

ABSTRACT

Teaching Elementary Students Media Literacy Skills Using Animated Films

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Parents and family members alike have always shown concern for their children's television and movie watching habits. Questions arise about the appropriateness and influence of content regarding these types of media. There is a need to consider how media literacy is taught to younger audiences. Commonly, media literacy curriculum and lessons are focused, well-needed and intended, on discerning the validity of a source. However, younger students, at elementary ages, aren't being equipped to critically view media directly targeted for them. Animated movies shape children's culture and the ways they view the world. This study examined the experiences of elementary youth when learning about media literacy, and attempted to understand their process regarding the deconstruction and construction of media. Another goal of this study was to prompt and prepare students to question things seen in the media as well as learn about influences media has on their societal perspectives. Findings of the study revealed student engagement was significantly higher in construction activities rather than deconstruction activities. In addition, students were able to make connections to media literacy lessons and extend their thinking about how messaging has an impact on their daily lives. Recommendations for teachers, parents, and media literacy specialists with regards to increasing media literacy education and practices for elementary-aged students are provided.

Keywords: media literacy, media literacy education, media literacy theory, animated films, constructivist teaching, elementary learners

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TEACHING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS
USING ANIMATED FILMS

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER ONE

Overview of the Issue

Media literacy, the ability to deconstruct and construct messages communicated through technologies, can be a means to disseminating the nuances and details of media messages through skills of critical viewing. Media literacy ensures an informed citizenry more resistant to surface level motivations and messages. It also empowers viewers to become creators themselves and create new messages and responses to other messages. As will be examined in this thesis, there are various definitions for media literacy, however, the commonality of themes provide that a media literate person is able to (1) communicate their ideas clearly within the characteristics of the medium in which communication is occurring, and (2) have discernment for the messaging of the media; and (3) understand the value and processes associated with media literacy. Teaching students media literacy skills will empower them to create their own media, discern the validity and purposes of media, and make informed decisions messaging presented in media.

As such, emerging educational trends to inform students about media literacy have been made across the nation. In 2009, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) developed the Common Core State Standards, an initiative presented as a national reform effort under President Barak Obama's administration. In 2010, Common Core Standards were adopted by 41 of 50 states with ties to federal funding for

implementing the education initiative. Spanning across every grade level, these research and evidence-based standards center on English Language Arts and Mathematics with a central goal to ensure students are college- or work- ready after high school. Within the ELA framework, five components are articulated – one of which that centers on Media and Technology. Some of these standards, in particular, will be used as a basis for implementing curriculum lessons. However, it should be noted that the Media and Technology section focuses on college readiness efforts; there are remnants of media literacy education skills and knowledge presented in standards for students in grades K-5, but these are listed implicitly with the ELA framework. For example, the *Speaking and Listening* component within the ELA framework for second grade interacts with media literacy practices: “Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2). Students could potentially be asked to recap a video of whatever genre.

Similarly, fifth grade follows within the *Writing* component with more specific and complex media literacy skills: “With some guidance and support from adults, use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing as well as to interact and collaborate with others; demonstrate sufficient command of keyboarding skills to type a minimum of two pages in a single sitting” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.5). Other Standards throughout K-12 focus on practical application skills and analysis. Overall, media literacy skills are present as a means and part of both primary and secondary education standards, although in some cases, not explicitly expressed. Still, there is evidence leading to the assertion that the development of media literacy skills and knowledge should be a fundamental component of education.

Similarly, the Texas Education Knowledge and Skill Standards (TEKS) are the official standards for the state of Texas. Educators from kindergarten through 12th grade are required to implement and align their lesson plans in accordance with the TEKS. Media literacy objectives are explicitly stated within each grade level of the TEKS, however, most are aligned within the English and Language Arts (ELAR) framework. Listed under “Reading/Media Literacy” two examples are presented in the Kindergarten ELAR Standards 110.11 (b)12A and (b)12B which outline the following:

Students use comprehension skills to analyze how words, images, graphics, and sounds work together in various forms to impact meaning. Students continue to apply earlier standards with greater depth in increasingly more complex texts. Students (with adult assistance) are expected to: (A) identify different forms of media (e.g., advertisements, newspapers, radio programs); and (B) identify techniques used in media (e.g., sound, movement).”

The first-grade TEKS vary minutely, removing “with adult assistance”. In second grade, students are required to do all the same as kindergarten and first as well as “identify written conventions for digital media” like email. In third grade, students build on prior knowledge and skills and begin to compare mediums and analyze their influence. At fourth grade, students analyze the effects of media techniques on the message.

Next, ELAR Standard 110.12 (b) 12A focuses on analyzing the positive and negative effects of advertising techniques. In fifth grade, students focus on the elements that define mediums and how those elements effect the message. In sixth grade, students continue to focus on the defining elements of mediums and the affects they have on a particular message. In addition, the TEKS lists its first standard that requires students to articulate their own thoughts: “critique persuasive techniques (e.g., testimonials, bandwagon appeal) used in media messages” (110. 14 (b) 13C). Media literacy standards

as the grades progress follow similar themes focusing on the defining elements of mediums, their effect on messages, and the influence of those messages.

Noted, media literacy has gained widespread attention across the nation. Educational researchers have also reaffirmed the need for media literacy education practices as a means to develop civic skills and responsibility. Kubey (2004) argues that within a representative democracy such as the United States explicit education and skills in “all forms of contemporary mediated expression well beyond the print media” (p. 69). Kubey (2004) analyzes the impactful role television and other media has in everyday life as a reason to pursue media literacy practices. Whether it is determining the credibility of a website or identify stereotypes within visual images, he argues that media literacy can be a means to encourage young people to vote. Further, Kubey (2004) analyzed the educational framework of every U.S. state in an effort to observe the media education policies in play. They found that “all state curricular frameworks now contain one or more elements calling for media education” (p. 75). However, the implementations of these standards in state education frameworks were concentrated in English language arts whereas only 32 states contained media elements in their social studies, history, and civics framework. Indeed, this is a missed opportunity to encourage political participation.

Statement of the Problem

It is important to teach elementary students media literacy skills because of the great potential of abuse by corporations who create films, TV, and other child-targeted media (Ford-Jones & Nieman, 2003). For example, Digita Perspective (2012) found that “little kids and tweens have the buying power to the tune of 1.2 trillion per year” (p. 1),

which includes their own spending and influenced parent spending. Child-targeted media corporations generate a considerable income from film products alone, but when considering the merchandising aspect, the additional profit margins span up to billions. The added revenue character merchandising accrues against the production costs of an animated film project creates an appealing profit for animation studios. Character merchandising, in legal terms, is

The adaptation or secondary exploitation, by the creator of a fictional character or by a real person or by one or several authorized third parties, of the essential personality features (such as the name, image or appearance) of a character in relation to various goods and/or services with a view to creating in prospective customers a desire to acquire those goods and/or to use those services because of the customers' affinity with that character. (World Intellectual Property Organization, 1994, p. 6)

Without critical media literacy, families run the risk of their children making decisions based on unrealized impressions and misunderstandings of reality. Parents fear what research supports that child programming inspires violent behavior. In a study that examined effects of cartoon programming on children, shows like Scooby Doo and Looney Tunes displayed mild to extreme forms of violence and were linked to negative and behavior (Brocato, Gentile, Laczniak, Maier, & Ji-Son, 2010). The line of fact and fiction is difficult to distinguish for the child audience. The difficulty lies in determining reality and/or real outcomes. At such a young age, it is hard to conceptualize that these characters are "acting" therefore increasing a child's vulnerability in believing the events in the animation are real or happen in real life. This concern is then magnified with the increased access young children have with media and technology.

As technology advances, the ability to receive and create messages will become more accessible to people. Even with the accessibility of information at where it is now,

the need for the skills to be able to understand and create media is important because messages can be exploited for power. Corporations, whether they create advertisements or produce songs, are businesses with bottom lines. The messages corporations create are meant to move the viewer to some action or impression. The audience can and will be manipulated for the benefit of the corporation, whether the inspired actions or impressions are 'good' or 'bad'. While national and state efforts supporting media literacy education are applaudable, there is still much work to be done in order to increase the skills and awareness students, particularly elementary youth, need in order to decipher messages presented in media, and make informed decisions about content validity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of enacting a media literacy study specific to elementary-aged students is to equip them with the skills necessary to become critical viewers of media content. As adolescents increase their experiences and exposure to media, it is necessary to deconstruct and critically analyze how media will influence decisions on morality, ethics, civic action, and beyond. Around age ten, developmentally children are able to understand these abstract ideas (Diergarten, Mockel, Nieding, & Ohler, 2017). It is vital in the elementary age that adolescents learn how to think critically about media at this age because it builds on larger media principles that are developed in the future. Media literacy literature is benefited by this study because it contributes to a variety of student experiences with media literacy curriculum, specifically here, elementary youth and animated film.

