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**The Power and Possibilities for Young Viewers of Reality Television when Educators and Researchers Partner Together for Critical Media Literacy**

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## The Power and Possibilities for Young Viewers of Reality Television when Educators and Researchers Partner Together for Critical Media Literacy

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### ABSTRACT

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Abstract: Different forms of media inundate young people on a regular basis, including social media sites, television, music, movies, and literature. These forms of media often go unquestioned in the traditional classroom, as the United States does not value instruction in critical media literacy. Through interviews with pre-teens and teenagers about their interactions with reality television, this paper explicates the need for critical media literacy in schools in the United States. Findings indicate the need for critical media literacy in the classroom in order to mediate the impact of consumption of reality television and the perceptions young people develop based on messaging and imagery found in reality television shows. One way to bring critical media literacy into the classroom is to develop a university-school partnership, where professionals could collaborate to help make change in the classroom

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**Keywords:** Critical media literacy, youth culture, school-university partnerships, reality television

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential link between personal connection to reality television shows and socioeconomic status. This exploration grew out of previous research (Author, 2018), which appeared to indicate a potential correlation between one's socioeconomic status and the personal connection to, and desire to take part in, reality television shows. This second investigation into the way young people interact with reality television shows will help to create a school-level professional development series that will assist teachers in working with students in the area of critical media literacy. Shirley Steinberg (2011) makes clear that media is one of the strongest forces in the lives of young people, so it makes sense to use this influence in the classroom, as teachers and other stakeholders work in partnership to educate young people on a daily basis.

Having spent 11 years teaching junior high school, the time that young people spend watching reality television shows was often a topic of conversation in the classroom. On a regular basis, I would hear the conversations my students were having; often thinking they were talking about friends or family members. It was not until I engaged more deeply in their conversations that I realized they were not talking about people they knew personally, but rather about characters on their favorite reality television shows. This level of engagement and interest on the part of pre-teens and teenagers peaked my interest and made me wonder about how young people interact with reality television and how it may act as an influence on them.

In the United States, reality television can be traced back to the 1940s, when "Candid Camera" first hit the airwaves. At the time, reality television was held in high esteem, as sociologists from across the United States believed the host, Allen Funt, was an absolute gem who provided a lens through which to view society at the time (McCarthy, 2009). This show was off and on the air for decades, but it was not until 1973 that American viewers had their first taste of a weekly episodic program featuring the lives of real people for all to see. A show called "An American Family" (NPR, 2009) featured the Loud family in 12, one-hour long episodes after filming hundreds of hours of footage. From there the weekly format of reality television shows was born. Since then, television in the United States has been saturated with reality television shows, to the point that Bill Carter of *The New York Times* (2010) stated that television viewers believed reality television to be the most overdone genre of television. In spite of that critique, reality television shows in the United States continue to highlight everything from 90-day relationships to quiz shows to physical challenges to the purported daily workings of people's homes and family lives. This genre is so abundant that, according to Todd VanDerWerff (2016) of the website Vox, 750 reality shows aired in 2015 and about 350 of them were new. Clearly, there is both a market and an interest in reality television and it has acted as a cultural pedagogue for decades.

With this in mind, using the lens of critical media literacy, I interrogate the ways in which young people interact with various forms of media, but specifically, reality television. I uncover their beliefs about the shows and their characters, their opinions about the ways reality television plays a role in the lives of young people, and the degree to which young people do or do not question the power that is inherent in media messaging.

## Theoretical Framework

Both the theory of and the need for critical media literacy ground this study. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share define critical media literacy as an approach to teaching literacy that "focuses on ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality; incorporating alternative media production; and expanding textual analysis to include issues of



social context, control, resistance, and pleasure” (2007, p. 62). Schools in the United States often neglect this approach to teaching literacy, which puts students at a disadvantage. Different forms of media permeate the lives of young people, and by neglecting to adjust teaching practices and offer a critical community where we can tap into students’ interests, we leave our most vulnerable students at a disadvantage. This is especially palpable in schools districts with high levels of poverty and traditionally marginalized students, as they often spend much of their time after school with different forms of media due to lack of funds to participate in outside activities or lack of supervision due to parents and guardians working multiple jobs. Essentially, by not educating all students in the area of critical media literacy, we are leaving our most vulnerable population at a disadvantage.

