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## **Influencing Middle School Students' Perspective of Media Literacy**

Ray Doss

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INFLUENCING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE OF MEDIA LITERACY

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts  
in Education.

Hamline University

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## DEDICATION

To my family, friends, and students, thank you for your support, encouragement, and inspiration.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Introduction

The typical American middle school is synonymous with a sense of high, intense energy. Small classrooms are filled with excitable, malleable, and rapidly-changing young minds. Students pack into the hallways without any overwhelming feelings. The mere sound of a junior high school's lunchroom can hover at deafening levels. If one thing has remained consistent about schooling for the American pre-teen over the past several decades, it is an unflinching need for stimulation.

However, as the chaos of middle school has remained congruent for years, there is one sharp difference between the school of yesterday and today: smartphones. Where students were once equipped with paper airplanes and deviously-placed tacs, they now come prepared with the full power of 21st century connectivity. Suddenly, the incessant need for stimulation can be satisfied. Students can spend hours consuming media, developing a dependency that appears to be unceremoniously interrupted by school. Smartphones have provided the perfect channel for young minds to focus their demanding attention, and teachers have become increasingly out of touch to this new wave of media consumption.

At first observation, this seems to be a very dismal reality. Teachers pry smartphones from students' hands and comment on the stark differences from their own childhood experience. Many harken back to a time where children found joy in the more simple pleasures of life, so much so that the very aesthetic of our pre-smartphone world has become a selling point. This sense of escapism has trickled down to pre-teen students

as well. Many revert back to their phones after a challenging moment with a teacher or peer. Why would you ever want to be *here*, when you could be *there*?

The reality is, middle school has always been challenging. It is a time of great insecurity and terrifying self-discovery. The journey of personal realization is much easier with a guide, and young people will do anything to seek out that support. Whether it be a peer, parent, or online makeup tutorial, sometimes pre-teens just need to be told what direction to follow. What middle schoolers lack however is a sense of media literacy. At their stage of development, it is difficult to distinguish truth from fiction. As they turn to online spaces for comfort and belonging, fast-spreading misinformation can act as a toxin in their already fragile psyche. Scholars can spend years debating the effect that ceaseless media consumption has on young people, however it won't change their current situation. If we want to improve this dismal picture, we must rationalize this reality. Adult teachers do have an influence over the perception of young minds, and many of the learning standards for middle schoolers focus on personal development. We must question how far this influence leads us, and examine the continuously widening divide between young people and their older guides. My research question is simple: *How can teachers influence a middle school student's perception of media literacy?*

Throughout this first chapter I will provide a rationale for this research, conveying my own personal charge to understand the topic. Then, I will examine the context for my work, and the various influences I have had in completing it. Lastly, I will end with a brief summary of my purpose thus far. Media literacy is a deeply profound topic. In order to begin an assessment of it, we must first understand the role it has played in our own development, and the influence it still has on us to this day.

## **Rationale**

My teaching career began where most do: as a substitute teacher. As I began to travel from classroom to classroom, I soon realized the difficulties in traversing a wide variety of learning environments. Each group of middle school students comes with a unique set of needs and difficulties. Some of them question your authority as a substitute, and many others may attempt to test your leniency, seeing what they can get away with during your time together.

On one particularly challenging day, I was tasked with getting a group of thirty eighth grade students to complete an independent work activity. The assignment was simple, but having a group of rambunctious students focus was not. I employed every teacher tactic I had in my miniscule toolbox, but nothing was working. Suddenly, in a moment of pure desperation, I cut the classroom a deal. If they could maintain sharp and studious focus for the entire period, I would allow them to use their smartphones for the final three minutes.

Suddenly, a pin drop could be heard on the other side of the room. Every eighth grade student dropped their shenanigans and truly applied themselves to the work in front of them. Almost the entire class was able to complete and comprehend the assignment. The final three minutes of class showed a similar level of focus, with an eerie quiet falling over the classroom as digital pacifiers rewarded their hardwork and dedication.

While this experience didn't necessarily demonstrate the school's policies, it did exhibit the startling need for media consumption that young people carry. Thankfully, I am no longer a substitute teacher battling with complex groups of students. I have my own classroom, and all the subtle consistencies of being a first-year teacher. As I stare down the barrel of a long and tumultuous career in education, I begin to wonder how this

digital landscape will affect students I will work with decades into the future. Am I beginning my journey at the climax of technology usage, or are the true challenges still to come?

I graduated from a rural high school in 2016. Digital connectivity was not on the forefront of my adolescence, if anything it was a small addition to my already exciting childhood. Landline numbers still had to be memorized and only storytelling could capture moments of brilliance. It was in middle school that I logged on to the family computer and made my first Facebook account. Suddenly, the people I interacted with at school existed in a separate realm. I could view them in what felt like a much more real digital space. No longer was there a need to pass notes in class, when you could pause homework to send someone a private message. For the first time, I could explore feelings of anonymity, and would interact with people from all over the world. The social exposure generations of people felt when they first went to college was suddenly right in front of me, as a mere middle school student.

This level of exposure has exploded over the past decade. Now middle school students harness the power of numerous social media platforms, each more demanding of their attention. Whether or not their phone is present, a student's attention is drawn away from the curriculum and back to the seemingly more authentic digital space. In my young adulthood, social media was a means of homework procrastination. Today, it serves as a distraction from reality, and I feel as though my colleagues and I are watching this play out in real time. One can't help but question the effects this type of media consumption will have on students as they mature.

It seems as though intervention is not only important, but crucial. Over the past several years, we have seen how unchecked online conspiracies have dominated the

national consciousness. Full adults have fallen victim to dangerous and harmful narratives, often amplified by online platforms that once seemed to be a fun addition to your life. As the U.S. Capitol faced an insurrection of extreme partisan actors, young people not only bore witness, but picked sides as well. The digital division being driven across the country affects young minds just as much as anyone else, and the events of January 6th could easily be repeated by a younger and more misled generation.

