

The Power of Critical Media Literacy to Enable Middle Grade Students to Understand Poverty

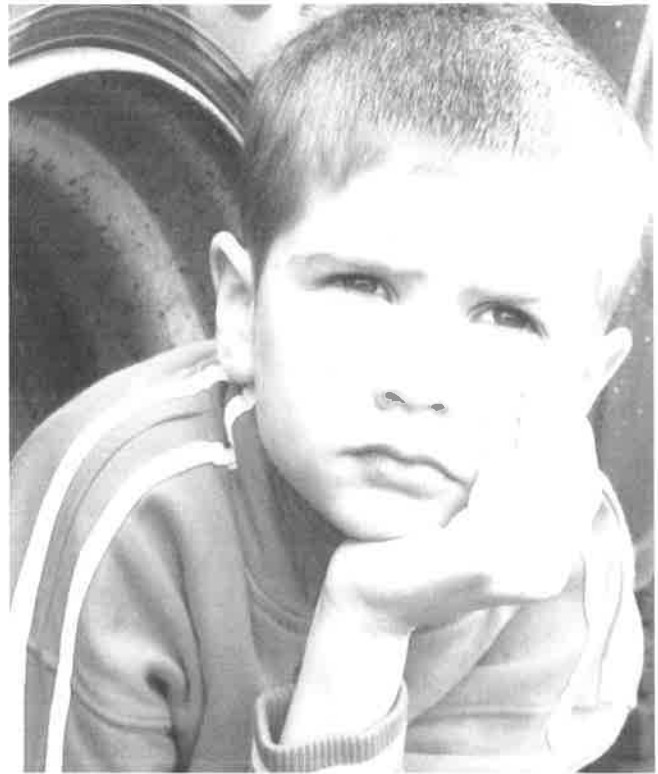
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Abstract

This research sought to understand how the use of critical media literacy enables middle grade students to understand poverty as a real and present issue. The study was conducted in one seventh-grade classroom in which the students viewed poverty from the perspective of children similar in age to them. The realities of poverty were presented to the students through the "Invisible Children" film. Afterwards, the students wrote reflections on the experience. Findings show that critical media literacy enabled the participants to develop a heightened awareness and to empathize with children of poverty so that the feeling dimension of learning became evident.

Introduction

Young adolescents are in constant motion. They love spending time at the mall, texting on their cell phones, and generally just hanging out with their friends. As a result, many young adolescents in the United States (US) are detached from the day-to-day realities that poverty entails in their immediate world. This is particularly true for students who are separated from poverty by neighborhoods or who attend upper middle class schools (Coles 2008/2009). With a lack of conceptual meaning, often times students in the US view poverty as not having materialistic goods. In addition, students in the US often associate poverty as temporary due to a natural disaster and because their homeland is the US, they believe life will soon improve for those who have been impacted. The results from seminal research studies (Feldman 1982; Schlozman & Verba, 1979; Sniderman & Brody, 1977) carried out in this field support this premise because, generally speaking, there is a tendency in developed countries to overestimate the power of individual factors as opposed to structural, situational or external factors. In other words, some economists believe that personal circumstances and actions are the primary determinants of one's personal economic situation, since it is believed that in a democratic society with equal opportunities for all, individuals are responsible for their own economic situation (Sniderman & Brody, 1977).



Despite the fact that literature is replete on the causes of poverty and its impact on society, very little work has been done on adolescents' conceptions of poverty (Furnham, 1982). When exposure to poverty has been limited, young adolescents have a paucity of prior knowledge from which to draw. Specifically, middle grade students are ill-prepared to learn about children on the other side of the world, much less close to home, who lack adequate shelter, food, clothing and education, but whose lives are part of the seventh-grade social studies curricula in many school districts in the US.

Statement of Problem

Research on adolescents' conceptions of poverty is minimal and marginal at best. However, this dearth of information is remarkable based on the large number of students who now live in poverty in the US. In 2009, there were forty-four million people (14.3%) living below or at the poverty line in the US (United States Bureau of the Census, 2009). Based on the current statistic, it is prudent for classroom teachers to engage their students in open discussions and build awareness on a socially relevant issue that will allow them to make meaningful connections to the real world and their own lives.

At the same time, there is an increasing recognition that media representations help construct our images and understanding of the world (Masterman, 1985; Torres & Mercado, 2006). Along with critical discussion, debate, and analysis, teachers ought to be

guiding students in an inquiry process that deepens their critical exploration of issues that affect them and society. From this stance, educators would do well to seize upon this recognition and expand the concept of poverty by implementing critical media literacy in their classrooms in order to sensitize their students to the inequities and injustices of a society (Kellner & Share, 2007a) that film and critical images can provide. Additionally, a plethora of literature focusing on the many applications of critical media literacy as a way to combat racism, stereotypes, and mainstream ideology exists (Eken, 2001; Luke, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). The gaps in research on critical media literacy's influence on middle grades students' understanding of poverty demonstrates a need for further research.