### *What is media literacy?*

The call for media literacy is not necessarily a new one. The National Association for Media Literacy Education got its start in 1997, as the Partnership for Media Education. In 2008, it renamed itself, as a way of “evolving with the times”. In fact, many of the most popular websites that focus on media literacy often take their definition from the work of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. There are multiple websites, such as Media Literacy Project, Center for Media Literacy and Media Literacy Now that have been in existence for over twenty years. When one looks at their definitions or mission statements, admirable goals for each are clear. The Center for Media Literacy uses a 1992 definition from the Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute that defines media literacy as, “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms.” More recently, they acknowledged that definitions evolve over time and they now choose to use the following phrase to define media literacy:

Media literacy is a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of democracy.

While this organization appears to realize that that being an informed citizen includes being media literate, the definition did not change a great deal from 25 years ago, nor did they approach what it means to be critical about interactions with different forms of text and media. While the website itself offers materials for professional development, a newsletter that one can subscribe to, and even a store full of materials to buy, at no location on their page do they reference how their work can inform students and professionals in a critical way.

A visit to the Media Literacy Project page, which formed in 1993, acknowledges the ability to read many types of media as “an essential skill in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” and offers the following definition for media literacy:

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. Media literate youth and adults are better able to understand the complex messages we receive from television, radio, Internet, newspapers, magazines, books, billboards, video games, music, and all other forms of media.

Similar to the definition used by the Center for Media Literacy, one can see the verbs access, analyze, evaluate and create; however, there is still no mention of raising critical awareness or the value of questioning various forms of media. When one looks a bit deeper, the organization does mention the idea of media justice and the ways in which power and privilege come into play when media is involved. They offer an endorsement of what gaining media literacy skills can do for students and adults, which seems to offer a bit more than their initial definition. The authors state,

Media literacy skills can help youth and adults:



- Develop critical thinking skills
- Understand how media messages shape our culture and society
- Identify target marketing strategies
- Recognize what the media maker wants us to believe or do
- Name the techniques of persuasion used
- Recognize bias, spin, misinformation, and lies
- Discover the parts of the story that are not being told
- Evaluate media messages based on our own experiences, skills, beliefs, and values
- Create and distribute our own media messages
- Advocate for media justice

([www.medialiteracyproject.org](http://www.medialiteracyproject.org))

Of interest here is the idea that this organization does seem to have an element of criticality about it, but it is not clear at first glance. It is possible that this is due to a reluctance to use the word “critical” in their title, or simply an evolution of the organization over time. Either way, this group seems to take media literacy a step further, but still does not dig deep enough into the realm of what it truly means to be critically media literate. What is particularly interesting though is that, the one site for media literacy that seems to possess a critical lens had to close its doors on June 30, 2016.

One final example is Media Literacy Now, which uses the exact same language as the Center for Media Literacy when defining media literacy. This group has been in existence since 2011 and works to support positive uses of media so that children can interact with it in a healthier way. The group describes their strategy as one that aims to show that media literacy works. They state that their aim is to share knowledge and resources as a means of encouraging awareness and advocacy; however, they do not say what they are advocating for, outside of their original claim that media literacy works. Media Literacy Now also collaborates with the American Pediatric Association, as well as the American Psychological Association as a way to get kids thinking about healthy habits and pro-social behaviors. Finally, the website promotes a great deal of resources meant for both educators as well as parents. Again, while this website seems to take the idea of advocacy quite seriously, there appears to be some very glaring omissions in terms of the information shared on this site.

The webpages listed above, as well as the countless headlines, newspaper articles, and blogs that are now calling for media literacy all fall under one of the three modes of media literacy that Kellner and Share (2005) argue do not go far enough. Again, while these approaches all have positive aspects to them, they fall short of offering the examination of power and the inherent inequities that exist in the media. One common approach to media education is the protectionist approach. This approach aims to push blame on the media for all of society’s ills and it frames the person who is engaging with these texts as a passive victim. When one thinks of many of the current headlines, it is easy to see why educators would like to blame the media for the behaviors of viewers. However, this far over-simplifies the ways in which we interact with and make sense of media.