I, along with many other concerned teachers, often wonder how educational intervention can play a role in helping young people. It seems clear that our students need some sort of assistance in navigating this newfound connectivity. The digital world is working much faster than we are in teaching our students how to navigate it. The question remains prevalent: How can teachers influence a middle school student's perception of media literacy?

### **Context**

My appreciation for media literacy has grown throughout my collegiate career. As I entered higher education, I wanted to share my understanding of journalism to those who were willing to learn. However, stronger interests always stayed in control of my time. Media and journalism have always been a passion I have held, yet seldom brought to the forefront of my endeavors. That ended when I took on a teaching role through a local elementary school. Myself and a small group of fourth and fifth grade students explored the importance of journalistic practices, and ultimately put together a comprehensive newspaper for the community. What this group of students once saw as an elective opportunity soon turned into a newfound appreciation for the media all around them.

Those learners have since moved on to junior high, and will soon continue on to become high school students. I often wonder if they approach the media they consume in a different manner to their peers. Most young adults don't have first hand experience with creating a journalistic piece, yet they have ample experience with journalistic consumption. I can think of the various high school teachers and college professors who taught me about media literacy, but much of that learning was personal to me. It is certainly not a required educational standard for young people, yet I have seen firsthand how they can benefit from learning about the media they consume.

Now, as I work with middle school students, I monitor the developing mind in one of its most critical stages. The themes and lessons learned in junior high will impact the trajectory of your entire life. We cannot afford to be neglectful of the curricular importance at play. We must ask ourselves about how, as teachers, we can influence young people to be critical thinkers. We need to encourage them to dive deeper into pieces of media, no matter how insignificant they seem. They should understand the dangers of viral misinformation, and know the proper ways to challenge it. It's a contemporary issue, and it demands our attention.

### **Summary**

Throughout my life, as well as my young career, I have had ample exposure to media literacy. It wasn't just through the lessons I have taught to young students, but the real experiences I had growing up. This topic is personal to me because I watched its rise to prominence. Now, as a fully-fledged teacher, I worry about the impact it will have on my students. The necessity is clear, all that remains is the research. We move forward with one question in mind: How can teachers influence a middle school student's perception on media literacy?

For this project I will be creating a curriculum relevant to these themes. It will come in the form of a unit-long exploration of media literacy and appropriate media literacy practices. The unit will be designed for middle school students, seeking to address the many woes described throughout this chapter. It is a practical answer to a theoretical question, and can provide students with measurable results to help improve understanding of media literacy.

In my second chapter, I will review and analyze the existing literature on this topic. This will provide a richer context for chapter three, where I will outline the implementation of the media literacy curriculum. Finally, I will conclude with my fourth chapter, a proper reflection of my work and discoveries in the realm of media literacy.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

Middle school is infamous for the painful transition into newly found young-adulthood. There exists a wealth of research concerning the development of the pre-teen brain, as well as the appropriate curricular response to this sensitive moment of maturing. However, my research concerns the recent, startling rise in media consumption by the hands of middle school children. As students have become much more exposed to media, thanks to an unrelenting stream of readily available content, the overall social studies curriculum has not been relevantly updated. Interests, as well as attitudes, have shifted, leaving behind an uninspired cacophony of content standards.

The main purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, I will assess the existing literature and research regarding media literacy education. Second, I will evaluate various social studies-related curricular approaches. This will be accomplished through five relevant research themes. I will start by covering the history and characterization of media literacy in America. Then, my research will explore the various curricular applications of media literacy education. After this, the impact of social studies will be explored in an effort to provide context to the content area where much of the research will be housed. Then, an in-depth look at effective learning strategies for middle school students will be addressed in an effort to determine the most engaging teaching techniques. Finally, a brief review of contemporary movements in social studies education will be covered. I am fortunate to complete this literature review from atop a rich bounty of relevant published work created by talented scholars and educators. However it is through assessment and synthesis of this research that I will identify an

answer to my guiding question: How can teachers influence a middle school student's perception of media literacy?

### **Media Literacy**

Media literacy is often defined through both analysis and creation. The term "media" can be refined to its most simplistic definition, simply referenced as "messages" which appear in many different forms. Therefore, media literacy in essence is one's ability to both analyze and create various contextual messages (Livingstone, 2004). However, some scholars have pushed the definition of this term even further. Lewis and Jhally (2006) present media literacy as a way to transform consumers into proper citizens, serving their most civic duty of critical thinking. No matter the definition, the topic is simple: What do we consume, and how do we consume it?

For as long as we have had media to digest, there has been controversy about the proper methods of consumption. Prior to the contemporary flood of mass information, issues of media literacy were that of access. Vast amounts of information were not available to the general public, but rather the elite and wealthy class (Potter, 2004). Informational access has shown itself to be an effective tool for maintaining a rich, ruling class. However, soon came the rise of mass media technology, such as radio, television, and ultimately the internet. Ten of thousands of books are published each year (Potter, 2004), with many available for free in convenient, public libraries. The historical gatekeeping of information has been dramatically reduced in the past hundred years. A flood of readily available media awaits us at any time, so the question of proper consumption becomes that of a burning nature.

There is also a strong indication that media literacy is an important topic to many people. Often, an abundance of existing research in a topic shows its apparent popularity.

Not only are the words “media literacy” frequently typed into search engines (Potter, 2004), but the related topics of news consumption and the spread of misinformation are centerfold in current civic discussions. Potter (2004) explains that media literacy’s popularity is easy to understand because of its relation to already vast research areas. Human thinking, media studies, and informational access have long been at the center of various scholars' minds. Potter even states that with such a plethora of material, one can even struggle in simply organizing the existing body of knowledge (2004). Media literacy is undoubtedly a popular topic, but this popularity is easily matched with a much more pressing understanding: relevance. The collective societal intrigue over media only matches the equally impactful importance the topic holds. Yes, media literacy is a popular topic. However, this popularity is only a symptom of the collective need for a sophisticated approach to media consumption.