Significance of the Study

Media literacy curriculum, currently, is heavily focused on news media and the validity of sources online and on television. The issue, however, is that news media and credibility is meaningless to the child audience. Media literacy curriculum concerning news media has to do with children's culture and does not give elementary students a realistic and applicable environment to apply and acquire media literacy skills. This medium is more relatable and applicable to analyze to the child audience than any other medium because children are the target audience for animated movies and television programs. However, relatability isn't the only reason to teach elementary students media literacy skills using animated movies; children often interact with animated movies with no expectations of a greater reflection. To contend, children can and do make critical reflections of animated movies when asked, and as such, animated movies can become an informal learning environment for children if they are equipped with the ability to analyze them.

Research Questions

This study seeks to elaborate on the experiences of upper elementary students as they interact with media literacy curriculum, specifically how students analyze film and from there create different media products. This information contributes to the larger media literacy literature as it deals with a population and medium that has not been extensively researched. This research could aid in the creation and implementation of media literacy curriculum, programs, and further research with upper elementary students. The following questions aim to cultivate substantial narratives and other qualitative data by focusing the study on student experiences. The following research

questions will be answered: (1) What are the experiences of elementary youth when learning about media literacy? (2) What are the processes regarding the construction and deconstruction of media for elementary students? (3) In what ways have the media literacy lessons prepared students to critique things seen in the media? and (4) How has this study helped students to learn about influences media has on their societal perspectives?

Theoretical Framework

This study will be analyzed using a media literacy framework. According to Potter (2004), defining media literacy in a world with several specific definitions starts with outlining what is common across all theories of media literacy. First, he shares that media literacy is not limited to a singular medium:

The media differs in terms of the symbols they use, their attitude toward audiences, their motives for doing business, and their aesthetics. The more people know about these differences across media, the more they can appreciate commonalities and the more they can understand how messages are sensitive to the media in which they are delivered. (Potter, 2004, pp. 32-33)

In this seminal work, he adds that media literacy often require skills because the emerging discipline is organized around key concepts which are used as tools for analysis, critical thinking, and investigation. Similarly, Potter (2004) expounds that in order to be considered media literate, one must know three areas content, industries, and effects:

With content, people need to understand that media messages are constructions that follow certain conventions and that the conventions distort reality rather than represent it. As for the industries, people need to understand that the media are businesses with particular motivations. For effects, people need to understand that they have the ability to negotiate meaning for themselves. (Potter, 2004, p. 33)

Finally, Potter (2004) continues that media's role is not to impose ideas or cultural values, but instead to factor in and imply how "mindless exposure to messages is bad and that interpreting the messages actively is good" (p. 34). These four characteristics summarize nearly every carefully crafted definition of media literacy. Each lends important caveats to the idea of media literacy given different mediums. Some definitions of media literacy attempt to specialize based on a medium; however, the study relies on a definition that does not do so. Adams and Hamm (1989) mark that people should learn about "all technologies that deliver information," a compelling description of the mediums media literacy is applicable (p. 34). Constructive and deconstructive skills are necessary to be media literate (Center for Media Literacy, 2012). One needs to be able to analyze, create, edit, share, critique and work in the medium to be media literate (Potter, 2004). As media literacy encompasses several different mediums; these mediums come with characteristics that define them (Media Smarts, 2014). This knowledge is particular and necessary to deconstruct and construct messages within the medium.

The Center for Media Literacy (2012) offers a descriptive framework for media literacy that will be utilized in this study. The following questions are posed as a way to develop media literacy skills amongst students: (1) Who created this message? (2) What techniques are used to attract my attention? (3) How might different people understand this message differently from me? (4) What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented or omitted in this message? and (5) Why was this message sent?

The MediaLit Kit was developed for K-12 educators to incite media literacy applications in a variety of subjects. It is important that people can apply this framework

to everyday life in an effort to make informed decisions. New technologies and new ways to communicate require bringing forth a need to understand these messages and why they are being sent (Wong, 2015). Younger and younger populations are being exposed to media, whether in TV, phones, or other electronics. Their ability to discern truthful images and understand the creative languages used to create media will be informative to their understanding and impressions received from media. Additionally, the Center for Media Literacy's MediaLit Kit will be used as a framework for lesson plans and discussions with students (Center for Media Literacy, 2012). Each question frames one lesson. The students seek to answer the questions concerning the animated film, *Megamind*.

It is important to note that this contemporary theory best aligns with the historical underpinnings of constructivist teaching. Constructivist teaching is a learning theory that states "people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences" (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004, para. 6). An educator practicing constructivist teaching provides students a learning space and an active role in creating knowledge (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). This is not to the ends of contradicting objective truths, but rather for students to actively engage with that truth by engaging with that knowledge and creating an experience. Based on the separate work of psychologists Vygotsky and Bruner, the theory places importance on the social interaction of the student with other students in learning. Vygotsky's work in *social constructivism* focuses on the social and collaborative of constructivism (Sjoberg, 2007). This puts importance

on the experiences including others (Sjoberg, 2007). Bruner's work focuses on the experiential portion of the theory as a method and motivation for learning (Sani, 2017).

Brooks and Brooks (2004) offer five guiding principles to implementing constructivism in the classroom: (1) pose problems of emerging relevance to students; (2) structure learning around primary concepts; (3) seek and value students' points of view; (4) adapt instruction to address student suppositions; and (5) assess student learning in the context of teaching" (Brooks & Brooks, 2004, para. 1). Implementing these guiding principles pedagogically could lead to discussion groups, small group exploration, picture sorts, performance-based assessments, and less formalized and teacher centralized instruction.

Definition of Terms

Animated films are feature-length films in which some form of animation (stop-motion, traditional animation, computer-generated, etc.) is the subject and live-action is not. Laika's *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016), Disney's *Toy Story* (1997), and Studio Ghibli's *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) are all examples of animated films, each utilizing a different animation style.

Civic education is described by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools as having four major competencies: (1) civic content knowledge, (2) civic skills (intellectual and participatory) and (3) civic dispositions (Baumann, 2015). This means that civic education not only includes knowledge of the government, referring to Competency One but also the skills and knowledge to participate in the government, other civic events and privileges, as well as the attitudes that characterize an active and informed citizen –ex. being well-informed on current and voting. An example of a civic education program or

curriculum might be student government in a middle school or voting for the new mascot's name in elementary school, provided there is explicit instruction on how this relates to civic duties.

Common Core Standards are the federal education standards currently in place in the United States. Commonly known as the Common Core, the standards include knowledge and skill standards concerning grades K-12 and two subjects, English Language Arts and Math. These standards mark what information students should know at the end of the year.

Construction refers to a type of activity. Construction or constructive activities involve any activity that requires students to create a product. One example of construction in this study is our final video project, *The Megamind Prequel*.

Constructivist teaching is a learning theory that is a learning theory that focuses on social interaction, collaboration, and experiences as a means of learning. Teachers act as facilitators of experiences that allow students to explore topics and create new knowledge.

Critical media literacy is characterized by its focus on “identity critique and analyzing the representation the crucial dimensions of gender, race, class and sex” (Kellner, 2007, p. 8). Another strong characteristic of critical media literacy is its resistance to an apolitical stance of media education instead reinforcing the idea of the audience and creators as “active in the creation of meaning” (p. 8). Critical media literacy curriculum could concern the offensive representation of Japanese men in Warner Brothers’ Looney Toons cartoon titled, *Tokio Jokio*, and the significance of it being made in 1943 during World War II.

Deconstruction refers to a type of activity. Deconstruction or deconstructive activities involve any activity that requires students to analyze parts of a product. One example of a deconstructive activity, in this study, is the discussion time during Lesson 2 in which student reviewed clips from *Megamind* and identified different techniques used to draw their attention.

Emergent media literacy, as defined by Finger, Neumann and Neumann (2017) as emergent digital literacy, is “the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors of proficient digital literacy skills” (p. 474). Emergent media literacy is a developing concept as media literacy research concerning preschool-aged children is not common. For example, research in emergent media literacy would concern questions like: What are the experiences of 3- and 4-year-olds as they independently explore *ABC Mouse*, an educational software application? Can children ages 3 and under identify audio that is artificially produced via computer program from naturally produced audio?

Media is any form of communication that use techniques and style of a specific medium to communicate a message. For example, media can be news, movies, songs, speeches, literature, advertisements, and social media posts. The message is the information being communicated and the medium is the means by which it is communicated. For example, the ‘Happy Birthday’ song’s message is about congratulations and the medium is a song, with or without instrumental accompaniment.

Media literacy will be defined as the ability to create and deconstruct media messages. This skill includes understanding the aesthetic and technical choices a creator needs to make and made to create a message. For example, being media literate includes

an understanding that action films employ special effects like fake explosions and fake blood to create a scene. The scenes depicted are fiction and not real.

NAMLE, which stands for the National Association of Media Literacy Education, is a national organization committed to promoting, and educating others on media literacy and encouraging and creating the opportunity for educators and other individuals to participate in media literacy practices.

TEKS, which stands for Texas Education Knowledge and Skill Standards, are the education standards for the state of Texas. The TEKS span from grades K-12 and are aligned to the following content areas: ELAR, Science, Math, Social Studies, Fine Arts, and Health. These standards detail specific knowledge and skills students need to know concerning each subject.