Current social studies curricula address a country's history, culture, geography, and economy which can bring about an awareness of a country's people. However, for students of the 21st century to truly understand and navigate the issues that underline poverty, research shows that the use of critical media images has had success (Kellner & Share, 2007b). In addition, regardless of how directly or indirectly children experience poverty, knowing what they think about poverty is important (Chafel, 1997; Ramsey, 1991). This study addressed this need.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how the use of critical media images enables middle grade students to understand poverty. Middle grade students have a difficult time understanding real poverty as a lack of shelter, food, and necessities for living. When the students in this study were asked to describe poverty, their responses indicated that many adolescents view poverty through a narrow lens of not having the latest cell phone, cool clothing, and other materialistic items.

In an attempt to shed light on the issue of poverty and as a means to invigorate democratic discussion about a societal problem that is relevant to their lives, this study focused on the children of Sudan and South Africa as part of a unit of study who were of similar age to the participants in this study, but who lived in dire conditions and struggled to survive. The ultimate goal was to move the participants' focus on poverty during their study of the children of Sudan and South Africa to a world they know, the United States.

Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik (1999) posit that young adolescents need advanced levels of literacy that can be achieved by reading a variety of texts, both print and non-print materials to support increasingly complex content. Using critical media literacy has been shown to develop student's analytical skills as

well as their critical thinking skills in the content area (Flynt & Brozo, 2010; Zamboo, 2009). In addition, critical media has been shown to be an effective tool for teaching students to engage in cultural inquiry in order to understand there are many ways of "being in the world" (Luke, 1999). Such an understanding involves the recognition that membership in a cultural group or a lack thereof, privileges some while disenfranchising others. The privileged members are often elevated to an enhanced status with power in society and their actions impact the poor. Subsequently, for the students of Sudan and South Africa, "being in the world" means a life of poverty with no privileges.

Pursuant to the above, this study was both descriptive and exploratory and was guided by the following research question: How does the use of critical media literacy enable middle grade (seventh grade) students to understand poverty?

Methodology

A Qualitative Study

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how the use of critical media literacy enables middle grade students to understand poverty. As a result, this qualitative natural inquiry was methodologically eclectic, making use of full participant observation as teacher-researcher (Burnaford, Fischer, & Hobson, 2001) and grounded theory development (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) using an ethnographic perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Green, Dixon, & Zaharlick, 2003) to describe the literacy events, the collection of data, and the narrative findings. In this study, the teacher-researcher's immediacy and interconnectedness to the student participants was unavoidable; therefore, it is important to acknowledge the potential for bias from the teacher-researcher's position.

The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this study defined particular points-of-view and identified underlying assumptions from which the research question was generated. Specifically, this study drew from ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Green, Dixon, & Zaharlick, 2003), social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Wertsch, 1991), and critical transformational theory (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997). LeCompte and Schensul (1999) offer that an ethnographic perspective uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret how people think, believe, and behave. For purposes of this study, an ethnographic perspective was needed to understand how the use of critical media literacy fostered a classroom culture that was supportive and student-centered so that the seventh-grade students could discover their voices, critique the media messages,

and begin to create a more caring society through dialogue. Wertsch (1991) posits that reality is created through exchanges of social processes and meaning is derived collectively among people. Accordingly, a social constructivist paradigm provided a meaningful lens for this research study in order to interpret and describe how the seventh grade students co-constructed the meaning of poverty as the students worked together in the interactive social setting of the classroom. Correspondingly, a critical perspective paradigm assumes that reality and knowledge are constructed but driven by power and power relations, and the inquirer attempts to uncover the dynamics of the ideology and power (Paul, 2005). In this context, inquiry involves social and cultural criticism. For purposes of this study, the critical perspective paradigm provided a lens to understand how the use of critical media images and film was a way for the seventh grade students to enter into criticality (Mellor & Patterson, 2000) by unpacking different layers of meaning from media texts, specifically when the texts represented degrees of power.

The Context for the Study

Research Context

The focal school for this study was Smith Middle School (a pseudonym) and is located in a rural area of the southeastern corner of the United States. It is one of eight schools in a county school system that covers 479.5 square miles. According to data for the 2009-2010 year, Smith Middle School is a Title I school and students who are eligible for discounted/free lunch are 52% of the student population.

