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Professional Resource: *Media Literacy is Elementary: Teaching Youth to Critically Read and Create Media* (2009)

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Media Literacy is Elementary: Teaching Youth to Critically Read and Create Media. By Jeff Share. New York: Peter Lang, 2009. 167 pp. In J. L. Kincheloe and G. Cannella (Eds.) Rethinking Childhood series, Vol 41. $32.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4331-0392-6.

Jeff Share's background as an award-winning photojournalist, combined with his work at the Center for Media Literacy, doctoral work with Douglas Kellner at UCLA, and personal commitment to social justice has inspired this book examining critical media literacy in elementary school settings.

In *Media Literacy is Elementary: Teaching Youth to Critically Read and Create Media*, Share argues that critical media literacy can—and should—be taught as early as possible. He provides a theoretical foundation for critical media literacy, highlights the successes and challenges of elementary teachers in implementing media literacy into an inner-city elementary school, and compares the work of two kindergarten teachers to illustrate critical media literacy with young students. Share uses this exploration to lay out the work needed for schools to infuse critical media literacy practice across the curriculum in the United States.

The strengths of this book lie in three areas. First, in chapters 1-3, Share provides a succinct overview of critical media literacy that is a great introduction to the concept. Drawing on Kellner's (1998) discernment of four types of media pedagogy, critical media literacy is situated as distinct from the protectionist approach, media arts education, and the media literacy movement (the latter of which characterizes mainstream media literacy in the United States). Share defines critical media literacy by first building on the foundation of the Center for Media Literacy's five core concepts and expanding these concepts through the frame of cultural studies, political economy, feminist theory (particularly standpoint theory), and critical pedagogy, drawing from the educational philosophies of Dewey and Freire. Critical media literacy is a transformative pedagogy that promotes empowerment, social justice, and active participation in a democratic society by challenging media ideology and media's perpetuation of interconnected forms of oppression, best summed up by bell hooks's notion of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Share draws from a diverse literature in critical theory and cultural studies to challenge readers who see media literacy pedagogy as neutral. He distinguishes critical media literacy as politically charged with a focus on activism and societal transformation. And for those who see critical media literacy as applicable only to middle or high school settings, Share illustrates how critical media literacy can also be effectively implemented and practiced in kindergarten, elementary, and special education classrooms.

A second strength in this book is a rare glimpse into teacher reflections on the successes and challenges of a multi-year media literacy initiative in an urban elementary school. In chapter four, Share revisits teachers who participated in Project SMARTArt, a federal grant from 2001 to 2004 that incorporated teacher training in media literacy at Leo Politi Elementary School in inner-city Los Angeles. This project focused on incorporating critical thinking about media and creating alternative media with a concentration on arts education. Through Share's analysis of teacher "voices from the trenches," readers get both a hopeful and disheartening look at media literacy in an urban elementary setting. This chapter is peppered with examples of media literacy activities

and the perceived effects on students. Through use of Freire's problem-posing education, students addressed ideology and social injustice through media literacy activities such as challenging corporate advertising in the school, examining self-representation through t-shirt message analysis and creation, and exploring the injustices of prison abuse. Share also included reflections from teachers of special needs students who reported that media literacy helped to break down barriers of difference, strengthen critical thinking skills in students, and challenge media representations of children with disabilities. Share also features unique approaches to critical media literacy, such as one teacher's use of primary sources from marginalized voices to create empathy and understanding in students regarding social injustice.

Readers also get a somewhat disheartening look at the challenges of implementing media literacy into a school—like most schools around the country—that is assessed by performance on standardized tests and mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act. The school's drop in academic performance kicked in mandates requiring a rigid curriculum program. The mandates, coupled with other factors such as unsupportive administration and a climate of surveillance, not only fostered fear and intimidation in teachers, but drastically affected teachers' ability to include media literacy in their teaching. Based on the findings of teachers' challenges with this experience, at the end of chapter four Share offers a valuable section summarizing teachers' recommendations for making media literacy flourish. Some of these recommendations include: the need for support and collaboration with other teachers, the need for a media literacy coach at the school and more opportunities for teacher feedback, offering additional media literacy lessons to teachers who desire more structure, and the need for more parental and administrative involvement in supporting media literacy. These recommendations are expanded upon in chapter six and emphasized as increasingly important in an age of globalization, new technologies, and changing pedagogies. Through Share's analysis of teacher interviews, readers see that critical media literacy can start early even in the most marginalized of settings. However, challenges such as meeting mandated standards and lack of administrative support hindered the ability for media literacy to flourish.

The third strength of this book is Share's illustration of critical media literacy with K-1 students in chapter five, where he compares and contrasts two exemplary educators, Patty Anderson and Vivian Vasquez. Share uses Anderson and Vasquez to represent his vision of the horizontal expansion of critical media literacy to include new media, ICTs, and popular culture; and a vertical deepening of critical media literacy to extend critical thinking about the relationship between power, ideology, and knowledge construction. Several examples of critical media literacy are provided where kindergarten and first grade students challenge injustice, take action, and make change in their classrooms, schools, and communities. In this chapter, Share debunks the myth that K-1 students are too young, vulnerable, or developmentally incapable to engage in critical media literacy.

However, there are a few weaknesses of the book. One critique has to do with the framing of critical media literacy as distinct from the media literacy movement. Share differentiates critical media literacy as a "preferred approach" (p. 60) to media education for transformative pedagogy. However, some would criticize this as unfairly categorizing mainstream media literacy as positivist, lacking a critical ideological component, and promoting an "ambiguous nonpartisan stance" (p. 11), when indeed the media literacy movement includes a focus on representation, stereotypes, and the use of media creation for social change. For instance, a common media literacy lesson is student-produced public service announcements or counter-ads, which engages students in ideology critique and alternative media creation for social change.

Another critique has to do with the research framing of Project SMARTArt. Although critical media literacy builds on the foundation of the Center for Media Literacy's (CML) Five Core Concepts, which are widely used by media literacy practitioners, it is unclear why critical media literacy is used to analyze Project SMARTArt. In this case, it is ambiguous whether teachers received professional development in critical media literacy pedagogy to train them to deal with challenging issues such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and social justice. According to Quesada, Jolls, and Grande's (2005) case study of Project SMARTArt, the underlying educational pedagogy used to train teachers was based on the Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions in the CML MediaLit Kit, highlighting an inquiry process teaching approach. If teachers were not trained in critical media literacy pedagogy, it wasn't surprising that Share found the majority of the teachers embraced a media literacy movement perspective and only a few embraced a critical media literacy perspective.

Furthermore, as a teacher-researcher, Share needed to provide more transparency about his role in Project SMARTArt and in Patty Anderson's classroom. This would have strengthened the research component of the book by explaining how Share's position might have affected his data and conclusions. For instance, Share's role in the project and relationship with the teachers could have influenced a social desirability bias in teacher interviews, and his analysis of teacher reflections is influenced by his own experience and involvement in the project. Since critical theory—especially standpoint theory—is intertwined with identity politics, knowing more about Share and how his identity intersects with the training, teaching, and researching of media literacy in Project SMARTArt would strengthen the self-reflexivity required for critical media literacy.

Ultimately, this book is a valuable read, particularly to elementary educators as an analysis of the possibilities and challenges of integrating critical media literacy into their classrooms. This book is also useful for media literacy practitioners, school administrators, and policy makers, media professionals, and parents as an overview to critical media literacy and its role in promoting social justice and democracy. Share challenges assumptions about younger children and offers a call to action: for critical media literacy, the earlier the better.

References

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