Limitations

There were a few limitations that should be considered regarding this study. First, the study was not conducted within a traditional school and/or educational context. The duration of this study took place in a summer literacy enrichment program which subscribed to various differences in pedagogy and practice. Lesson plans were created with a traditional school environment in mind. This wasn't a disadvantage to the design of the lessons but affected the implementation of the lessons. Specifically, there are techniques and philosophies that structure CDF Freedom School which were not considered during class time. As such, student demographics and overall curricular and instructional approaches were modified completely – all of which could have drastically impacted and/or influenced the outcomes of this study. Secondly, this study was conducted using convenience sampling measures during the summer months. Students

have had disinterest and/or increased interest regarding the content and topics; this consideration also shaped the intended outcomes of the study. Finally, as a result of the parameters for recruiting and sustaining participants throughout the duration of the study, upper elementary students were utilized as participants. To this regard, the limited range in youth demographic should be noted as a possible limitation of the study.

Summary

This initial chapter provided context for the study by highlighting the growing trend and implementation of media literacy education through state standards and educational frameworks. In recognition that media is ever-changing and pervasive, there is a need to situate ways in which young learners are able to critically analyze messages around them – specifically through the practice and commercialization of animated film. This study seeks to examine the experiences of elementary youth when learning about media literacy. Using the media literacy framework as a theoretical lens (as a modern approach to constructivist teaching theory), this qualitative case study will expound on the processes of construction and deconstruction of media for this demographic. Before the methodology is presented, however, a review of conceptual and empirical literature will be provided in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 will explain further the historical context of media messaging, research concerning the effects of popular media, research concerning media literacy concerning school-aged children from early childhood to high school, and research concerning the purposes of media literacy skills, standards, and programs.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

Chapter 1 provided a synthesis of the problem, research significance, and purpose of the study. In addition to providing a theoretical lens to examine media literacy practices, the preceding section also provided concise definitions for commonly used terms throughout the study. In this chapter, conceptual and empirical findings provide greater context regarding the aims of the study: (1) Effects of Media Messaging, (2) Media Literacy as a Form of Activism and Student Agency, (3) The Capital and Cultural Influences of Pop Culture Films on Children, and (4) Educational Media Literacy Encounters for Youth.

Effects of Media Messaging

After World War II and during the Second Red Scare (1947-1957), the United States remained anxious regarding potential Communist influence through the medium of media via television and radio programming. Scholars like Newton Minow critiqued television programming of the time calling it a “wasteland” (Spring, 2018, p.423). This opinion inspired the formation of the Carnegie Commission of Educational Television in 1967. The Commission recommended that television could be used “as an informal means of education” and “prepare preschool children for formal education” (Spring, 2018, p. 424). Soon, producers and television stations began to buy into the Carnegie

recommendations. The Children's Workshop was born and from its first program aimed to act as an educational program for children, *Sesame Street*. According to Spring (2018):

During the first broadcast year, it was estimated that almost 50 percent of the potential preschool audience watched the program, including children in daycare and other prekindergarten programs serving children of the poor (p.428).

The program covered topics like the alphabet while also taking characters on adventures that modeled desirable and undesirable behaviors. The potential for television programming was completely transformed for the U.S. audience and this act proved that children could learn from television. And since, television has been useful because of its informal learning environment that also provides intentionally education-focused programming.

Historically and contemporarily, parents have censored their children based on their opinion of innocence. There are two main schools of thought on the nature of children: they're born innocent and subject to being corrupted, or they're born corrupted and prevented from becoming more corrupted (Marsh & Millard, 2000). These guiding notions have influenced the way in which parents allow their children to interact with media. For example, parents and teachers alike prefer to keep students away from images of violence and violent play for fear it would inspire violent behavior (Marsh & Millard, 2000). However, in a study done by Gunter and Harrison (1997), "children are well aware of the fictive nature of the violence they watch" (pg. 27).

Similarly, the element of drama is contextualized for child audiences. In Marsh and Millard's *Literacy and Popular Culture* (2000), the authors outlined the appeal *soap operas* have for children. Soap operas by definition are television or radio drama series that deal with the daily life of the same group of characters. One appeal of soap operas

that appeal to children is “good and evil are omnipresent and the differences between them apparent” (Marsh & Millard, 2000, p. 160).

However, with increased exposure to dramatic content, parents fear that media programming will dually influence children and further delineate their thinking from innocence. As such, in an effort to protect the innocence of children, censorship of media programming has become a normed standard which is presented in the form of TV ratings (“The TV Parental Guidelines”, n.d.). Ivanovic (2014) discusses the interaction of young children as early as preschool has with different media citing specifically created educational programming and software created for preschoolers. Concerning the political and social implications of participating in media society, the subjects and values portrayed in media can be used for particular ends. Whether a political campaign ad or a song about love, a medium can be used or misused.

Television networks have become strategic about the times of day in which family and adult programs are aired. Typically, family-friendly programming will air afterschool (usually around 3-5pm according to time zone), following news broadcasts, and finally, adult programming. Additional measures, such as parental control remotes and blocked content via cable networks, have also been put into place.

Media Literacy as a Form of Activism and Student Agency

Media literacy curriculum can be an agent by which students affect political and social change and participate in political and social discourse. Ivanovic (2014) states of media education: "students develop ability of articulating their problems, competence of understanding, explaining and changing communities for the better" (p. 442). Similarly,

McArthur (2016) describes media literacy as a means of activism against racist and stereotypical representations of Black girlhood by extending that the “critical thinking and interrogation skills”, learned via media literacy practices, is a means of creating counter-narratives, portrayals of “lived experiences” of black girlhood (p. 362).

McArthur (2016) considers both the history of activism by Black women and the impact of the Black Girl Collective four Black female scholars Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Marcelle Haddix, Detra Price-Dennis, and Sherell McArthur whose work “honors the multiple identities and literacies of Black adolescent females” (p. 369). Through solution-oriented scholarship programs like this and other media literacy programs, McArthur (2016) argues that students can participate in social activism and make meaningful change.

In addition, Kahne and Middaugh (2012) conducted a study on the participation of youth in politics using social media and technology. They discuss the emergence and activity within participatory politics, which is defined as “interactive, peer-based and not guided by traditional institutions like political parties and newspaper editors” (p. 52).

Kahne and Middaugh (2012) observed youth like Michelle Ryan Lauto, a student who created an online campaign to protest school budget cuts at her New Jersey school, in order to garner substantial and effective support for her political beliefs. Kahne and Middaugh (2012) emphasize the opportunity technology offers educators to capture and engage students via a medium they already find engaging. Specifically, they note educators can be a means of curbing concerns of divide and lack of voting within participatory politics. Overall, they suggest that media literacy skills and explicit teaching of technology as a means of political participation and social justice become a part of the curriculum.

The Capital and Cultural Influences of Pop Culture Films on Children

Children's popular culture includes the interweaving of popular media into the lives of children through not only television but with food, games, and other products (Marsh, 2006). Merchandise plays a large part in animated films' franchise ability to accrue revenue and shape culture. For example, the Disney Princess franchise made \$3 billion in licensed retail sales globally (Goudreau, 2011). Several other animated franchises made serious retail profits in 2011: *Pooh* made \$1.09 billion, *Cars* made \$1.05 billion, *Mickey & Friends* made \$750 million, *Toy Story* with \$685 million, *Spongebob Squarepants* with \$330 million, and *Ben 10* with \$295 million (Goudreau, 2011). These numbers are alongside animated sequels like *Cars 2* (2011), which earned 600 million in the box office, and *Winnie the Pooh* (2017), which earned 50 million.

This level of profit also comes with a significant cultural impact. The aforementioned licensed retail sales include "t-shirts, stationery, toys and electronics" (Goudreau, 2011). Cartoon characters have often been cited as a persuasive figure for children to consume junk food as seen in research done by Ogle, Graham, Lucas-Thompson, and Roberto (2017) and Kraak (2015). These characters also have the potential to form communities across time with youth and adults alike participating in fandoms and nostalgic recreations in remembrance of characters of their childhood (Geraghty, 2018). With the combination of the existing ability of stories to create community with the newer ability to communicate community more widespread, the cultural impact of animated films is magnified.

The views and values of fictional character, animated or not, can and do affect the behavior of youth today. Huang (2016) conducted a study that recorded the socialization of 5- and 6-year-old Chinese children as affected by *Finding Dory*. Students viewed the animated film and then had a lesson on helping others and being friends. The students were able to list specific examples of how they could be helpers and friends. Even considering the language barrier the children experienced, the experiences the students were exposed to inspired questions about friendship and proper treatment of others (Huang, 2016). Through the avenues of storytelling and merchandising, animated films can and do influence popular children's culture.