A second approach to media education is media arts education. This approach advocates for self-expression and gaining the means to create art and media. However, not only is this approach rarely a part of the everyday curricula (instead opting for after school clubs and programs) but it also ignores the need for critical analysis of different forms of media. While these types of programs may support students in their need to express themselves, they do not promote a conscious analysis. Without a critical approach to making media, students run the risk of learning how to reproduce the same hegemonic ideas that are already prevalent in different media sources (Kellner & Share, 2017). Like the protectionist approach, the media arts approach to media literacy does not do enough to teach critical thinking skills, and this is true of the basic approach to media literacy as well.

The basic approach to media literacy education is still fairly small and new, as referenced above. It has produced national organizations and multiple websites that work to expose students to media content without any of the questioning that should go along with that exposure. For many educators who

stand behind this approach, the idea is that education and specifically media education can and should be politically neutral. This is a troubling idea, as basic exposure does nothing to address the injustices and inequalities that are entrenched in interactions with media. By taking this approach to media literacy, there becomes the quest for the perfect cookbook of media literacy skills – one that will take the educator through all of the steps of a basic curriculum without ever having to dig deep or confront the greater societal issues that must be examined through our use of media.

Media literacy, as summarized here, offers multiple approaches to educating our young people that all fall short. This is troubling when young people in the United States are living in a time of frightening political rhetoric and an overabundance of technology at their fingertips. While there is power in recognizing that students need to be media literate and while it is promising that there is now a national outcry questioning how prepared we are as a national citizenry to address different forms of media, until the qualifier of “critical” is added to the approach to media literacy, we will continue to be comfortable in the status quo, reproducing the dominant discourse that people all too often accept in an unquestioning way. If our hope is to avoid that fate, we need to gain a clear understanding of and put our support behind critical media literacy.

### ***Critical Media Literacy***

When first working with young people regarding their interactions with reality television and how these shows may be affecting their lives, I naively sought out an understanding of whether or not the pre-teenagers and teenagers involved in the discussions thought reality television shows were real or not. Little did I know how deeply these young people were affected by reality television shows or how much of an influence these shows and characters had in their world. It was after months of research and transcribing data that I found myself even more deeply committed to the need for critical media literacy. I, like many other scholars and educators already understood what Ernest Morrell was saying when he wrote that “media are, for today’s youth, their primary cultural influence, surpassing the family and the school” (2008, p. 156). However, while I thought I had a good understanding of how youth interact with media, I was still stunned when a participant in my research explained to me that reality television was like a big sister to her. If young people are connecting with a reality television show in that personal of a way, then it should be clear that critical media literacy is something that needs to be just as embedded in their world as the shows that they watch are.

With this in mind, it should be clear that critical media literacy needs to go well beyond a basic exposure to media that is accompanied by neutral discussions. It also needs to surpass the time and space offered to young people to create new media. As the definition of critical media literacy shared above articulates, what all of the approaches to media literacy explained earlier missed was the element of power, questioning, and critical analysis. Educators and their students must critically question the various texts they interact with if they are to begin to understand the power that is inherent in media.

This is where critical media literacy goes beyond the approaches to media literacy described earlier. If educators are going to ensure an educated citizenry that can participate in democracy and be well versed in the ways that media works to influence everyone’s lives, educators must start from a place of understanding and an imperative need to question. Parents, educators, and researchers must ensure that all students get the chance to learn these skills and understand the ways in which media mediates their understanding of the world. In today’s media-saturated world, this should seem like an obvious - if not imperative - skill for all youth to become quite proficient in. Unfortunately, unlike scholars and educators in places such as Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, the United States views critical media literacy as something that is seen as optional, at best and unnecessary, at worst (Kellner & Share, 2007).

