (2005) asserted that many schools operate under the antiquated U.S. Supreme Court *Plessy v.*

Ferguson (1896) ruling, which stated that whites and non-whites are to be separate but equal.

Apartheid schools have come into being as a result of white flight, inequitable school funding, and increased accountability standards. Kozol (2005) coined the term *apartheid schools* to refer to the many low socioeconomic, "failing" schools composed of a 90 to 100 percent non-white student body. Students attending apartheid schools are often taught by teachers lacking full certification, receive fewer curricular and extracurricular resources and opportunities, and attend school in unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

Parents of students attending apartheid schools, concerned citizens, and educational activists have worked to make them more equitable. Though the plaintiffs of many court cases have worked to improve the state of apartheid schools, courts have responded by stating that education is not a constitutional right and students are entitled only to an "adequate education." An adequate education is defined as: "the preparation of students to function productively as capable voters, jurors, and citizens of a democratic society and to be able to compete effectively in the economy" (Nelson, Palonsky, & McCarthy, 2013, p. 74). However, an adequate education does not suffice to truly prepare low socioeconomic and other minoritized students for academic and vocational success.

Minoritized students are not only subjected to poor school conditions and novice teachers, but also frequently receive the brunt of stereotypic ideologies from those who are supposed to educate them (Ferguson, 2003). Teachers are prone to harboring racial bias (Ferguson, 2003). Perceptual bias refers to the tendency of teachers to evaluate students based on their preconceptions of their students (St. C. Oates, 2003).

Unfortunately, teachers' descriptions of the ideal student do not match their characterizations of Black students (Bakari, 2003). Consequently, teachers often negatively perceive racially minoritized students, evaluate them in accordance with stereotypic beliefs, and subsequently fail to empower these students for success both in and out of the classroom.

The consequences of minoritizing racially and linguistically diverse students speak to limited opportunities for success. Non-white students, particularly Blacks, are overrepresented in special education (Taylor & Whittaker, 2009). Whereas non-white students disproportionately comprise the number of students enrolled in special education, Black and Brown children are vastly underrepresented in Gifted & Talented and enrichment programs (Taylor & Whittaker, 2009). Black and Latino students are negatively represented at both ends of the achievement spectrum, and the opportunities of linguistically diverse students are also hindered.

Aside from limiting educational opportunities to minoritized students, policymakers have attempted to suppress students' language and culture. Many of these policies are enacted under a deficiency orientation, which

negatively views persons who do not conform to the dominant language or culture (Harris & Schroeder, 2013).

Arizona is one of five states with the highest concentrations of English learners (ELs), yet has enacted restrictive language policies in its schools such as mandating content to be taught in English only as well as for EL students to read and write only in English (Mackinney & Rios-Aguilar, 2012). These policies limit ELs by refusing to capitalize on their first language literacy.

The consequences of deficiency-oriented language policies are particularly evident in secondary schools. ELs must demonstrate their academic competence on state standardized tests to graduate. Expectedly, many ELs lack the language proficiency to demonstrate their academic knowledge on standardized assessments given only in English. Though demonstrating their academic aptitude in their coursework, some ELs become so discouraged by their failure to pass the exit-level state standardized assessment that instead of becoming high school graduates they become high school dropouts (Valenzuela, 2000).

In response to the current societal and educational policies designed to hinder participation in exercising one's citizenship as well as opportunities for educational and vocational success of minoritized people, critical media literacy provides a means for raising awareness of such issues.

As activist Tim Wise asserts, it no longer suffices to simply raise awareness of discriminatory practices—people must also write a counternarrative to current socially unjust practices (Wise, 2011). Critical media literacy enables both minoritized students and students wanting to change discriminatory policies and practices to author such a counternarrative.

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages (Schwarz, 2014). In the contemporary United States, media saturates our society. Though quite often media are approached with an uncritical eye, educator Marshall McLuhan famously stated, "The media is the message" (McLuhan, 2003). McLuhan's quote is rich because it asserts that media are not neutral but rather that all media exist to communicate a message, whether or not the audience is privy.