Educational Media Literacy Encounters for Youth

Aarsand and Melander (2016) conducted a study examining the everyday use of media literacy in the lives of children. By analyzing the activities of four 6- and 7-year-olds as they interacted with online calling and word processing, researchers observed the media literacy skills children utilized to participate in both activities. For the online calling activity, children participated in a Skype call with their mother. The researchers observed the children gained an understanding of how to participate in this activity from the posturing of both technology and body by the mother. She also made explicit comments in an effort to adjust their placement to be seen in the call. The children make said adjustments, like being on the other side of the room to in view of the camera on the computer. This study shows that media literacy skills can be and are gained in and outside of the classroom meaning parents and other caretakers can have a significant effect on media literacy in their children.

Similarly, Boske and McCormack (2011) conducted a qualitative study examining the experience of eleven high-school Latino/a students and their Latino teacher as they examined and analyzed the animated film *Happy Feet*. The students, in-class discussion, identified several strong themes and associations with power, identity, and the Latino experience that paralleled their own. Students made connections about the power divide between the Emperor and Rock Hopper penguin characters. They suggested the Emperor penguins represented “White people” and the Rock Hopper penguins (who spoke with a form of the Hispanic dialect) stereotyped Hispanic/Latino(a) people (Boske, 2011, p. 177). The students not only discussed the power dynamics within the film itself but how it paralleled real life, specifically their own experiences. Through this critical reflection, the students were able to uncover something in the film they otherwise might not have considered. This study shows the deep reflections students can have of animated films if prompted and the way media literacy curriculum facilitates such critical questioning.

In addition, Frolunde (2009) examined the experiences of a class of secondary students as they transferred story ideas with different modes of storytelling – specifically audio and visual. Students participated in a week-long workshop in which they transformed an idea into a storyboard. The researcher, while observing the experiences students had with multimodal learning processes, also evaluated the merit and effectiveness of storyboarding as a pedagogy. According to Frolunde (2009), "Storyboarding offers a forum or platform of transduction that supports the process of gathering, concretizing, reworking, discarding or keeping ideas" (p. 18). This study concluded that not only is storyboarding a useful skill for developing an animated film or

other stories, but it can help improve students' processing of technologies that students have such easy access to.

Another study conducted by Marsh (2006) incorporated a media literacy project that observed children using an editing software to create short animated films. Marsh (2006) observed how students interacted with a laptop computer animation program. The editing software for their animated film utilized a stop-motion animation style, "sequencing a series of still images until they give the appearance of movement" (Marsh, 2006, p. 494). Marsh (2006) notes the development of knowledge and skills: understandings of authorship, aesthetic design, developing the story, and decision making. In contrast, students struggled with "three-dimensional sequencing of actions in a chronological narrative," which is more telling of a typical three or four-year old's developmental ability than anything else (p. 498). In conclusion, the researcher recommended that early childhood professionals consider integrating new technologies to parallel the "highly technologized 21st century" (Marsh, 2006, p. 504).

The teaching of media literacy skills also helps to develop students' intellectual capacity. Researchers, Diergarten, et al. (2017) tested 150 five-year-olds to examine the effect of media literacy as another personal characteristic that affects knowledge acquisition from educational media, specifically hypermedia environments and educational film. Hypermedia are interfaces in interactive websites and software programs that include picture, video, graphics, and text. The children were given pre-tests for intelligence while parents were given a questionnaire about their Socio-Economic Status (SES) and their child's media consumption. After the pre-tests and questionnaire, children were exposed to two different forms of educational media in one

session and given a test on both. The students were shown an educational film about sugar beets in the first half of the session. After students were shown the film, they were interviewed. They were asked recognition questions and inference questions in a forced-choice format questionnaire. The inference questions asked students about implicit knowledge that “could be answered by drawing conclusions or from general knowledge” (Diergarten, 2017, p. 36).

Another developing trend among teachers is the creation of lessons and units based on popular films in order to teach media literacy. May (2007) wrote a unit plan, including lesson plans, graphic organizers, and worksheets to align with Australian Education Standards and based around the film *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. Teachers were prompted to “engage students in moral debates about good and evil, the fantasy genre in films, the hero’s journey in fiction, popular culture and a range of social, gender and cultural issues” (May, 2007, p. 72). The aim of this curricular unit was to “help [students] form their own opinions on morality through the exploration of moral choices” (p. 73). May (2007) includes a variety of opportunities for students to do just that: personal writing activities, debates, worksheets, group activities, and class discussion. To that extent, this resource helped to conceptualize this particular study by providing suggestions on content and delivery while centering on a popular film. The culmination of these conceptual and empirical findings highlight the benefits of fostering media literacy practices both at home and at school.

Summary

The literature discussed in this chapter is important in understanding the greater role and practice of media literacy curriculum and programs and the effect media has on society. The history of media messaging, mostly riddled with fear and anxiety of corruption, gives weight to the efforts media literacy seeks to fight against. Further, the ends to which media literacy can be extended was illustrated in this chapter – specifically activism and student agency. The skills a media literate person can exercise allows him or her with the ability to advocate for causes, campaigns, and themselves using media and mediums most effective for communicating their message, given its purpose and scope.

Chapter 2 also provided detailed youth experiences of media literacy activities, programs, and curriculum. Varying from ages 4 to 17, the encounters of children with media literacy help contextualize this study and its contribution to the greater literature. Finally, discussion concerning media literacy standards in schools was also included in an effort to give a fuller picture of active application. These themes inspire both the structure and application of this study. By considering not only the history but the current implementation of media literacy, appropriate media literacy standards, teaching, and assumptions were made when creating this project. Overall, the literature reviewed here gives the reader an efficient context to both the problem and the methods of investigation.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Design and Rationale

Chapter 1 illuminates the need within media literacy research and within general society for media literacy practices that both focus on Elementary students and popular media like animated films. Specifically, chapter 1 contrasts the concern parents have for their children's screen time and the lack of analysis or production standards within media literacy standards within the Common Core and Texas Education Knowledge and Skills Standards. Chapter 2 introduces relevant literature and research on topics such as media literacy curriculum and programs, fear of the media, and the success and history of animated films. This literature helps contextualize the problems within chapter 1 and details media literacy practices researched within relevant studies. These studies serve as inspiration and foundational knowledge for the study design.

Research Design and Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of upper elementary students with media literacy curriculum. The qualitative research design of this study utilizes a narrative case study methodological approach. Case study research is a form of interpretive research (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Narrative inquiry is a methodological approach concerned with the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the study's participants. The study is informed by Plokinghorne's (1995) definition of narrative inquiry, which "uses paradigm thinking to create

descriptions of themes that hold across stories or taxonomies of types of stories, and narrative analysis” (p. 31). The following research questions were posed to guide the work:

RQ1: What are the experiences of elementary youth when learning about media literacy?

RQ2: What are the processes regarding the construction and deconstruction of media for elementary students?

RQ3: In what ways have the media literacy lessons prepared students to critique things seen in the media?

RQ4: How has this study helped students to learn about influences media has on their societal perspectives?

Prior to data collection, a systematic literature review was conducted. This literature review was conducted during the months of January through August 2018. After viewing the literature, a proposal was sent to the Institutional Review Board for research consideration. The documents submitted and approval verification for the study are provided in Appendix B. After students were convenience sampled and recruited for possible participation, fifteen were selected and consent forms were given to the parents/guardians. Of the fifteen consent forms received, however, only six were determined to be the final participants of the study.

In terms of data collection, a preliminary lesson took place initially. This provided an opportunity to engage with students and increase familiarity with the topic and scope of the study.

The two primary instruments used for data collection were surveys and lesson plans. A pre- and post- survey was administered to students to assess their background knowledge and any growth in learning. This survey served to mark explicit changes in

learning and thus the effectiveness of lesson plans. A preliminary survey (see Appendix A – Preliminary Lesson) was administered to students to gauge their previous media literacy knowledge and background of the animated film, *Megamind*. Following the preliminary lesson, each week a lesson was presented to students.

Five lesson plans in the constructivist method were created using the CML's MediaLit Kit as a framework. The lessons served as plans for each of the study visits and were used to implement increased media literacy. It is important to note that lesson plans were written in the constructivist method. As implemented in this study, structured the gradual release of information and responsibility of learning. The lessons were designed to start with a question that students would explore through discussion. As the study continued, the original plans were changed to become more constructive due to student attention and interest. In addition, concurrently, the researcher took notes and made memos of student engagement and interactions. In addition, after the completion of the lesson, the researcher documented reflections on the experience.

For all five questions explored during the lessons, the students used the film *Megamind* as a catalyst and subject of analysis for this discussion. The discussion happened in several different ways: think-pair-share, a yes/no paddle game, and direct questioning. Once students began establishing their own answers to the question, they were lead in a construction activity. Students created several different products using their opinions and explicit information. The following table provides a brief account of the lesson plan, focus question, and associated activities:

Table 1.