Considering the capacity that media has to present images and meaning to youth and, thus, to understand their world, educators must rise to the challenge of helping students understand the multicultural society that they now inhabit. Because so much of what is presented to students is either what they choose to see or what the mainstream media allows them to see, it is imperative that educators help young people become sensitized to topics that are not brought to light in the classroom, including



social inequities and injustices. Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (1999) give a plethora of examples of how to do this work in the classroom in meaningful ways, with all grade levels. In addition to their work, there has been an influx in practical and theoretical work regarding the importance of critical media literacy in U.S. schools for the last few decades (Author, 2020; Author, 2019; Macedo & Steinberg, 2009; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011; Morrell, 2008). This work builds on the thinking of the Frankfurt School theorists, who were the first to consider the effects of mass culture on the working class almost 100 years ago. Their critical questioning laid the foundation for the work of critical media literacy in the United States.

Critical media literacy that acknowledges media texts of all types that students are engaging with needs to be included in the formal school curriculum. Without some guidance and dialogue, the relationship that youth and media share will be one of stereotypes and discriminatory views based on gender, race, class, and sexuality. As educators work to help students manage all of this, however, it is important to remember that young people are not passive in this process. Students can and should become active in the meaning-making process and as Beverly Daniel Tatum reminds us, “children need to be able to recognize distorted representations, they also need to know what can be done about them” (1997, p. 49). By exposing both youth and adults to critical media literacy, they gain the opportunity to explore ideas that are not otherwise discussed with them at home or at school. Additionally, they get to work with these messages and experiment with what they mean to them and how these hegemonic and stereotypical images and messages affect their own identities and thoughts. These moments of exploration and understanding can prove very powerful in the lives of youth and allow them the freedom and agency to decide how media will affect their lives in the future. These moments can allow students the opportunity to not only be consumers of media, but also to capitalize on their skills as new producers of media. Youth as producers of media is on the rise, especially with easily accessible apps, so it is even more important for them to question elements of power, voice, and representation in different forms of media.

The effect that media has on young people needs to be examined and critiqued, and that is what critical media literacy strives to do. Kellner explains that by working to teach critical media literacy in our schools, we can work toward the goal of truly analyzing mainstream media and examine the ideology, power, and domination that are in play in all forms of media that young people are interacting with on a daily basis. This examination of media and technology can then allow students to gain a greater understanding of both the reality that they are experiencing as well as the social realities of the world around them. In this way, not only are students working to understand the ways in which they receive media and make meaning of it, but they are also becoming active members in a society that needs to challenge the dominant discourse and the messages disseminated to the public. Talking about it simply is not enough.

Additionally, by helping students gain literacy skills that address how they receive information, not only can youth understand changing cultural views and values, but they can also work toward a greater sense of democracy, as more and more people will be able to take an active role in the world and the ways it is now structured, defined, and presented. It is important that educators capitalize on how media savvy young people are and take advantage of how accessible technologies of communication are to today’s youth. By working with youth collaboratively, educators can promote discussion of topics such as democracy, politics, the spectacle that is the media and social issues that are pertinent to their worlds. In this way, critical media literacy acts as a way to arm young people to interact critically with a variety of texts, as well as interact critically with the world around them, which can promote a sense of “radical democracy.” The idea of radical democracy is an important one, as it “depends on individuals caring about each other, involved in social issues, and working together to build a more egalitarian less oppressive society” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 65). This is an admirable goal and one that educators can work toward if we help youth learn how to better critically analyze media.



## Methods

Researchers implemented a critical qualitative case study approach, identifying nine participants in cooperation with a public school situated near the university, just outside a major metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States. All participants showed interest in discussing different forms of text and media that they interacted with on a regular basis and chose to be a part of this study. After researchers fulfilled all proper IRB requirements and the parents or guardians and students filled out the consent and assent forms, the primary researcher conducted focus groups and individual interviews, which were semi-structured in nature. The primary researcher conducted four focus groups, which lasted approximately 60 minutes each. After the focus groups concluded, the primary researcher conducted interviews with individual participants, and those ranged in length from 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the participants' responses. Participants attended both the focus group sessions and one-on-one interviews in a classroom at the school the participants attended.