With copious amounts of information flooding the senses of average citizens, an increasing need for a skills-based approach to media literacy becomes apparent. Livingstone (2010) argues that an extension of this approach to the broader population is crucial in building a more sophisticated world. Forming media literate adults through a focus on skills will be beneficial for multiple reasons. First, it encourages cultural competency, an important aspect in nurturing a more equitable world. Second, it builds interpretive skills, helping people analyze various forms of messaging they receive. Lastly, it increases access levels to previously inaccessible forms of media (Livingstone, 2010). The ideas presented by Livingstone (2010) are grounded in a robust understanding of the topic. This skills-based approach is necessary in aiding many of the aforementioned contemporary issues. However, what Livingstone (2010) does not focus on is the importance of starting this process from a young age. Mass media reaches an

incredibly adolescent audience, one that could benefit greatly from this knowledge of media literacy skills.

Many scholars argue media analysis should be focused on the means of production as opposed to reception. Lewis and Jhally (2006) interrogate media institutions in their work, discussing the benefits of questioning mass media production instead of the acceptance by the general public. This form of critical thinking can be beneficial for many individuals seeking answers in a particularly troubling media climate, and shifts the blame of misinformation away from the consumers. It is also helpful for those looking for alternatives to a decently regulated system of commercial media (Lewis & Jhally, 2006). Arming citizens with the tools necessary to find an appropriate media source is an exciting notion, and it shifts the burden of misinformation production to a much more appropriate group. Media literacy is an inherently democratic practice (Lewis & Jhally, 2006), and it ultimately brings more power to an increasingly out of touch *populus*.

The purpose of studying and practicing media literacy is evident. In order to build a more sophisticated population of consumers, the skills discussed must be internalized. Controversy over media consumption is not a new topic (Potter, 2004). However, the current landscape of media consumption brings new urgency into an age-old debate. It is a topic that excites many citizens (Potter, 2004), yet fails to meet their educational demands. There are several appropriate approaches to media literacy-related education. A skills-based approach would help people harness the power of critical thinking in everyday practice (Livingstone, 2010). While an analysis of media production would give citizens the power to find more appropriate consumption outlets (Lewis & Jhally, 2006).

Nonetheless, the topic is of the utmost importance in building civically-minded people, and there is no better place to build these skills than in the middle school classroom.

### **Curriculum Concerning Media Literacy**

With a clear idea of the importance in media literacy understanding established, there now remains a need to understand its curricular application. There have been a variety of initiatives throughout school systems to amplify the presence of media literacy education. Some have taken a more traditional educational process to implementing these new standards, while others have followed a more contemporary path. The following section will examine various studies, each of which reviewed the effectiveness of these initiatives. With a proper synthesis and analysis of each study, a better understanding of the stated research question can be achieved.

In the previous section, a study from W. James Potter (2004) determined the popularity and general acknowledgement of media literacy. A majority of citizens view media literacy as an important topic, and the same is true throughout education. Across all levels, educators view media literacy education as important and necessary for students to learn. However, while a majority of teachers understand its importance, research shows that media literacy is often not addressed until higher-level education (Schmidt, 2013). This shows a troubling disparity between the topic's popularity and its implementation. This gap harkens back to historical issues in media access (Potter, 2004), as higher education is not always accessible to many groups of people. However, according to Schmidt (2013), this issue does not rest in the hands of educators. Training resources for media literacy related education do not match the persistent interest in the topic. In order for educators to begin teaching media literacy, there must first be a well-founded curriculum to use.

One of the most important aspects of our educational system is the installation of critical thinking skills. Critical thinking allows someone to pass necessary judgements upon their surroundings. These skills equip students with the ability to properly analyze various messages and lead a life of a most inquisitive nature. There is ample empirical evidence to prove this, with research showing that adults carrying critical thinking skills are better outfitted to problem solve and actively apply knowledge (Lai, 2011). The results of critical thinking-based education are extremely beneficial, and lend themselves perfectly to media literacy education. At its core, curriculum focused on media literacy promotes strong critical thinking skills among students (Brown, 2006). This promotion of critical thinking aids students in their journey to lifelong learning. In practice, students can expect to gain skills in the perception of their media experience, the context of their use, and the methods for sophisticated media consumption (Brown, 2006). Educators have long tried to incorporate critical thinking into the classroom, and a curricular approach to media literacy assists them in this responsibility.

It is important to note the parameters media literacy based curriculum presents in practice. In order to ensure effective implementation, collaboration must be established across an educational institution. This collaborative approach is not only important for a shared understanding of the curricular goal, but the very nature of this program requires collaboration from all educational stakeholders (Brown, 2006). Students must view the importance of media literacy as legitimate, as they do with the other core content areas. In a world with so much exposure to media messaging, any attempt to curb consumption methods needs to be implemented through collaborative practices.

An effective model for media literacy education is grounded in a hands-on learning approach. Research shows that using dynamic teaching methods significantly

boosts students' engagement with media-related content. These methods can include anything from videos and websites, to music and printed news (Hobbs, 2004). This is particularly relevant in the middle school classroom, where previous research has shown a more dynamic curriculum suits the pre-teen brain effectively. Additionally, a project based learning approach has been shown to strengthen media literacy studies (Hobbs, 2004). Given the opportunity, students can apply their learning through media writing, recording, and video making. Research has shown that this application also encourages long term civic engagement, interest, and critical thinking (Hobbs, 2004). This is due to the engagement students feel in their learning. When someone forms meaningful connections to content they are much more likely to make practical applications to their life. It seems clear that any curriculum created to promote media literacy should be grounded in a quick, lively, and dynamic instructional practice.