Lesson Plan Study Schedule

Lesson	Focus Question	Activities
1	Who created this message?	Students engaged in discussion, an internet search activity, and a group poster project to answer this question about <i>Megamind</i> .
2	What techniques are used to draw my attention?	Students participated in an analytical discussion of scenes from <i>Megamind</i> and recorded short videos based on an assigned emotion.
3	How might people understand this message differently than me?	Students participated in a discussion and analysis of movie reviews written by various individuals with opposing opinions on <i>Megamind</i> . Students then wrote and recorded their reviews of the film.
4	Why do people create media messages?	Students participated in a discussion and game about representation in <i>Megamind</i> . We determined whether certain people and views were represented or omitted in the film. Students then created their own characters, specifically persons whose POVs were not represented in the film.
5	Why do people create media messages?	Students participated in discussion and a writing exercise. We then began a final video project which spanned one additional meeting.

For the final lesson, a concluding survey was also administered to compare initial responses and gauge whether students had increased their media literacy skills and knowledge (see Appendix A – Lesson Five). In addition, peer debriefing sessions took place with the advisor in an effort to organize and synthesize data. Analysis of the data was completed with critical thinking about the media literacy framework while using open-coding based on the research questions posed. An elaboration of findings and the study’s emergent themes will be presented in Chapter 4.

Organizational Profile

The CDF Freedom Schools at Baylor University program was the site in which this study was conducted. Freedom Schools is a literacy enrichment program that aims to prevent summer learning loss amongst youth who are at high academic risk. In partnership with Waco ISD and Prosper Waco, Baylor University hosts the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools® program for students seven weeks in the summer. This full-day program serves seventy Waco ISD elementary and middle school students each year completely free of charge for families and also provides breakfast, lunch, and free admission to weekly educational field trip experiences.

Site and Participant Demographics

The location of this study took place at a local middle school in Central Texas. Student participants of the Film Studies afternoon activity were of a relatively homogenous group: mostly Hispanic, aged 10-11 and local to the area. Of the six students who participated in the study four identified as male and two as female. Of the students, five were of Hispanic/Latinx ethnic origin, whereas one was Caucasian. Program data also revealed that 100% of participants were from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

Analysis of Megamind

Megamind is a CGI animated film directed by Tom Mcgrath and released in 2010. Produced by DreamWorks Animation, this animated feature tells the story of an alien supervillain, Megamind, and his nemesis and protector of Metro City, Metro Man. After the sudden and unexpected defeat of Metro Man, Megamind takes control of the city. He

seems to have everything he wants but without Metro Man, Megamind doesn't have a purpose. He's started a secret project that will solve all his problems: to create a superhero. But, at the hands of investigative news reporter and frequent kidnap victim of Megamind, Roxanne Richie, Megamind's secret project won't remain secret for long.

There are three elements of this film that make it ideal for this study and which will be the focus of student discussion in lessons: villain-protagonist trope, emotional backstory, and redemption. Each of these elements is opportunities for students to think critically about the values and points of view the film and its characters' offerings.

Megamind puts the villain front and center as the main protagonist and narrator. The events of the film are portrayed through the perspective of Megamind. It's an uncommon choice in animated films to allow a villain to have control of a story. The movie requires their audience to operate under a unique framework because the narrator offers a very counter-cultural perspective of good and evil.

However, a parent of a young child might feel concern for their child to view a scene like this because it sends a mixed message about good and evil. There are several scenes throughout the film like this that present a counter-cultural belief of good and evil often laced with humor and irony, an attempt to balance out the dissonance. This element of the film provides opportunities for students to analyze presentations of good and evil, specifically why the choices in this movie were made, how it affects them, and who benefits from them. By analyzing these choices, students can become self-aware of the way that media, even funny animated films, can present difficult and controversial themes.

In addition, analyzing Megamind's upbringing and school experience will be a meaningful opportunity for students to think about justifications for evil and empathy. The focus of the conversation on this topic will concern whether Megamind is responsible for being a villain, why the writers chose to give him a sad backstory and what message is trying to be communicated. The final element, redemption, is what makes this film worth studying at all. Once Megamind 'beats' his life-long enemy, Metro Man, he realizes villainy doesn't fill the void inside. Through his relationship with Roxanne and hero training with Hal, Megamind starts to let go of the villain identity he's lived by for all his life. This element gives students the opportunity to consider consequences for actions, obligations/duty to protect others and justice, and what all these things have to do with the larger message being communicated.

Summary

In this chapter, the research design and method were explained in order to provide an understanding of how the proposed research questions will be answered. Contextualization of the organization, site location, and participant demographics was also provided. Whereas preceding chapters provided the study's research potential and significance, and how this study is uniquely situated in the literature, Chapter 3 focused on methods and implementation approaches. The next chapter will provide a presentation of the findings in alignment with instruments used and overall themes in connection to the narrative inquiry method, research questions, theoretical framework, and empirical literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

Presentation of Findings

This chapter will provide highlights from the study. Specifically, major findings from both survey data and lesson plans will be explored. Next, major themes in connection to the proposed research questions will be examined through a reiteration of topics presented from the review of literature. Next, independent reflections provide the reader with an increased narrative of the researcher's experiences in teaching the lessons. Following, a section entitled *Caveats* gives a possible explanation regarding procedural and instructional modifications made in the study.

Findings from Survey Data

The pre-survey and post-survey presented several themes. Students were able to communicate opinions about films and understand ideas associated with film viewing. Overall, they were not interested in deconstructive activities. With regards to the implementation of the pre-survey, all the students, except one, had viewed the film before the study. Some students shared that they had seen the film when they were significantly younger – some as young as five. This is important to note that even within a homogenous group of student participants such as these, their parents/guardians/caregivers each independently decided that this film was an appropriate media act. While the purpose to which they watched the film, likely varied, this lends

some support to the idea that popular children's animated films are a part of common children's culture.

Based on information gathered in the post-survey, students were most impacted by construction activities. They felt the moments they were learning were times when we created videos with cameras, whether they were filming or acting. The tangible product and their personal interests may have created this consensus but perhaps students at this age are more apt, both developmentally and mentally, to participate in constructive media literacy activities.

As discussed in Marsh and Millard (2000), children gravitate to the soap opera drama of strict good and bad themes in books, television, film, and video games. As discussed in Diergarten et al. (2017), this is likely due to the inability of children 10-years-old and under to understand abstract ideas. The student opinions recorded in the pre-survey aligned with these ideas. With regard as to why students liked *Megamind*, students gave answers like "I liked the heroes" and "they saved the day." With regards to why students disliked *Megamind*, one student responded that he disliked the villain 'Titan,' who in the second part of the film attempts to destroy and become the dictator of Metro City. The expressed dislike with the film, however, did not reveal particular connection or relevance to findings in literature; it simply provides a narrative voice to the student participants in the study.

Findings from Lesson Plans

The first lesson was shaped by the question: *Who created this message?* The first lesson of the study sequence aimed to help students understand who created the message

presented in films. All students were present and completed the activity. Most of the work involved two-person and partner groups where students worked collaboratively to find information about the creators of *Megamind* online and create poster projects about a job in film. All students seemed to master the skills and concepts associated with this lesson by correctly answering questions and extending thinking by asking additional questions. While there were two students who seemed to get a bit off-task, most of the group's behaviors reflected enthusiasm, energy, and engagement while learning. In fact, a few students demonstrated leadership skills by delegating tasks to reach their goals, taking on difficult parts of the assignment, and volunteering to present. Also, worth mentioning, students seemed to enjoy the integration and use of technology throughout the lesson.

The second lesson was shaped by the question: *What techniques are used to draw my attention?* This lesson aimed to inform students about the methods used by creators in film and television to create specific messages. The lesson focused on the use of music, cinematography, and an actor's expressions to create a message. To simulate the decision-making process writers, directors, cinematographers, and actors participate in, the students, three per group, created short 30-second scenes with a camcorder. The two groups were each given the same four-line script and drew at random an emotion. The students worked collaboratively to make their videos. The students were very engaged in the activity. They kept on-task and seemed to be having a lot of fun together. One student was hesitant to participate because he didn't want to be the only guy in the group. He was assuaged when he was able to secure the role of cameraman for their group. The students took several takes of the script, changing angles, actors, and movements. They

started to take notice of the way the difference setting, and the camera angle created for their video. One group changed from a single frame single location shot to a moving dynamic shot by the end of the workshop period. When it came time to present their scene with the class, the groups were eager, engaged but a little embarrassed. The students loved the opportunity to act and interact with technology.

Lesson three was structured around the question: *How might other people understand this message differently than me?* The lesson aimed to stimulate student thinking about varying perspective to the same media. By reading movie reviews of *Megamind* by very different people with very different opinions, students were able to analyze and compare the reviewers' perspectives, as well as their own. The students worked independently to write their own movie review and then worked with a classmate to film their movie review. The students had varied levels of engagement during the discussion portion of the lesson. The students interjected their thoughts and opinions throughout and answered questions well. Some students were hesitant to write their movie review but were comfortable verbalizing it. Most of the students were more interested in recording their movie review instead of writing it. Their engagement overall increased when it was time to use the camcorders. Some students showed leadership skills by taking the lead in deciding who would record and be recorded first as well as ensuring the quality of the video.