As educators, media literacy is of the utmost importance because we must not only prepare students to think critically about the various media they encounter each day but also help students further develop their literacy as the nature of literacy continues to evolve in the twenty-first century. The Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts may be addressed through media literacy (Common Core State Standards Initiative, n.d.).

Media literacy presents an engaging and interesting alternative to more conventional pedagogical approaches. Apart from addressing curriculum standards, teaching media literacy to students is imperative because their lives are inundated with media. Today's students readily access print, social media, websites, television, radio, and films both inside and outside of school.

Media literacy education empowers individuals so that they no longer passively receive media messages (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009). Rather, media literacy requires examining an author/producer as well as his or her purpose for communicating. Through media literacy, the choice of medium is also analyzed in terms of not only how it facilitates communication but also in terms of how the chosen medium contributes to the message because as McLuhan (2003) asserted the medium and the message are inextricably intertwined.

The impact of the message on the audience is analyzed along with the author's credibility and the various means by which the message may be interpreted. Media-literate students become critical of media messages that they encounter meanwhile gaining necessary skills for English/Language arts. For example, through their analysis of media messages students begin to understand important writing concepts such as: understanding the author's purpose, writing for an audience, and using persuasive rhetorical devices. They can then begin to author their own media messages, which can further a counternarrative to racism, discrimination, and prejudice.

Critical media literacy involves the critique of media messages particularly in regard to portrayals of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and power in media (Kellner & Share, 2007). As previously mentioned, media are not without bias. Thus, advertent or inadvertent messages that are prejudicial or seek to minoritize others can be communicated to respective audiences. Kellner and Share (2007), however, hold that media can be a tool of empowerment through which minoritized groups can express their concerns.

The Black Lives Matter movement that arose in response to the tragic and controversial murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 is just one example of critical media literacy in action. Advocates of this movement brandished the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and engaged in critical conversations about the minoritizing of Blacks in the United States via social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Though the Black Lives Matter movement grew organically this does not mean that critical media literacy is beyond the scope of our nation's schools. Critical media literacy, in fact, is an avenue by which teachers can seek to empower all students, but especially minoritized students to express their concerns about current prejudicial and discriminatory practices that affect their daily lives.

EMPOWERING MINORITIZED STUDENTS THROUGH CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

As previously mentioned, media literacy education can be used to creatively and engagingly address Common Core Standards. Whereas media literacy education as a whole engages people in critical analysis of media messages, teachers can foster a more democratic classroom as well as engage students in praxis through critical media literacy.

Critical Media Literacy as Praxis

Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire is a strong proponent of a democratic education, which entails the teacher and students being coauthors of learning. As co-learners the teacher and students dialogue and engage in problem-posing education, which requires individuals to critically think about a real-world issue and actually seek to resolve the issue through praxis, which is reflection and action on a real-world problem (Freire, 2014).

Critical media literacy, in particular, allows educators to engage their students in problem-posing education. Through critical media literacy education, students participate in a democratic education by actively discussing why a media message may be alienating as well as how it contributes to the minoritizing of others. Subsequently, students and teachers engage in praxis as they begin to create their own media messages of empowerment.

Critical Media Literacy in Action

A prime opportunity exists for students to engage in critical media literacy through the intersection of English/language arts and social studies learning. Upper-elementary and middle school students, for example, can make cross-curricular connections by examining media from the Civil Rights Movement. In particular, students can listen to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech at the conclusion of the march from Selma to Montgomery on March 25, 1965. Students might also watch the award-winning 2014 motion picture titled *Selma* (Winfrey, Gardner, Kleiner, & Colson, 2014), which portrayed events leading up to the march, including Bloody Sunday.

Dr. King and other Civil Rights leaders organized the march to draw attention to the egregious denial of Blacks' constitutional right to vote in many southern states. Students can analyze Dr. King's speech for its content, the rhetorical devices that he employs, as well as how the utilization of audio recording influenced the message or audience.