A common misconception with media literacy education is that it is not always applicable to every content area. This is an easy conclusion to come to, as media studies is often focused in just English/language arts or social studies. However, in practice it can be applied effectively to all content areas, even boosting the effectiveness of instruction in each subject. When taking a pedagogical approach to curricular planning, media literacy can be used as the lens at which lessons are taught (Scheibe, 2004). What follows this instruction is a measured boost in communication and technological skills among students, something all content areas strive for (Scheibe, 2004). Media literacy curriculum is not only effective, but applicable to all areas within education.

Curriculum concerning media literacy can also be an effective tool in teaching students about how oversimplification can harm perception or public discourse. In a study by Elmore and Coleman (2019) a group of middle school students spent two weeks

following a lesson on political memes. Political memes are defined in the study as “argumentative visual texts commonly encountered on social media” (Elmore & Coleman, 2019, Abstract). The study found that through the use of effective curriculum, students were able to show a measurable improvement in critical thinking and processing skills. They could better understand how social media can create binaries and deep divides within society, and were now equipped with the decoding skills needed to traverse a polarizing social media landscape (Elmore & Coleman, 2019). This study exemplifies the contemporary and relevant approach media literacy curriculum must take in its implementation. It followed a necessary model that was engaging and relatable to the students, ultimately earning them a level of skill any teacher would be envious of.

There exists a wealth of knowledge concerning the educational implementation of media literacy. Not only have scholars determined its importance, but also the unfortunate absence it shows in earlier education (Schmidt, 2013). With a media literacy curriculum in practice, student outcomes will see a significant increase in critical thinking skills (Brown, 2006). Research has also shown effective tools for this instructional implementation. From an increase in educational collaboration (Brown, 2006), to a more dynamic and hands-on learning practice (Hobbs, 2004), media literacy can be an area of instruction adopted by all forms of content, providing the lens at which teachers conduct their practice (Scheibe, 2004). Ultimately, curriculum concerning media literacy will help students gain lifelong decoding and analysis skills (Elmore & Coleman, 2019), helpful to traverse an increasingly polarizing media landscape. Through effective instruction, media literacy can help students become strong, civically-minded adults.

## **Curricular Influence of Social Studies**

Much of the focus for this research project centers on the content area of social studies. As previously discussed, the topic of media literacy curriculum does not need to be tethered to a certain topic (Scheibe, 2004), but the inbound subject matter does feature work within the confines of social studies. Ross describes social studies as a “study of human enterprise” (2001, pg. 4), an incredibly overarching definition that does adequately describe the broad content area. However, Mindes contextualizes social studies from a more civics-focused perspective. Mindes defines social studies through the various techniques and applications of the social sciences, using these tools to better students’ analysis skills (2005). What sets both definitions apart is their focus of benefit. Ross believes that the benefits of social studies lie in their application to society (2001), while Mindes sees the content area as an improvement of the individual (2005). For this literature review, both definitions will be utilized, as they each provide an interesting perspective in determining the curricular influence of the academic subject.

One of the main curricular benefits to social studies learning is the changed perception it comes along with. When we learn about social studies we improve our discernment of the environment. With this thinking in place, a student can move into the world with the necessary tools to improve it (Ross, 2001). This is where instruction moves from informational to liberational, and it all starts with effective forms of curricula. At its core, curriculum is meant to increase teachers’ effectiveness (Ross, 2001). Due to the relentless relevance of the social sciences, this effectiveness often translates to particularly impactful learning experiences for students. Social studies is an inherently powerful content area because it not only improves the individual, but the individual’s trajectory.

Social studies is also a content area grounded in natural learning processes. Much of the material is derived from basic, societal observations. It is a content area that reflects the world it exists within, creating a powerful experience for the students who partake. Social studies is ultimately an exercise in self-development (Mindes, 2005), one that awakens discovery and intrigue. When we focus on the curricular approach social studies takes, we can begin to see the individual benefit it has. Any strong social studies curriculum will prioritize the whole child, even down to the more minute details (Mindes, 2005). It is the basic nature of the content area, one that serves the most natural human learning.

Due to its civics-based nature, social studies presents the educational opportunity to address many existing issues within society. Ross argues that teachers of the content area should constantly be in pursuit of equitable practices (2001). Through effective instruction, social studies can nurture learning based in the understanding of oppression, and form young citizens aquipt with the tools to interrupt it (Ross, 2001). Students' progress towards these goals should be their ultimate measurement of learning. It is not about the knowledge they have gained, but the skills they have acquired. A social studies curriculum without a focus on systemic inequality is a body without a backbone. Just as the content area interrogates the past, it should do the same towards the future. This is the gift social studies gives to students, an opportunity to move forth into the world with an understanding of how to change it.

The purpose of social studies education is undoubtedly multi-dimensional. Some view the content area as a civics-focused improvement on society (Ross, 2001), while others see it as an opportunity for individual development (Mindes, 2005). In the end, social studies is both. Through students' personal learning improvements they move into

the world with the necessary tools to better it. It's a content area inherently focused on the disruption of systemic inequality (Ross, 2001), and presents the chance to seriously interrogate societal woes that students have already become accustomed to. As this research narrows in on the topic of media literacy education, it is important to understand where the needed curricular influence lies. If the ultimate goal is to influence students' perception of a topic, there is no better route to travel than that of social studies.

### **Middle School Learning Strategies**

When examining the influence of middle school teachers, one must take a deeper look at the learning strategies they host. Curriculum is nothing without effective instruction. Often, teachers are tasked with the difficult journey of engaging students who have little to no interest in the content. It is not only the role of the teacher to instruct students, but to engage them. Middle school curriculum, social studies, and media literacy instruction will all fail without effective learning strategies. This section will interrogate several pieces of research on learning strategies, and make determining conclusions to select the most engaging classroom practices.

“Learning strategies” is a complex term to understand. Like most curricularly focused phrases, its definition is driven by the personal experiences of those who carry it. Nisbet and Shucksmith describe learning strategies as purposeful procedural sequences, each equipped with a dynamic ability to meet various situations (1986). This definition views learning strategies as primarily task-oriented, and simplifies their rather interpretive meaning. Throughout this section, learning strategies will be viewed through the lens of this definition in an effort to simplify what can be seen as a complex subject matter.