Lesson four was centered around the question: *What perspectives, values, and POV are represented and omitted in this message?* The goal of this lesson was to activate student thinking about representation in film and the intentionality of the message presented. Students analyzed clips from *Megamind* by taking note of what kinds

of people were seen most and least frequently. They were also tasked to create a character that was not represented in the film by drawing their person and write 2-3 sentences about them. The students had varied levels of engagement. The conversation was interesting to them, but sitting and talking was not. Most shared that they liked creating a character but some were obstinate about writing sentences. In an effort to recapture their attention, students were asked to make a video introducing their character. This helped the students who were unengaged to reconnect to the lesson.

Lesson five was created around the question: *Why do people create messages?* The goal of this lesson was to analyze the purpose for which films like *Megamind* are created. Students participated in a whole group discussion and writing activity. The students were very engaged in this discussion. They offered a lot and a variety of different answers. In this session, students began working on their movie. Using the characters created in lesson four, the researcher created the script for students. They were extremely excited about this project. They were enthralled by the opportunity to wear costumes, play a character, and for each clip to be put together to create a movie. The students showed leadership skills by participating in their acting and production roles for the film. The students showed increased competency for filming by initiating retakes, being precise about their angles, and making sure everything that was needed in the scene was visible. The students acted, shot footage, and set up sets for about two hours with a fifteen-minute snack break.

Major Themes of the Study

What are the experiences of elementary youth when learning about media literacy?

The six students observed in this study had similar experiences. They were not explicitly told that the questions framing the study were elements of media literacy. They were not able to retell exactly what questions structured the lessons. Throughout the study, they all recounted the ability to make videos as a learning gain. Students were more engaged with constructive activities than deconstructive activities. The experiences of the students observed closely resemble the experiences of students in Frolunde's (2009) study where there was a focus on learning and building storyboarding skills. In contrast, this study was focused on the use of media literacy skills. All the same, students in both groups had a more significant experience interacting with the active construction skills rather than the deconstructive or analysis skills. Their use of analysis was a less notable experience for the students. Though the students in the Danish study (18-year-olds) were notably different in age and geographic locale, their experiences were incredibly similar.

What are the processes regarding the construction and deconstruction of media for elementary students?

The engagement was higher when students were creating media messages (construction) instead of analyzing media messages (deconstruction). Students had higher participation when completing a task in a pair or group. The deconstructive and constructive activities that framed these lessons were created mirror other peer-reviewed

media literacy research. Similar to Boske and McCormack's (2011) study concerning the animated film *Happy Feet*, students were able to make critical reflections about themes in the animated film *Megamind*. The students in this study were able to view *Megamind* and have a critical viewing experience. In this study, this opportunity is concentrated in Lesson Four, surrounding the question: *What perspectives, values, and POV are represented and omitted in this message?* Parallel to Frolunde's (2009) research, the participation of students in an active creative process in effort to cultivate media literacy skills reaps wide rewards, as discussed in this chapter.

To reiterate, students were overall unfamiliar with deconstructing media. Using their own created media and other more familiar media helped foster discussion. Students had some knowledge about constructing media, largely from their impressions and knowledge of YouTube and using smartphones. They all knew about or what the following was: video, video camera, the basic abilities of a camera (sound and audio recording), which end to point the camera in effort to use it effectively, batteries, the purpose of batteries, play button, stop button, recording button, costume, actors, role of an actor, movie, director, role of a director, and commonly accepted behavior during movie viewing. Student knowledge of elements of creating videos before instruction is likely the effects of popular culture and animated film. The effects of popular culture such as discussed in Marsh (2006) are clear. Students often cited YouTube as the way they knew how to make videos. Whenever a browser or YouTube was used for activities, students often started to suggest their favorite YouTube channels or type of videos to watch.

In what ways have the media literacy lessons prepared students to critique things seen in the media?

Students were asked explicitly to analyze a film during this study. The discussion about the film and other media exposed students to the activity of critiquing and analyzing film and video media. Students now had the opportunity to perform this activity independently whereas previously, when they had no experience, they could not participate in this activity independently. Students also had a frame a reference to base their critiques. The entire experience lends itself to creating a meaningful experience for students to develop new knowledge and a new reference point for analyzing media. The benefits of the experiences students in this study had with analyzing and creating media messages is similar to what researchers Kahne and Middaugh described in their 2012 study. Students have a greater sense of agency (Kahne, 2012). They are now able to participate in analysis and creation outside of the structure of the classroom. Further, this goes alongside McArthur's (2016) study done on the potential of media literacy programs as a means of activism, specifically for minority groups. This study described the ability of Black girls to combat negative stereotypes in media by developing their own counternarratives. Similarly, given the newly practiced and acquired skills, students who participated in this study will be able to be greater advocate for themselves, others, and whatever causes as they have a new way to view and communicate information.

How has this study helped students to learn about influences media has on their societal perspectives?

This study has helped students learn about the influences that media has on their societal perspectives by explicitly challenging and informing the students observed on the subject. Students, per the constructivist teaching method, were asked to reflect on their own perspectives and opinions in an effort to analyze *Megamind*. By creating an environment for students to explore and analyze media, students were able to further explore and build off this experience. The experiences students had during this study in the realization of how it influenced societal perspectives closely resembles the experiences of students of Boske and McCormack's (2011) study on the experiences of Latinx students and media literacy curriculum. Highschool Latinx students were tasked with analyzing different societal perspectives within the animated film *Happy Feet*. Similarly, 10- and 11-year-old Hispanic students of this student were asked to analyze the societal perspectives amongst other things within the film *Megamind*. For Boske and McCormack (2011) and their focus on critical media literacy, specifically experiences of minority populations and LGBT+ communities, detailed and gave light to the experience students had being affected by societal perspectives in media. As such, students are beginning to understand the effect of media on societal perspectives. Most notably, their commentary on the inclusion of Hispanic characters in *Megamind*, or rather the lack thereof, brought forth some of the modern and personal concerns many of them had at the time, specifically concerning the Trump Administration. With this in mind, the research of Kubey (2004) comes into the conversation. As he argues, students wanting to participate and create change within the political sphere must be given maximized

instruction on means to communicate (Kubey, 2004). The students who participated in this study, now with the practice of analyzing perspectives in media, will be able to participate in conversations concerning questions of representation and correctness that are riddled within the U.S. political system more than their peers who have not practiced or know of such skills.

Independent Reflections

Reflecting upon the data, three main themes were present throughout: (1) students are more often and more interested in constructive activities, (2) students are not naturally attuned to analyzing film, and (3) students input their interests and previous viewing experience into their creative works. These themes affected the study to such a point that the design of the three lesson plans was completely different than how they were originally developed.

I wrote the lesson plans and conceived this research project with deconstructive media literacy practices in mind. My students had something else in mind. Because this is an education research study with the goal of the students acquiring media literacy skills, my explicit focus on deconstructive activities started to shift to constructive activities more and more. My students were so engaged when I pulled out the cameras and let them film! The shooting assignments I gave them were very simple, but they really lit up at each one. They didn't always give their full effort with the assignments at hand, but their interaction with the technology was very curious. A lot of them are big fans of YouTube, with specific watching habits. This shaped their perspective of how and the extent to which one makes movies. One student shared that he already knew how

to load videos to YouTube and all. In comparison to our discussion and writing activities, the students were much more willing to participate when we were making something.

While technology is meant to be engaging, I don't think it was solely technology's innate entertainment value that drove their interest. They had a stronger background in what videos are than they had on how they are made, especially at the deeply analytical level we were discussing filmmaking. I think this greatly attributed to their greater interest in constructive activities. Alongside that, the students didn't show much experience with whole-class discussion and film analysis. I anticipated analyzing a movie would be a new experience but the questions we were exploring I was also teaching. I was teaching them how to answer these questions, but they were overall very reluctant to participate. This leads me to believe that perhaps they haven't done a lot of analysis in their elementary English classes. Whether or not that is true, it gives weight to the idea that students need more prolonged and explicit instruction on how to deconstruct media messages. One conversation or one lesson isn't enough. They don't fall into deconstructive analysis naturally. The analytical eye needs to be trained.

Moving on to how they created, the students were consistently inputting small references to their interests and previous viewing experiences in their creative works. For example, one student named his character for the final project 'Gotti' after a song of the same name. When we brainstormed, students proposed ideas of TV shows and movies they had already seen to replicate. Their understanding of what should be in a video was colored by what they had seen in videos. For example, when one student found a beret in the props, he decided to change the direction of his character to a painter. His viewing of

a 'French painter' trope transformed his character. Their prerogative when creating wasn't to create something unique or original but something they thought would fit. This could be because they haven't had conversations about plagiarism or copyright yet. Their culture explicitly affected the outcome of their written and video creations.

Caveats

Student behavior negatively affected the implementation of the lessons in this study. I spent a lot of instruction time redirecting attention, rallying students to participate, and gain overall control of the class. Several times, students would simply walk about of class or play around. I curbed this behavior by modifying lesson plans to be more engaging for students, speaking with students one-on-one and with the program director about undesired behavior, and using more effectual behavior management techniques like incentivizing and setting standards. The amount of time I spent correcting behavior disrupted the flow of discussion and construction activities. Attention and deep reflection on the topic at hand was difficult to cultivate when I also needed to curb undesired behaviors.