Students can then analyze media messages from today's contemporary political arena concerning voter identifications laws. Once analyzing both sides of the spectrum, students can then take a position and create their own

media messages (e.g., website, Tweet, Instagram, infographic, public service announcement, meme, etc.) by which to convince their fellow Americans of their viewpoint.

Many elementary students enjoy popular films produced by the Walt Disney Company. Some of these beloved children’s films present a prime opportunity for engaging young children in critical media literacy. For example, the film *Peter Pan* (Disney, 1953) features a song titled “What Makes the Red Man Red?” The song portrays Native Americans in a stereotypical manner, and they are referred to as “savages” by the film’s characters. Teachers can use *Peter Pan* (1953) in teaching critical media literacy by asking children to describe the characteristics that the filmmakers attribute to Native Americans.

Children can then compare the negative portrayal of Native Americans in the film to a more accurate portrayal in *Greet the Dawn: The Lakota Way* (Nelson, 2012). The teacher and students can then discuss how they would rather be portrayed—in a manner that pokes fun at their cultures or in a manner that showcases how their cultural heritage and the larger American culture intermingle.

Though some may claim that *Peter Pan* (1953) is outdated, Disney again portrayed Native Americans as savages (either noble or ignoble) in the film *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, 1995). *Pocahontas* (1995) presents an opportunity to discuss cultural invasion, and teachers can supplement this discussion with a reading of *Fatty Legs: A True Story* (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2010). In *Fatty Legs*, the main character is a Native American girl who realizes that her education is meant to strip her of culture. Again, elementary teachers can use *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Fatty Legs* (2010) to discuss minoritization of racially and ethnically diverse people.

In encouraging students to participate in praxis, elementary teachers can have their students brainstorm ways in which they want to change the portrayal of Native Americans in popular culture. For example, students may choose to write to the Walt Disney Company to discuss the importance of portraying diverse cultural heritages in a culturally affirming and accurate manner.

During the month of November, which is Native American Heritage Month, students may elect to host an event in which they educate the community on the importance of resisting cultural invasion and appreciating diverse cultures.

Elementary students in particular can watch a popular film such as *Remember the Titans* (Bruckheimer & Oman, 2000), which showcases racial tension on a fictional 1960s-era football team. After watching the film, the students can discuss how Blacks were minoritized during and before the Civil Rights era. A reading of the daily newspaper or watching of an evening

television news program will undoubtedly reveal that racial tension still exists in the United States.

The teacher and students can then dialogue about ways in which the United States has changed and areas in which improvement is still needed in terms of eradicating prejudice and discrimination.

A viewing of a family-friendly popular movie set in the Civil Rights era as well as an examination of contemporary race-related issues provides the perfect avenue for not only engaging in critical media literacy, but also living out the democratic educational experience. Elementary students can author their own media messages about an issue of importance to them to counter narratives promoting inequality and discrimination.

IMPLICATIONS

Unfortunately, minoritized students are viewed as “others” within the dominant U.S. society. Critical media literacy is a means by which educators can not only equip diverse students with the English/Language Arts skills necessary for academic success but also empower traditionally marginalized students to create a counternarrative to a narrative of oppression.

As educator Paulo Freire asserts, the oppressed must institute praxis—reflection and action—to not only liberate themselves but also their oppressors (Freire, 2014). Critical media literacy allows traditionally marginalized students to exercise praxis as they seek to better our contemporary society—both for themselves and for the nation as a whole.

There are several practical implications for educators. The first is being aware of potential bias against those who identify as a different race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. As several studies referenced in this chapter suggest, educators are prone to bias, and it is important to have this awareness to guide interactions with one’s students, families, and colleagues.

Another practical implication is that educators need to be mindful of the educational resources that they use in their classrooms. An educator should preview each resource before using it with his or her students and ask himself or herself how others may perceive that material. This is an opportunity for the educator to engage in media literacy himself or herself in contemplating what perspectives are left out and what are the (c)overt messages communicated through the medium.

Perhaps the greatest implication is to foster a democratic education by involving even young children in praxis through encouraging them to identify real-world problems of importance to them as well as take steps to actually make changes.

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