Many middle school teachers tend to approach learning in a very personal way. The way in which teachers view effective instruction is often dictated by the experiences

they carry from their time as students. This apprenticeship of observation is typical (Russell et al., 2018), but lacks the effectiveness middle school students require. An effective teacher is not bound by their own personal experiences, as these experiences only impact them on an individual level. Instruction must be tailored to a shared collective experience, one that serves a collection of diverse needs. If a teacher's understanding of middle school is shaped through overwhelmingly positive memories, the learning strategies they hold may not be properly formatted for a student living in a rather negative reality. Successful teachers let go of any preconceived notions, and remain open to new improvements to their learning strategy mastery. The simple requirement of middle school teaching is an ability to grow (Russell et al., 2018), this understanding must be central in building effective learning strategies.

One particularly effective learning strategy for middle school students is the incorporation of texts and literature into the curriculum. Junior high often hosts incredible literacy level changes, especially that of students with low reading comprehension. It is very beneficial for student outcomes to promote literacy within the classroom. If implemented properly, this learning strategy can not only boost mastery, but engagement (Harmon et al., 1999). However, there is a significant framework that must be followed for proper literacy promotion within the middle school classroom. Accessible, engaging texts should be at the forefront of instruction. Additionally, meaning must be made of the reading presented. Anything less than captivation and understanding will fall flat, and engage a smaller amount of the young audience.

A helpful strategy to engage learners in literacy is the frontloading of a clear instructional framework. In the social studies classroom this can take the shape of providing context. Before students master a text, they should be informed of basic

background information (who is involved, where they are, what is happening, etc). This helps with comprehension of texts relating to historical events (Harmon et al., 1999). As students move into the literacy comprehension that follows, they travel with the cognitive strategies needed to engage with complex, challenging texts. This format also favors the learning of struggling readers, many of which face difficulties in literacy engagement. Additionally, this learning strategy utilizes background knowledge (Harmon et al., 1999). If a student can understand the particular time period or location of a text, they are much more likely to not only comprehend, but engage with the reading. Frontloading instructional framework is a very effective learning strategy in the middle school classroom, and provides an excellent opportunity to promote literature among students.

Another impactful learning strategy is the implementation of generative learning into the classroom. Generative learning allows students to learn in a reflective manner and helps to contextualize content. In a study by Pilegard and Fiorella, middle school students were introduced to a reflective learning exercise in the middle of their lesson (2016). As compared to the control group, the students who incorporated reflection into their learning had higher rates of problem solving and cognitive ability (Pilegard & Fiorella, 2016). Implementing this strategy through the use of reflective learning exercises such as journaling or discussion will drastically improve engagement and mastery. It also provides a sense of ownership for students, and gives them an opportunity to internalize the content at hand. When planning instruction for middle school students, it's of the utmost importance to include reflection and internalization. This will help students take ownership of their learning and better understand the curriculum.

One of the main challenges middle school teachers face is student motivation levels. Often, students in junior high report feeling unmotivated and uninspired by the

content. In order to curb this apathy, an active learning approach can be implemented by instructors (Hootstein, 1995). Content should feel exciting and invigorating. There are several strategies teachers can implement in their classrooms in order to build a culture of fun, motivating learning. Increasing capacity for project-based, interactive learning can engage students who would otherwise feel left out of the curriculum. Another example of this is the inclusion of lessons that incorporate physical activities and movement. Additionally, encouraging students to share their thoughts and opinions is particularly rewarding for the middle school brain. There are many ways to build an effective curriculum, but no middle school lesson should be without an element of active learning.

All middle school curriculum should interrogate the most effective ways to engage students. When building instruction, an educator must consider the most optimal learning strategies. This will ensure students can not only learn, but engage in the content. In order to do this, teachers must let go of any preconceived notions related to middle school teaching, as they only detract from the varying and diverse perceptions of students (Russell et al., 2018). One applicable strategy is the promotion of literacy within the classroom (Harmon et al., 1999), a model that increases learning outcomes for all students, including those with low reading scores. In order to be successful in this approach, a teacher should frontload learning, and provide content for challenging texts before their implementation (Harmon et al., 1999). Additionally curriculum should be generative, and include reflective checkpoints throughout (Pilegard & Fiorella, 2016). With the incorporation of journaling and discussion, students can take ownership of their education and internalize the content. Finally, any effective middle school instruction is active, and employs learning strategies that engage otherwise disengaged students (Hootstein, 1995). These approaches are intentional, and rooted in the cognitive needs of

middle school students. If the ultimate goal of this literature review is to determine a teacher's influence over middle school students' perception, then there is no better place to start than effective learning strategies.

### **New Movements in Social Studies Curriculum**

As progress has been made throughout educational research, new developments have shown differing ways of delivering instruction. Practices that were once thought of as commonplace have become outdated, as contemporary models of instruction take center stage. It is only natural that an area with as much active research as education would be faced with constant dynamics. Change is fundamental in science, and the social sciences are no exception. New curricular practices and learning strategies have taken hold of the educational community. As literature review is focused on teacher influence, it would be incomplete without a thorough evaluation of new movements within the world of social studies education. This section of research is dedicated to the developments that now shape modern social studies curriculum, and how they influence teachers' impact over student outcomes.

During the 1990s a series of sweeping renovations to the traditional model and standards of social studies began to take effect. Frequently referred to as the "New Social Studies," these fresh ideas breathed new life into dated and biased teachings of old history. Suddenly, the one-hundred year old institution of social studies curriculum was being viewed through a rather contemporary lens (Fenton, 2010). These changes were necessary, and often viewed as revolutionary. Much of the curricular shift New Social Studies saw was a change in standards. What was once a convoluted content area now had a very aligned approach. However, one of the most impactful changes that resulted from the New Social Studies was a change in perspective. Revisions to standards did not

stop throughout the 2000s and 2010s, and still continue to this day. The New Social Studies changed the monolithic structure of the content area, creating a dynamic curriculum exciting in a state of constant revision. Social studies should be a reflection of our current times. The curriculum of today will not be the curriculum of tomorrow, and much of this is thanks to the reforms set in place in the 1990s.