The primary researcher transcribed and coded the data after all focus groups and interviews had taken place. The questions used during both the interviews and the focus groups lend themselves well to the approach to critical media literacy that was described earlier in the paper, as researchers were looking to understand the participants' levels of understanding and critical questioning as they relate to media imagery and messaging. During the transcription and coding process, researchers used overt and covert categories as a way of analyzing the data. Overt categories were composed of explicit messages regarding the impact of media on young people and the relationships participants do or do not build with media personalities. The covert categories included stereotypes depicted in reality television, as well as coveting prizes or lifestyles seen in reality television shows. The primary researcher used Carspecken's (1996) concept of low level coding to help generate themes and patterns found in the data. Additionally, before, during, and after data collection, the researcher and co-author worked together to discuss the background information of each participant, using the survey data collected from parents and guardians prior to the start of the research project.

### *Data Sources*

Participants in this study were nine pre-teen and teenaged students in a school situated outside a major metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States. This community has experienced drastic dips in attendance due to school choice policies, which allow families to take their student out their "neighborhood school" (the school assigned to them based on their address and school district boundaries) and into other schools in surrounding areas. These policies often affect students and families of lower socioeconomic status, because families are unable to transport their students outside of the neighborhood to other schools and districts. Seven of the participants in this study reported a household income of less than \$25,000 per year. One reported a household income of \$25,000 to \$50,000 per year and one declined to comment.

This particular school is currently a K-12 program in an urban school district with 1009 students enrolled. The school is divided into multiple programs; a K-12 honors program, a K-4 language immersion program that focuses on Spanish, and the district's program for students on the Autism spectrum. The honors and language immersion programs require students to complete an application, participate in an interview and submit a written essay. A faculty member uses standardized test scores from NWEA, WIDA, and M-STEP as part of the application process and assesses students in grades K-1 in a one-on-one setting. This school is student-centered, focusing on project-based learning and 21st century skills. Finally, one of the main goals of this school has always been to ensure a high quality education for all students and to respect and honor the diversity and background of every student and family.





Within the participating school, there are 57 staff members – 50 of whom have a Master’s degree or higher. It is also important to note that due to rapid growth in this program, only two original staff members remain from its inception in 2010. This school is a Title-I school, where 100 % of the students receive free breakfast and lunch. Additionally, the demographics of the program include 73% (736 students) Hispanic, 23% (232 students) African American, 3% (30 students) Asian, and 1% (10 students) Caucasian. The nine participants who were included in the research were of varied ethnic backgrounds, as the researchers tried to model the demographics of the school.

### **Voices of Young People**

Young people have a lot to say, especially as it relates to their own lives and identities, the various types of texts and visuals that they interact with, and the ways in which they are viewed by the adults around them. Much of what adolescents have to say focuses on elements popular culture, including music, social media sites, and television shows. While discussions with pre-teens and teenagers can act as a community building force when implemented through the lens of critical media literacy, what often happens is that educators, parents, and researchers diminish the ways in which young people engage with different forms of text and media, which results in a lack of development of critical inquiry skills, as well as a lack of representation of adults who can act as a positive force in the lives of young people. Additionally, by ignoring in the classroom what young people are interacting with outside of the classroom, we are negating not only their lived experiences, but also the people, shows, and different forms of media with which they are potentially forming connections. As educators, researchers, teachers, and stakeholders in the education of young people, we must do a better job of collaborating with them as a means of hearing their voices and centering their experiences. Historically, the effects of media and reality television have focused on adults (Ouelette, 2010; Pozner, 2010; Rose & Wood, 2005; Grossberg, 1997), with a study by Allen and Mendick (2012) being a notable outlier. This study aims to take the focus off adults and center the voices of young viewers instead.