Participants

The teacher-researcher in this study was assigned to a Language Arts/Social Studies classroom for a pre-service teaching field experience and worked with two existing groups of seventh grade students who attended this class for their Language Arts/Social Studies block. Because this study used two existing groups of students ($N = 46$), a convenient sampling technique was in place. Each group received a 90 minute block of instructional time in this classroom every day. Permission to conduct the study was obtained by both the superintendent of the school system and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Georgia Southern University.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

Data Sources

In order to gather data, the teacher-researcher used a multiplicity of data sources. These sources presented original thinking, new discoveries, and new information, and further provided research credibility because the sources provided authentic data upon which the study was based. The primary sources included: (1)

anecdotal records, (2) research log and field notes, and (3) student-produced artifacts which consisted of forty-six student response journals that captured the participants' thoughts, emotions, and understandings at the time of the event or shortly after. The purpose was to understand what was happening and what was being produced in the context of video viewing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that student artifacts provide information about insights into student behavior and learning. Further, student-produced texts provide rich data that can be examined on an on-going basis. For purposes of this study, the student participants produced response journals in order to reflect on the images they viewed from Sudan and South Africa and as a way to develop their critical thinking.

Data Collection

Data collection procedures required the teacher-researcher to act from within and to interpret the infused meaning of the social context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Purcell-Gates, 1995) while collecting data that developed in a real-world culture (Geertz, 1973). This task was accomplished through a number of different procedures and included: (1) participant observation, (2) field notes, (3) anecdotal records, (4) informal conversations with the student participants, and (4) student-produced artifacts, such as student journal entries.

Data Analysis

According to Spradley (1980), the goal of data analysis is to make sense out of data in order to discover similarities and differences, build typologies, or find patterns about the phenomena under study. For purposes of this research study, the data was analyzed according to the prescribed coding methods that follow the typical protocol of a natural inquiry involving an ethnographic perspective (Gee & Green, 1998; Spradley, 1979), which meant perusal of the data for emerging themes and categories, followed by revision of those themes and categories with every round of analysis and making data analysis a recursive process. Subsequently, the teacher-researcher began the process of generating theory from data using a three-level process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify patterns, categories, and themes of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Focusing on the forty-six journal responses, open coding required the teacher-researcher to read each line, sentence, and paragraph with the intention of determining what the data was all about. Pertinent words, phrases, and sentences were written and coded in the margins. Memos were made in reference to possible relationships between categories. The basic idea of the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) is to read and reread a textual

database and discover or label categories, concepts and properties, and their interrelationships. The inductive nature of grounded theory enabled the teacher-researcher to embrace an interpretive stance in which subtle degrees of contextual meaning were considered, rather than an objective stance.

From this stance, the teacher-researcher began to construct categories (Leininger, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) that emerged from analysis of the literacy practices within response activities to identify how the participants engaged the media text and the types of practices demonstrated, thinking comparatively in terms of properties that would permit further analysis between the data. Through observations, anecdotal records, and the students' dialogue journals, two domains or categories emerged that encompassed a range of emotions that were voiced and displayed. The two domains were student self-awareness of poverty and discernment for others' well being.

Subsequently, the next level of analysis involved an ethnographically grounded approach using axial coding to focus more on the significant words and phrases, reading line by line to see what themes emerged. During this phase of the data analysis process, the anecdotal records and the field notes were reviewed and theoretical notes were made using a constant comparison method in order to determine what properties were comparatively the same and which properties were different (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The researcher categorized data, developed codes, and then refined and renamed the codes as new data was integrated.

In the final phase of data analysis, the categories were scrutinized further and formulated into themes (Leininger, 1985) that were supported by literature and the findings of the research study (see Figure 1). Concurrently, the teacher-researcher returned to the literature to craft valid justification for the themes that emerged. In order to increase the study's trustworthiness and authenticity, detailed records of data collection, coding, and analysis procedures were independently reviewed by a faculty research mentor to ensure how the teacher-researcher arrived at the conclusions.

Results

For purposes of this discussion, the findings from data analysis are organized in two sections. Subsequently, the first section presents the two research themes that emerged as a result of the thematic analysis (Leininger, 1985). Supported by the research themes, the second section addresses the findings of the research question that guided this study. Throughout this discussion, examples of data are provided to

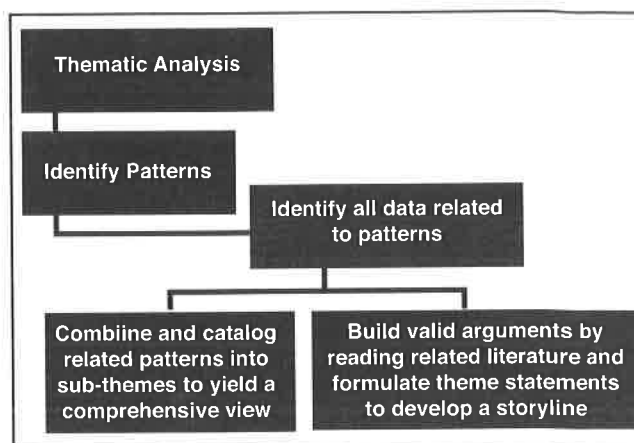


Figure 1 *Thematic analysis (Leininger, 1985) focuses on identifying themes and patterns. When all codes are determined, the researcher observes relationships between the codes and places them within a specific pattern. When all data is related to their specific patterns, the patterns are catalogued into sub-themes. The researcher then turns to the related literature to find ways to build a valid argument. The theme statements are then used to develop the narrative findings.*

highlight the findings. In doing so, several criteria were followed. First, data accounts were selected to illustrate the findings that were representative of the research question and data examples were chosen that were typical of events and patterns across the research study.