While the current social studies standards are far more dynamic than they once were, they are not completely absolved of issues. One of such issues is shown in the representation of global perspectives in content. In an increasingly globalized world, social studies has failed to keep up with the demand for cross-cultural education. Myers argues that in order to satisfy this rising need, social studies as a whole should be rethought (2012). Much of the traditionalist structure of social studies remains, following a line of thought that values patriotism over global partnership (Myers, 2012). As the national study body becomes increasingly diverse, it is important to mirror the many perspectives and voices that embody the school system. No modern social studies curriculum should be complete without a presentation of global perspectives. It not only engages diverse groups of students in the content, but prepares them to navigate an incredibly interconnected world.

As students and classrooms have become more technologically advanced, much of the existing academic standards for social studies have not followed in this upgrade. Curricula still reflects a more traditional approach to education, one that does not incorporate the powerful tool technology can be in motivating students. Through their research, Berson et al. (2000) suggest that one of the main duties of preparing teachers for success is modeling the incorporation of technology into the classroom. Without this aspect of training a teacher to deliver effective instruction, a significant learning

opportunity will be lost on the students (Berson et al., 2000). Any relevant, meaningful lesson should include a technological aspect. It is crucial in engaging students of the contemporary era.

With adequate training in technological incorporation, teachers will also be more equipped to engage students in the material. A large issue with social studies education is lack of engagement. This is particularly evident in the middle school classroom. However, the use of technology as a means of delivery content can reduce boredom and improve learning outcomes (Heafner, 2004). This can come in the form of lesson delivery or project learning. For example, students could work to build a website based upon the necessary learning objectives (Berson et al., 2000). These strategies go far beyond content understanding, and give students learning skills to be successful in many different content areas (Heafner, 2004). The use of technology should be at the heart of any effective instruction, as to properly reflect one of the most recent developments in New Social Studies.

Over the past several decades, social studies education has seen a sharp change in perception. What was once viewed as a monolithic content area has become ripe with growth and advancement (Fenton, 2010). Social studies is now viewed as a reflection of our modern world. It is full of dynamics and positive change. New movements have included an increased presence of global perspectives in curriculum (Myers 2012), and a need for more training in technologically acquitted teachers (Berson et al., 2000). In addition to this growing need for more technology in the classroom, research has been shown to support the rise in non-traditional units. Lessons based in technology use are proven to improve student outcomes, resulting in more competent and prepared learners (Heafner, 2004). When determining the most effective forms of instruction, it is

important to recognize the new movements social studies has seen. This not only impacts curriculum, but shows just how far a middle school teacher's influence can reach.

### **Summary**

This chapter has presented an extensive review of the existing literature concerning media literacy and social studies education. Both topics are of the utmost importance in understanding the guiding research question: How can teachers influence a middle school student's perception of media literacy? In order to comprehend this quandary, one must first look into the rich history surrounding media literacy education. Through the examination of several historical analyses, an understanding was reached about the evolution media literacy has undergone. Informational access has exploded over the past several decades, and curricula (particularly that of social studies) have failed to keep up with the expansion. This lacking response is particularly unfortunate when one considers the research proven benefit media studies has on young people. The need for media literacy education is clear and scientifically justified, what remains is an understanding of how best to deliver this important content.

The latter half of this chapter focused on the practice of middle school social studies. The history and curricular influence of the content area was discussed in length. This was done in order to provide understanding of the relevant nature social studies has to media literacy education. From this point a research based approach was taken in exploring effective learning strategies. These strategies can be employed in a middle school classroom in order to engage students in meaningful content. To conclude, a brief review of contemporary movements within social studies education was presented. This was done in order to establish the best practices for building a strong, relevant social studies curriculum.

With this research set in place, a clear understanding of both media literacy education and how to employ effective social studies teaching strategies has been reached. In the next chapter the methodology for this project will be reviewed and established. In response to the aforementioned issues, this project will seek to create a responsive curriculum. This curriculum will come in the form of a unit for middle school students. The unit will teach them about media literacy, and will follow much of the research discussed throughout this chapter. It will feature dynamic and engaging instruction, and culminates in an assessment of student learning outcomes. There will also be additional information about the project specifics, parameters, and procedures. A clear background and understanding of importance has been made clear, from here this project will begin actively interrogating media literacy education within the middle school classroom.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

Students of the contemporary classroom absorb amounts of media that have never been seen before. Much of their time outside, and sometimes in the classroom is spent locked into content sharing apps and platforms. They face incredibly high exposure to various personalities, opinions, and influences. Personally, I see this everyday in my role as a middle school social studies teacher. Much of my job's demand is dedicated to removing students from the incessant digital space and grounding them in the classroom. Their consumption of media knows no bounds, and it's my observation of this phenomenon that led me to create this project's guiding research question: *How can teachers influence a middle school student's perception of media literacy?*

In order to partially fulfill this question, I reviewed significant research related to the topics of media literacy and middle school education. Throughout Chapter 2 a rationale was created for teaching middle school students about media literacy. In the following chapter, I will outline the curriculum needed to address this issue. This curriculum will come in the form of one unit dedicated to improving media literacy skills among middle school students. The unit will include researched-backed lessons, projects, and assessments, all of which will be highlighted throughout this chapter.

The chapter will begin with a description of the project I will be completing. The purpose and goal of the media literacy unit will be discussed, as well as how the unit is aligned with research from Chapter 2. After this, the curricular components of the unit will be introduced. Each component will be backed by previous research, and will provide specific examples of implementation. Later in the chapter, an overview of the unit's summative assessment will be presented. Following this, a completion timeline will

be discussed. In the end, this chapter will detail how this unit can effectively teach middle school students about media literacy.