### ***Participants***

The nine young people who took part in this study were all invested in media of different types. Keith was a 13-year-old African American male, who spent a great deal of time with video games, YouTube, and reality television. Kevin, also a 13-year-old African American male, enjoyed video games and reality television. Joey, also an African American young man, but 12-years-old, was not interested in the violent video games that Keith and Kevin enjoyed, instead spending time with reality television, to the point that he built a personal investment in some of those characters. Jeremiah, on the other hand, was a mixed race, 13-year-old young man who enjoyed “binge watching” certain shows on Netflix and spent a great deal of time on YouTube. His peer, Antoine, was the only white male participant. At 13-years-old, he also spent a great deal of time on YouTube, but checked in with reality television shows as a form of comic relief. Paulie, another 13-year-old African American male, had similar interests to some of his peers; namely, playing video games and spending time with YouTube. His peer, Devin, also a 13-year-old African American male, spent a good amount of time with reality television; in spite of the fact that his mom believed he did not watch any. Lila, the only female in the group, Puerto Rican and 13-years-old, was one of the participants who showed the greatest personal connection to reality television characters, linking their experiences on the shows to her own struggles with rumors and gossip. The final participant, Leonardo, was a 13-year-old Mexican young man who deeply believed that reality television was not real, but who spent a great deal of time with television of all types after school. All participants shared their experiences with media during our discussions, explaining how and when they interact with it, their shows and social media platforms of choice, and whether or not they would choose to be on a reality television show of their own.



### *Joey*

When talking with Joey, it was clear from the start that he had a very personal investment in reality television shows, working to make connections with characters, while failing to question the editing or production that might be involved in the way viewers see these characters. However, while Joey did not critically question who holds the power in these shows, he did share his thoughts about the ways people on these shows construct a certain image for viewers. Joey also mentioned the influence these people have on the lives of viewers, sharing, “maybe, like, you’ll be rooting for a certain person that will be like, your favorite character.” Even though Joey acknowledged what he was viewing may not be entirely real (because, as he said, that would not be very entertaining), he still found himself invested in these shows, and willing to be a participant on a reality show, should the opportunity ever present itself.

### *Kevin*

Kevin, similar to Joey, questioned the authenticity behind reality television shows. In spite of the perceived lack of reality (or maybe because of it), Kevin was invested in and entertained by the ‘drama’ inherent in these shows. He said, “I mean, let’s be honest here, most of the most, most, popular reality shows are, they’re more based around drama because, in all honesty, that’s what we like to see and that serves as entertainment towards us. So, naturally, we’re just drawn to it.” Kevin went on to share the ways drama plays out on these shows, causing problems when there is no need for problems. As we were discussing some of what he considers ‘drama’, and how he might define that word, he started to tiptoe into critical waters, vaguely mentioning the idea of stereotypes, but he fell short of really digging into some big questions. While Kevin did share that he talked about some shows with his grandmother, it was only the shows they watched together. Additionally, like Joey, Kevin said that he would be willing to take part in a reality show, often mentioning the money that is a big part of some of reality shows.

### *Keith*

From the start of my conversations with Keith, it was clear that he was different from his peers. He stated explicitly that he would never want to be on a reality show, even though he watched them regularly with his mom. However, just like Kevin, Keith found himself entertained by the ‘drama’ in his favorite reality television shows. Even though he described reality television as ‘messy’, he also told me, “I like watching it because, well, I just like the fights and all, to be honest”. He went on to tell me how many of his peers are influenced by the shows that they watch, wanting to look and act like the characters they see on reality television shows. While he was not sure if reality shows were real or not, he did mention the money and fame involved in these shows, as well as the idea that the characters on these shows are likely not being their authentic selves in front of the cameras.

### *Jeremiah*

Jeremiah was another participant who watched reality television on a regular basis. However, his response to whether or not he would like to be on a reality show in the future was more nuanced than that of his peers. Jeremiah shared that he would only be on a reality television show if it were about the fun aspects of his life, not about negative or dramatic experiences in his life. He felt the need to keep some things private, which was interesting, given that he deeply believes that reality television shows are “100% real”. While Jeremiah did not seem as amused by ‘drama’ as his peers were, he did share that he and his mom discuss some of the shows they watch together and that they talk about how he feels some of his peers are affected by watching these shows. Additionally, Jeremiah was another participant who started to step into critical waters, bringing up an issue of racism from one show, but he fell short of questioning what might be behind the televised incident and the overly simplified way the producers handled the situation.