Student absences affected the execution of these lessons given the limited meetings and structure of the lessons. I designed the lessons with a certain number of students in mind but that was easy enough to adjust. The difficulty with student absences came with the way the lessons built on each other. Each lesson focused on a question and set up the question for the next lesson. Missing a lesson meant missing an essential question altogether.

It is also important to note that students had limited interaction with film and analyzing film. This limited the deep reflection and analysis intended during the discussion portions of class. The students needed more explicit instruction on how to analyze film than originally planned. This affected the greater conclusions the students were able to come to during discussion. Film Club met twice a week for about an hour. Ideally, students would attend Film Club more frequently for a shorter amount of time. This improved student attention, gave more space for construction activities, and allow more time for students to process information. While the duration and frequency of meetings was not a hindrance to the products created in Film Club, certain behavior issues may have been alleviated if the class was more spread out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Recommendations and Implementation

This study offered a set of problems children confront when interacting with media including: potentially unrealized impressions of people, places, or things, misuse of moral messaging, and influence of behavior. Following, the benefits to media literacy literature this study will contribute given the infrequency of media literacy studies examining upper-elementary experiences with analyzing animated films. The theoretical framework as outlined by Potter's (2004) definition of media literacy and the Center for Media Literacy's (2012) Media LitKit was introduced followed by definitions of several key terms for this project.

Chapter 2 reviewed the literature concerning the variety of topics that influenced this project including: the influence of pop culture films on children, media messaging and values, and media literacy in schools. Discussing the influence of pop culture brought into question the capitalist systems that benefit from the popularity of children's film and merchandising. Within the topic of media messaging and values, there is a history of educational programming being used as a means to model and teach desirable social behaviors and values. Not only did children's programming start with this in mind, but it is now an expected characteristic of children's programming.

Chapter 3 covered elements of research design and rationale specifically: instrumentation, study schedule, research questions, and an analysis of *Megamind*. In Chapter 4, major themes, results, and caveats of the lessons and student behavior are

described and analyzed. It was found that students were significantly more engaged in constructive rather than deconstructive media literacy activities concerning the animated film *Megamind*. All students were also inexperienced in analyzing film with very few of them offering explicitly reflective comments throughout.

Recommendations

Interacting with these students has revealed a lot about what children think of technology and how they interact with creating videos. From here, recommendations for teachers, parents, and media literacy professionals.

Teachers are tasked with ensuring student learning. Media literacy curriculum is a great way to curate new skills and spark creativity. Students have the opportunity to explore storytelling, multimodal literacy skills, editing, aesthetics, rhetoric, and strategic communication. When it comes to applying media literacy in regards to film, incorporating video recording could be useful in any subject. For example, students could record reflections, film student taught lessons about a concept, or create messages for parents about learning. Using video in the classroom can be the focus of an activity or an extension of any subject. Algebra practice can become more interactive and engaging through videos of student taught lessons. A history lesson can come alive through several small groups acting out scenes described in primary texts. Allowing students to attempt to make videos in elementary school gives them an opportunity to become familiar with the technology and develop a more intimate understanding of what it takes for a video to be created. Having experience creating gives you greater ability to analyze because of the firsthand experience with the decisions creators must make to

create a product. The pedagogical implications of video use in the classroom are meaningful and tangible.

Alongside the great fun students had, this study has revealed the great inexperience the students had with analyzing film. When asked to think deeply about the choices creators made in regards to characters and plot of *Megamind*, often the students chose to not answer or admitted ignorance. To alleviate this, elementary English classes should begin to ask their students higher-order thinking skills that encourage students to question the reasons why the content was created the way it was created. By asking these types of deconstructive questions during pre-existing teaching time, teachers can spark more critical thinking skills in their students as media literacy is not limited to screen media. Students should be asked questions of content and creation. These deep deconstructive conversations, if happening in the classroom, paves the way for students to think to and actually ask insightful questions of their media viewing.

Most if not all movie and television occurs outside of school making parents and other caretakers the primary adults interacting with children and their viewing. Parents can make screen viewing an interactive and reflective time by asking students questions about the shows and movies children watch. After watching a TV or movie together, parents can ask simple questions to help their child become critical viewers. For example, parents can ask questions like: How do you think this TV show/movie was made? Why do you think this TV show/movie was made? What kind of people do you see in this TV show/movie? What would you do if you were a specific character or a new character on this TV show/movie? The answer the child provides is not as important as

the fact that the child was asked and has an opportunity to think about the question.

Questioning after screen time can activate more critical viewing.

Another way parents can encourage media literacy amongst their children is to create opportunities for students to create using video. This could be done by letting students use a smartphone or video camera to record a scene with their toys, do a dance to a favorite song, or send messages to family members. By interacting in constructive activities, students are entering the same decision-making process that working media professionals operate in daily. Questions about how and why a director, writer, or cinematographer won't be as foreign or abstract because they will have filled all these roles themselves. Pursuing creative activity like this outside of school can be beneficial as the school day is already full with curriculum expectations that may not include or afford creative outlets such as this.

To media literacy experts, I recommend the continued study of the benefits, effects, and experiences of students interacting with media literacy curriculum and activities. The study of media literacy is becoming more important as access to media becomes more readily available to students of all socioeconomic backgrounds and at younger ages. It is important that as research in media literacy is conducted, especially in reference to elementary and middle school-aged children, the mediums interacted with are relevant and important to students. The results of media literacy research with elementary students are only as revealing or meaningful as the medium's pre-existing influence on the students. There are few mediums that have no influence on youth but the potential of developing critical viewing and analyzing skills pertinent to media literacy are only possible through meaningful and authentic media.

Implications for Future Research

The implications this study has for future research are deep. First, the structure of the study would be different concerning the school setting, time span, and the number of lesson plans. The traditional school setting would be a more effective environment to explore and observe the effects of media literacy curriculum as that would be a more probably setting for such curriculum and standards to be applied. The traditional school setting would also be more consequential when reviewing observed data as it would be a greater predictor for the effectiveness of media literacy curriculum and standards if implemented nationwide. The time span of the study would ideally last either a five-month semester, or an entire 10-month school year. This would be a greater predictor for the effects of media literacy curriculum and standards being implemented nationwide as the curriculum would need to be able to garner material and attention for that length of time if integrated. The lesson plans in accordance would be more frequent. With these changes, the depth and scope of which media literacy would also be greater explored.

Secondly, more students would allow data trends and conclusions to be better strengthened through common experiences. Anomalies could be better identified if present and a greater variety of experiences could be documented. Students could also potentially participate in larger and longer-term projects as well as work with a greater variety of students. These experiences would deepen and extend student opportunities for learning and mastery of skills.

Finally, if this study were to be done again, the film choice would be different. While animated film has a significant impact on children's culture, as discussed in Chapter 2, the film chosen, *Megamind*, was not a significant example of an animated

feature with a popular franchise or wide audience range. An animated film with several sequels, an overall older audience, or greater appeal for a variety of students would likely inspire greater ease for students analyzing the film. If the time frame were also expanded, students could potentially analyze several animated films – whether that be a franchise or comparing different types of animated film. This extension would allow students to have more practice analyzing film and more opportunities to master skills.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Lesson Plans

Preliminary Lesson: Introduction to Study and Movie Viewing

Texas Education Knowledge and Skills Standards

ELAR 5(b) Reading/Media Literacy. Students use comprehension skills to analyze how words, images, graphics, and sounds work together in various forms to impact meaning.

Prerequisite Knowledge & Skills

Students need to be able to assent to the study verbally and be able to visually view the film.

Materials/Supplies/Technology

- *Megamind* DVD
- Description of study
- Television/PowerPoint display

Procedure

- Introduce myself as the teacher, the purpose of the club as a whole, and the purpose of this class period: “We’re going to be watching two movies together. The first one is *Megamind*, which we’ll be watching all the way through. After the movie, I will a quick interview with each of you about the movie and some things we’ll be talking about during our time together.”
- Set behavior expectations for the class with sticky note game.
- Have students introduce themselves with ice breaker.
- Once everyone is settled, the movie will be played throughout with the lighting dimmed for best viewing.
- After the movie, the students will be interviewed using the pre-survey questions in a large focus group.
 - Have you ever seen the movie *Megamind* before tonight?
 - What did you think of the movie?
 - What did you like about the movie?
 - What did you dislike about the movie?

Lesson 1: Who created this message?

Common Core Standards

RL/RI.X.3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

RL/RI.X.6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Lesson Objectives

Students will answer the question “*Who created this message?*” through research activities and whole-class discussion.