### **Project Description**

This project will consist of one unit dedicated to media literacy skills. The unit will be taught through the lens of a social studies curriculum for middle school students. The purpose of teaching this unit through social studies is simple. Media literacy as a topic aligns strongly with the standards of social studies, as compared to the other content areas of math, science, or English-language arts. However, the choice to house this curriculum in a middle school setting was a bit more complex. When thinking about the perfect age to implement media literacy teaching, you must first consider the populations most affected. Currently, many young adults begin consuming massive amounts of media from an early age. Social media accounts are created young, and smartphones are acquired before many students reach high school. The reality of this is startling to some, but it shows evidence that media consumption looks very different then it did in the pre-digital era. It is because of this shift in media exposure that my unit is catered to middle school students.

### ***Curricular Components***

There are several different curricular components that will be included in this unit. These components will include projects, technology usage, incorporation of texts, inclusion of global perspectives, and formative assessments. Much of these components are backed by the research previously discussed in Chapter 2. They have been shown to significantly increase learning outcomes within the middle school social studies classroom. Throughout the following sections the purpose and reasoning behind these various components will be discussed.

The media literacy unit will feature several different projects in order to develop students' understanding of the topic. Project learning is an incredibly effective tool in promoting standards comprehension. It also is shown to increase lifelong learning, with students reporting higher levels of critical thinking and civic engagement (Hobbs, 2004). The projects within this media literacy unit will range from short, lesson-long partner work, to multi-day group creations. They will feature writing exercises, text analysis, and media creation. Additionally, the unit's summative assessment, described later in the chapter, will come in the format of a comprehensive and creative student project. Project-based learning is an important tool in not only teaching students meaningful content, but promoting lifelong learning skills.

The unit will also feature ample usage of technology within the classroom. The use of technology is shown to be an effective tool in increasing student learning outcomes (Berson et al., 2000). Additionally, it seems only fitting that a lesson focused on modern media literacy would incorporate the very technology most media exists within. The use of technology will include internet source analysis, research projects, and online media creation. Of course, much of the technological incorporation ultimately depends on the capacity of each individual classroom and school district. For the sake of clarity, this unit will assume the classroom is equipped with internet access and devices students can use to access it. While this assumption is not ideal, it is important that students learn online analysis in real time. This is crucial for developing active media literacy skills.

The incorporation of texts and reading into the unit is also an important aspect in improving outcomes. Due to the incredible shift in literacy skills seen in middle school, textual incorporation is crucial in ensuring a well-rounded learning experience. Additionally, proper literacy promotion has been shown to promote engagement among

middle school students (Harmon et al., 1999). Throughout the unit several articles and relevant readings will be present to the students. This is one of the ways the curriculum will differentiate learning, as it presents content in various forms and mediums.

Additionally, the unit will also feature text comparison, where students will view contrasting readings together in order to improve comprehension of the learning target. Incorporating texts into the unit is an important step all middle school teachers should take.

The unit will also feature various perspectives and voices in an effort to include a global perspective of media literacy. It is important that social studies teachers share content related perspectives differing from their own. This is important in not only showcasing a range of voices, but in helping an increasingly diverse student population find their own identity within the content (Myers, 2012). The unit will feature videos and readings from various media literacy scholars. Students will also explore media literacy issues from around the world, studying the contrasting realities of global media consumption. It is important that the unit not simply follow a eurocentric approach to media consumption. All social studies should be taught from a global perspective, and this unit is no exception.

Throughout the media literacy unit will be a strong incorporation of formative assessments. These assessments focus on the active development of learning, as opposed to the result. Including formative assessments in lessons provides the instructor with an opportunity to monitor and track student progress, ensuring that learning targets are being met. It also helps students internalize content through the practice of repetition. These formative assessments will provide the cap to each lesson. They will come in the form of “exit ticket” style quizzes, short reflection essay writing, and comprehensive worksheets.

It is crucial that a teacher monitor the progress students show, and this unit will ensure this through the use of formative assessments.

### ***Summative Assessment***

The unit will conclude with an extensive summative assessment. This type of assessment is different from the aforementioned formative assessment. It focuses on the learning that has already been developed, and measures the mastery students have of the learning objectives. As this unit is focused on media literacy skills, the summative assessment will gauge their understanding of the topic. In many ways this unit is driven by data collection, and this final summative assessment provides the teacher with the ultimate opportunity to measure success.

The summative assessment will come in the form of a cultivated project. Students will create a webpage that demonstrates their knowledge of media literacy. The purpose of the webpage is to inform the audience about media literacy. This project is impactful for several reasons. First, it showcases the knowledge students have gained about the topic. By doing this students can gain ownership of their newfound understanding of media literacy. Second, this assessment allows students to actively use the skills they have acquired. Through an understanding of media literacy they will be able to create a piece of fair, creditable media. They are not only demonstrating what they know, but putting their knowledge to use.

In total, this unit will feature many different curricular components, each aimed at improving students' understanding of media literacy. These components are relevant and necessary to middle school social studies. Many are based upon extensive research, such as the inclusion of projects, technology, texts, global perspectives, and formative assessments. As the unit progresses, it will be building towards a comprehensive

summative assessment. This assessment will utilize project-based learning, allowing students to not only demonstrate their knowledge, but put it to practice. This unit seeks to promote media literacy skills among middle school students. It is relevant, timely, and necessary to the lives of young learners.

### **Timeline**

The following timeline represents the schedule I will follow in completing this project. Each milestone on the timeline will represent a different section of the work, with the ultimate completion time of May, 2022. In total, the project will take nine months to complete.