### *Antoine*

Antoine, similar to Jeremiah, felt strongly that popular culture and reality television influence his peers. During his one-on-one interview he stated, “I believe people are trying to be like the people they see on reality TV shows or wherever else . . . because you see these people and you think, wow, this person is entertaining, they’re funny, they’re beautiful and you don’t see their flaws.” This was a big concern for Antoine, as he was one of the participants who felt strongly that reality television was fake, and that the people involved in these shows were only involved for the money and potential fame. Not surprisingly then, Antoine was one of the few participants who mentioned that he would never be on a reality show. He was clear in his feelings when he told me, “It probably would change me. You can’t say it can’t change you because fame and fortune that can make a big impact on anybody. I don’t care who you are, it’s gonna change you . . . I don’t want that to happen. I’d rather be the person I am today than another fake person on TV.”

### *Paulie*

Paulie was a participant who seemed to have the most to say, both during one-on-one interviews, as well as during the focus groups. His interview lasted the longest out of all of the interviews, but he spent much of his time talking about the video games he loves, and how he thinks it is foolish if video games or other forms of media influence anyone. However, when we did get around to talking about reality television, he shared that reality television shows are not real and the people who participate in these shows are simply involved in them for the sake of money or fame. While Paulie did not watch a lot of reality television, he did share his opinions on the shows he sees family members watching and later shared that he would be willing to be on a show that had a competition element and prize money involved, but not on a show that was full of drama or focused on dating and relationships.

### *Devin*

Devin, a participant on the quiet side, still had some clear ideas regarding reality television, and many of them echoed those of his peers. Devin made clear that these shows are full of ‘drama’ and that he does not understand the appeal of watching manufactured drama. He also shared that he believes people on reality television shows often put on a different persona as a means to gain attention on these shows, mentioning that most people’s ‘regular’ lives are not interesting enough for people to watch. However, when asked if he would ever take part in a reality show, his answer was interesting. He told me that it would have to be his own show, because he would want to be able to be his own person, and not have to pretend for the cameras. Devin took issue with people he felt were pretending on these shows, as they have a great influence on young people. He described some of his peers as “trying to be like them or like, saying, oh, I want to be famous like them and live their type of lifestyle. They don’t actually know what they go through to get to where they are today.” When speaking with Devin, it appeared as though there was a foundation of criticality that could be strengthened, if only he had the guidance of teachers or other adults.

### *Lila*

Lila, as the only female participant, often experienced her peers talking over her during the focus groups. However, during our one-on-one conversation, she shared the connections that she has formed with certain reality television stars, comparing their ‘drama’ to situations regarding rumors that she has dealt with in her own life. Like many of her peers, Lila would willingly participate in a reality television show, and she found the drama inherent in these shows as entertaining. Lila mentioned, “People think it’s interesting to see people’s problems,” going on to share that sometimes these problems mirror the ones in her own life. Lila, like many of her peers, also believed that people on reality television shows are often not presenting an authentic version of themselves, although she did not speculate as to why that might be.

Lila was also one of the few participants who used social media often, remarking that she has both Snapchat and Instagram accounts, but chooses to use her Snapchat account more frequently, as her mom does not monitor it. When Lila mentioned that her mom monitors her social media accounts, I asked if she monitors the shows that she watches as well, or if she discusses them with her. She briefly said yes, but did not elaborate.

### ***Leonardo***

Leonardo was the only participant who did not give a direct answer as to whether or not he would want to be a participant on a reality television show. While our conversation was the shortest out of all one-on-one interviews, Leonardo did make clear that money and fame play a role in reality television, and that he feels young people are deeply influenced by popular culture and different forms of media, stating, “It’s affecting them because, like, they’re gonna start doing different things. They’re gonna act different. They’re gonna dress different. They’re gonna start doing different things that they haven’t done in the past.” Because Leonardo felt so strongly that reality television shows are not real, he did not watch them at home, nor did he talk about them at home with family. However, he was aware of conversations that his peers had about these shows, which is the information he appeared to use in order to form his opinions about reality television shows and their influence.