Materials/Supplies/Technology

Computer/iPad

Paired Research Question Sheets

Pencils/pens

Journals

glue

Procedure

- Introduce students to question of the day: “Who created this message?”
- Students are partnered with 1 to 2 additional students to answer a total of 12 questions. Each student will receive a question sheet with 6 individual question.
- Students will use a computer or other device with a search engine to complete the activity.
 - Why would this be important to ask?
 - Do you know any other directors? writers? animation studios?
 - What control do these people have over the story?
- Students get into equal sized small groups and make a poster for either the director, writer, or animation studio of *Megamind*. Each group will get a different topic.
- Poster needs to have (1) a picture representing each, (2) text describing their job/purpose, and (3) other movies the person/studio has done.
- Each student will write a one sentence description on the influence this person has on the film to be put on the back of the poster.
- After students reflect on the lesson in their journal. Write on one of the stems.
 - I learned about
 - I want to know more about ...
 - I thought _____ was interesting
 - I already knew about
 - Students glue their question sheet into their journal.
 - Students write questions they have for tomorrow.

Lesson 2: What techniques are used to draw my attention?

Common Core Standards

W.X.6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

SL.X.6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Lesson Objectives

Students will answer the question, “*What techniques are used to attract my attention?*” by participating in a video-making activity and small group discussion.

Materials

Videos:

Back story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZM8fPOlwUbo>

Rescue scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehc2x4BleQI>

Kidnapped Roxanne: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UrglwLNQh8>

Megamind crashes the party:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNJTWGx4yQA>

MetroMan at the ceremony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTswFDgOqso>

Camcorders

Scripts

Procedures

- Introduce the question of the day: “What techniques are used to draw my attention?”
- Assign students into equal sized groups. Students each get an animated clip from *Megamind* to analyze. Ask the following:
 - What do you notice about the animation?
 - What do you notice about the music?
 - What do you notice about the emphasis?
 - What do you notice about the camera angles?
- Students share their conclusions to their peers. Create an anchor chart covering different defining elements of film as a medium:
 - Animation: funny, message, emphasis
 - Film: emphasis, direct eye
 - Music: Mood, Message
- Place students into small groups. Students will make a 30-sec video. Students will draw an emotion from a hat and given a script. Students will have 30-40 minutes to complete this task. Once students finish recording, students will select one take to present to the rest of the class.
- Play final takes from all groups. Introduce the groups by roles: “Presenting (film title) by camera man (student name), and actors (student name)”.
- To conclude: Ask questions whole group: “What did you learn today? What was your favorite part of today’s lesson?”

Lesson 3: How might other people understand this message differently?

Common Core Standards

SL.X.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.X.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Lesson Objectives

Students will answer the question, "*How might people understand this message differently than me?*" by participating in group activities and small group discussions.

Materials/Supplies/Technology

Movie reviews (4)

Movie review template

Review sheet for movie reviews

Journals

White board or poster

Markers

Camcorders

Procedure

- Start lesson reading my review of *Megamind*. Frame the question of the day: "Today we will be answering the question, "How might different people understand this message differently than me?"
- Facilitate short discussion about the review: "Was there anything in my review that you agreed with? Anything you disagreed with?"
- Explain using an anchor chart that people can view of message differently because of their (1) beliefs, (2) experiences, and (3) expectations.
- Ex. A parent believes and expects a children's film won't have cuss words. It's been their experience that other parents agree and that movies follow this standard. If a children's film didn't, they would be upset.
- Read a movie review that speaks of the film positively and one that speaks negatively.
- Facilitate discussion about each movie review: "Who did you guys think wrote this (negative) one? Who did you think wrote the positive one? Why?"
- Analyze specific example from movie review 1 (negative): The writer says, "Being bad because that's what you're good at is accepted." Ask, "Do you think that's true? Why?" Get 2-3 class responses.
- Analyze specific example from movie review 2 (positive): The writer says, "The movies has positive messages about what makes people 'good' or 'evil'. What are some examples of good and evil in this film?"
- Review 2 states, as a reason the film is good, that the film shows that "in the world, there will be good to stop it."
- Ask: "Do you think that's true? Why?" Get 2-3 class responses.
- Ask: "Is one of the writers right and the other wrong?"

- Students will write their own movie review using the movie review template: “We’re going to write down some of our thoughts about the movie: (1) Did you like the movie? Why? (2) What was the best part of the movie? (3) What was the worst part of the movie?” Students will have 10-20 minutes to complete the movie review template.
- Students will then pair up and film their partner’s film review and vice versa.
- View each student’s film review and mark the similarities and differences between them.
- To conclude: “Write your answer to today's question: How might different people understand this message differently than me?”

Lesson 4: What lifestyles, values, and POVs are represented or omitted in this message?

Common Core Standards

SL.X.2 Summarize a written text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

SL.X.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Lesson Objectives

Students will answer the question: What lifestyles, values, and POVs are represented or omitted in this message? By participating in class activities and discussions and creating a new character who is not represented in the film.

Materials/Supplies/Technology

Paper

Pictures of characters: MM, MtM, Roxanne Richie, Hal, Minion, Mayor

Journals

Procedure

- Introduce lesson topic: "Today, we will be exploring the question: What lifestyles, values, and POVs are represented or omitted in this message?"
- Facilitate conversation about representation. Ask students' specific opinions about a thing, could be any item a student would have an opinion about. Use something that a student suggests. Go to each student – what do you think of (random thing)? Video tape their response. "Since I filmed all of you, all of your point of views are represented. What would happen if I didn't film (one of the students)? (Student)'s POV would be omitted."
- Begin analysis activity: Each student will have a YES and NO paddle. After each clip, pick up a picture or sign that has a category and students will raise the YES or NO paddle to say whether the character or type of person is represented in the clip.
- Facilitate post-activity discussion: "Did any of the clips surprise you? Were you expecting more types of people to be represented in the clips?" Get 2-3 student responses.
- Facilitate construction activity: We're going to add another character to *Megamind* that isn't represented in the film. Draw a new character for the film, a person whose lifestyle, values, or POV isn't in the movie. Write a short scene or description of how they would fit into the movie.
- The requirements for this assignment are that (1) there is a drawing of the character (2) the character represents or holds a lifestyle, value, or POV that isn't in MM, and (3) there is a short scene or description of how they fit into the movie.
- Students will then film each other explaining who their character is and how they are a person who is represented. Once all students finish their clip, view each student's clip whole group.

- To conclude: Answer the following questions whole group: “What perspectives would you like to see in a movie? What kind of people do you want to see in a tv show or movie? Do you see a lot of people like yourself in movies and tv?”

Lesson 5: Why is this message being sent?

Common Core Standards

W.X.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

W.X.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

SL.X.5 Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

Lesson Objectives

Students will answer the question Why is this message being sent? By participating in class discussion and activities.

Materials/Supplies/Technology

Anchor chart

Markers/pencils

Prop box: various different items of clothing, random objects, etc.

Paper

Musical instruments

Camcorder

Procedure

- Introduce topic for the day: “Today we’re going to be answering the question: Why is this message being sent? We watched *Megamind* a few weeks ago. We talked about a lot of different things about it. The question we’re asking today is why.”
- Gather students on the ground. Create anchor chart together. “Turn to a partner and tell them why you think *Megamind* was created.” Get 2-3 responses.
- “Everyone gets to write as many reasons as they’d like on the anchor chart. We’ll circle the ones that are relevant.”
 - Entertainment, money, art, fun, creativity, learning
- Introduce final construction activity: “We’re going to making a movie. Why are we making a movie? We’re going to start working on our final project. We’re adding a scene / supplementary content to *Megamind*.”
- “We’re going to (1) create new characters, whose POVs aren’t represented in the film. We need (2) costumes. We need to video to be (3) at least 3 minutes long. The (4) scene can’t change anything that happened in *Megamind*.”
- Determine characters, setting, and plot. Beginning filming during this class period and take as many other meetings to complete the project.
- At the conclusion of filming, administer post-survey:
 - What was the biggest thing you learned from Film Studies Class?
 - Did you learn anything you didn’t know?

APPENDIX B

Institutional Board Review Notice Of Exemption



BAYLOR
UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD—PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH

NOTICE OF EXEMPTION FROM IRB REVIEW

Principal Investigator: Olivia Moses
Study Title: Double-Sided: Teaching Elementary Students Media Literacy Skills
Using Animated Films
Sponsor:
IRB Reference #: 1241830
Date of Determination: 05/14/2018
Exemption Category: 45 CFR 46.101(b)(1)

The above referenced human subjects research project has been determined to be EXEMPT from review by the Baylor University Institutional Review Board (IRB) according to federal regulation 45 CFR 46.101(b):

- (1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

The following documents were reviewed:

- IRB Application, submitted on 05/10/2018
- Protocol, dated 05/08/2018
- Parental Permission Form, dated 05/08/2018

This exemption is limited to the activities described in the submitted materials. If the research is modified, you must contact this office to determine whether your research is still eligible for exemption prior to implementing the modifications.

If you have any questions, please contact Deborah Holland at (254) 710-1438 or Deborah_L_Holland@baylor.edu.

Sincerely,

Deborah L. Holland, JD, MPH
Assistant Vice Provost of Research
Director of Compliance

OFFICE OF THE VICE PROVOST FOR RESEARCH

One Bear Place #97310 • Waco, TX 76798-7310 • (254) 710-3708 • FAX (254) 710-7309 • <http://www.baylor.edu/research/irb/>

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