September, 2021	Begin writing Chapter One of capstone.
October, 2021	Begin research for capstone.
December, 2021	Complete work on Chapters One, Two, and Three. Edit, revise, and finalize the first section of the capstone.
January, 2022	Begin work on the media literacy unit.
February, 2022 through April, 2022	Complete work on the media literacy unit.
May, 2022	Finalize the media literacy unit and complete capstone. Present capstone and submit work.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of my intended project. The project will come in the form of a middle school social studies unit on media literacy. This topic is relevant to the lives of middle school students because of the startling rise in media consumption among young adults. By teaching students about media literacy, they can develop skills to responsibly consume media messages throughout their lifetimes. The

unit will incorporate various curricular strategies, such as the inclusion of project based learning, technological incorporation, literacy promotion, global perspectives, and formative assessments. It will culminate in a summative assessment where students will create a webpage to showcase their knowledge of media literacy. Ultimately, this project will be completed in the spring of 2022, and will provide a useful piece of curriculum teachers can use to promote media literacy.

In my next chapter I will reflect on the outcomes and learnings of the created curriculum. This will provide an understanding of this capstone's intended outcome. It will also help to contextualize the results this project hosts. With this final chapter comes the answer to the guiding research question: *How can teachers influence a middle school student's perception of media literacy?*

## CHAPTER 4

### Conclusion

#### Process and Realizations

The intent of this project was to answer the guiding question: *How can teachers influence a middle school student's perception of media literacy?* This question was developed from numerous troubling experiences with middle school students. There is currently a massive shift in student perspective. Many middle schoolers are feeling increasingly disconnected from school due to their newfound online connectedness. In creating an appropriate curriculum that addresses this change I was able to answer my guiding question, while also providing teachers with a responsive pedagogy to use in the classroom.

The first step in developing this curriculum was to look at the gaps in knowledge. Many students lack the media literacy skills and awareness you need to navigate the complex digital landscape. I wanted students to finish the unit with an understanding of the history of media, as well as the proper consumption habits you need to maintain a healthy relationship with it. To gift students with these skills would ensure lasting knowledge and learning.

As my topic was narrowed and the writing process began I realized the full scope of the project in front of me. I knew that to satisfy the needs of the unit I sought to create much research had to be accomplished. I began to fully comprehend the gravity of the project as I started reflecting upon my previous time in education. I lingered on the lessons I had learned, and anticipated the realizations still to come. Soon the research project brought forth the many pieces of information that would shape into my full unit.

The first step in this process was an extensive literature review. The review essentially worked in two separate sections, the first focusing solely on media literacy, while the second examined middle school learning strategies. By catering the research in this fashion, I was able to identify both the content and the techniques needed to build a sufficient unit of curriculum. The research process quickly led me to a multi-faceted definition of media literacy, one that identified the process as the ability to both create and analyze messages (Livingstone, 2004). It is from this definition that the concept of the unit's summative assessment was born. In order for students to understand media, they must be able to create their own form of it. Through the process of making a piece of media, whether it be a podcast or a newspaper, they could better understand the importance literacy has in their consumption.

I also noticed an alarming amount of research that favored a project based approach. This form of interactive learning stimulates students' engagement with the content, providing a purpose to their education (Hootstein, 1995). This not only helped to shape my curriculum's focus on the final assessment, but also encouraged the incorporation of smaller, lesson-concentrated projects as well. This research realization was not entirely unexpected, I have seen the benefits project learning brings to a classroom before. However, it did provide ample context to how my unit should be formatted, and the best techniques for using project-based learning in the classroom.

Ultimately, I found the literature review process to be far more helpful than anticipated. I frequently revisited my work as the unit plan was developed, accessing sources that provided useful insights into the learning experience. While I have always found research to be enjoyable, I have never viewed it as the necessity it would become. I am of course fortunate to have an incredible bounty of resources focused on media

literacy and middle school pedagogy. In the end, it was research that served as my most useful tool.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The resulting curriculum took shape as a thirteen-day unit. The first half of the plan focuses on foundational learning, while the second allows students to apply their knowledge in a multimedia project. The format of the unit is one of its strongest characteristics. It is directly catered to a natural learning process that will excite and engage middle school students. By first utilizing what they already know, and then transferring knowledge into a new context, students are able to maximize their learning experience.

Additionally, this project has strength in its relevance. Many middle school students can directly relate to the content being taught. When students can view themselves within a curriculum, astounding learning connections can be achieved. Young students recognize the importance of this curriculum, and are hungry for the tools it provides them. Bringing this relevant curriculum to a social studies classroom will ensure an engaging and exciting learning experience.

However, this project is not without its limitations. The topic of media literacy is fascinating, but can be very limiting to many classrooms. Middle school social studies is often taught through a narrow lens. Many classes focus on topics like state or country history. It would be misinformed to assume that any social studies teacher could adopt this curriculum into their course. It certainly has relevance, however this relevance may not apply to the reestablished learning targets.

In the end, this project hosts several strengths and limitations. It is ideal for its purpose, and actively teaches students about media literacy in a compelling and engaging

manner. I am thrilled with the curriculum that was created as a result of my guiding research question, and I am excited to see the many applications it takes on throughout its relevant lifespan.

### **Applications**

It would be an honor to see this curriculum taught in any middle school setting. I hope to incorporate it into a future class of my own, and I encourage any social studies teachers to do the same. As our world continues to develop further into a virtual state, the relevancy of this curriculum will only grow stronger. It was certainly created with the students of today in mind, but there is nothing stopping the students of the future from obtaining these important skills.

I would be fascinated to see future media literacy curriculums developed for younger or older students. High schoolers could learn important lessons from a unit tailored to their developmental needs. While elementary students could practice media literacy skills before their full immersion into social media. There are many possible applications similar projects could develop. The aforementioned research could even be curated into a professional development series for adults. Media literacy is not an age dependent subject. Anyone with a love for learning can benefit from these skills. No matter our perspective, we live in a media-saturated world. The only thing we can control is how we choose to navigate it.

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