### **Discussion**

The analysis of data brings up four main points for discussion, all of which articulate a need for critical media literacy in the classroom. Two main themes emerged from the data, in addition to two supporting themes. The two main themes were articulated by all nine of the participants; namely, that popular culture and media have an impact on the lives of young people and that media influences not just how young people think about their own identities, but also how they think and learn about others with whom they may not be familiar with in real life. The supporting themes illustrated a desire to take part in a reality television show, as well as the forming of personal connections to characters on reality television shows. Just one participant was adamant that he would not choose to be on a reality television show; while two participants indicated that they did not make strong personal connections to the people they were watching on reality television. These findings support an earlier study conducted by one of the authors (Author, 2018), that there appears to be a correlation between socio-economic status and personal connection to reality television.

Other common themes arose from these conversations as well. One theme that clearly resonated with all nine participants was that reality television is entertaining, partially due to the behavior and over-the-top antics that it highlights. Reality television shows have influenced the lives of these young participants by allowing them to imagine what their lives could be if they had some of the resources the characters had. Another detail that surfaced was that families did not monitor what the participants watched or how long they engaged with reality television, social media, or video games. A question on the survey asked explicitly if parents or guardians discussed chosen forms of media with their student and six of the nine respondents said no, they do not discuss what their child views or other forms of media and entertainment. Finally, the young participants also showed a level of frustration with the reality television characters at times, indicating that the characters did not value what they had or where they came from. This was disheartening, as many of the participants in this study are growing up in families who barely have enough money to support their basic needs.

When looking at the data and the themes that emerged, it becomes clear that media not only acts as a pedagogue for young people, but that viewers are active in a process of making connections to characters, coveting lifestyles and material goods, and desiring their own role in a reality television show



one day. These processes of actively making connections to reality television shows, without having the instruction in how to think critically, thoughtfully question, and push back on potentially harmful rhetoric speaks to the need for critical media literacy in schools.

## Conclusion

Educators and researchers should be aware of what Henry Giroux described in 2011; namely that the media works to cultivate fear of others and to render traditionally marginalized groups as “dangerous and unfit” for society. This type of framing is what the young participants in this study are seeing daily, without any guidance or support to make sense of different forms of media, specifically reality television. They do not see families like theirs represented on television, and when they do, they are presented often in a negative, stereotypical light. If educators are prepared in the concepts of critical media literacy, we can work to change both the rhetoric, as well as the acceptance of it.

Knowing the ways in which different forms of media influence young people, and thinking about how they interact with and interpret different forms of media holds great implications for PK-12 educators, as well as parents and other stakeholders in education. The days of mistakenly assuming that television, social media, and video games are simply mindless entertainment should be gone, and replaced with a real, deep, and lasting commitment to not only critical media literacy instruction in the classroom, but critical community building in every classroom through the use of various texts and forms of media, and partnerships among educational stakeholders. In order to build community in the classroom – especially during these divisive times – deep relationships are necessary. Teachers and students can build relationships in the classroom by interacting with students around their interests, which more often than not include media. By using different texts and media as a starting point, relationships can be built which can lead to a community of not only support, but of critical questioning, critique, and meaning-making, which all students need in order to be thoughtful members of society. These skills are imperative for students everywhere, but especially for those who are traditionally marginalized due to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. As educators, we can meet students where they are in order to form those bonds of familiarity and trust, and then use those same interests to help support critical thought and questioning.

The findings of this research indicate the need for critical media literacy in all schools in the United States in order to help mediate the influence of reality television on young people. With that in mind, universities and PK12 schools have an opportunity to collaborate in order to serve the needs of their students. While universities often push into schools when they need to conduct research, universities are less likely to work with communities and stakeholders in a way that might help bring outside curriculum into the schools, or even in a way that would prove valuable to classroom teachers. Experts on critical media literacy can help remedy this problem by collaborating with teachers in classrooms, which can support partnerships in order to improve instruction in this very important area. There is great power in partnerships and this research indicates that young people can benefit from critical media literacy in the classroom, which can occur by researchers and teachers collaborating to bring critical media literacy into their classrooms.



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