Thematic Analysis

From the development of an ethnographic theme analysis (Leininger, 1985) informed by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) to understand how the use of critical media literacy informed seventh-grade students' understanding of poverty, two overarching themes emerged (see Table 1). The themes instantiate the students' critical thinking processes during discussion and journal response time and provide a comprehensible framework to understand the findings of this study by bringing together components of individual students' responses to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experiences.

Answering the Research Question

In response to the research question, How does the use of critical media literacy enable middle grade (seventh grade) students to understand poverty?; this study found that critical media literacy enables students to develop a heightened awareness that poverty is real and to develop empathy for those who live in poverty such that the affective dimension of learning became evident.

Interactions	Themes
CML-S	Critical media literacy is a forum for students to begin to understand poverty
CML-S-RJ	Classroom discussion, reflection, and film promoted acting for justice

Note: Themes developed from ethnographic thematic analysis informed by grounded theory. S = students; RJ = response journals; CML = critical media literacy.

TABLE 1 *Two Research Themes*

The manner in which the participants responded to critical images of poverty were observed and recorded during the film showing of *The Invisible Children* (Russell, Bailey, & Poole, 2004). Data analysis consistently found the film impacted the participants emotionally and became a venue from which the students began to develop a concept of poverty. Following a brief synopsis of the film, excerpts from student journals are provided to illustrate this point.

The film opens with the introduction of three young Americans (Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole) who are attempting to film different parts of Africa. However, the purpose for their trip quickly changed when the Americans find themselves stranded in Northern Uganda and the southern tip of Sudan and become witnesses to untold horrors.

While stranded, they discovered that children were being kidnapped nightly from their homes and forced to become child soldiers. The film focuses on four young boys, Jacob, Thomas, Tony, and Boni, and it is through their eyes that viewers are exposed to the harsh realities of poverty and child abductions. The film shows thousands of children leaving their villages nightly to sleep under a hospital where they feel safe, in bus parks, and other public locations as a way of avoiding abduction into the Lord's Resistant Army. They sleep in public places, vulnerable, without supervision, and without food.

The three Americans left Africa appalled by the living conditions of the children in Southern Sudan and Northern Uganda. Believing that the "invisible children's" story could inspire others to do something, as it did them, they created a documentary, which is now known as the *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*. All students' names in the following sections are pseudonyms.

Domain of heightened awareness. Data analysis consistently showed that as the students recorded

their feelings and reactions to the critical images of Sudan and South Africa, they became more aware of the plight of the two nations' children, such that each participant in the study became more aware of poverty and its ramifications. While viewing the film, words such as "mad," "depressed," and "angry" came up frequently as the students expressed their outrage with the conflict that jeopardized the lives of children their age. In addition as the students became more aware, data analysis revealed how the students' hopes and wishes for outside intervention grew stronger and this awareness was captured in the student response journals. For example, Sean records in his journal, "These children are being used cause they are poor. This makes me angry."

Susan responds in her journal, "I didn't know anything like this ever happened. I'm mad that nobody cares. Where is the United States?"

"I guess the soldiers get by with it because they know the kids are poor and nobody can take care of them. They need help," Graham writes.

In the film, the resilience and power of the human spirit in the most desperate of circumstances is repeatedly demonstrated. This did not go unnoticed by the student participants. In fact, data analysis found that the film acted as an agent to move the students into a heightened state of awareness that the poor are often victimized by those in power. Some begin to think about their own lives.

For example, Chasity writes, "I saw kids that were tortured by soldiers and forced against their will to fight in wars. They were stolen because they were poor and they were brainwashed into killing villages full of people."

Jennifer's response says, "It is just wrong to use kids as killers because they have to live with it for the rest of their lives. They've had their youth taken from them because they were poor. This is wrong and I wouldn't want to live that way."

"Many don't get an education; I'm lucky to have a home and food. I'm not forced to fight in a war or be a victim unlike them. I don't suffer their crisis," Jessica writes in her journal.

Like Chasity, Jennifer, and Jessica, many of the other students were very sensitive about the young Africans' mistreatment and this same understanding was reflected in other student journals where words such as "forced against their will to fight," "lack protection," and "their lives are disadvantaged in comparison to American children" were written time and again.

From data analysis, the findings showed that as the students became more in tune to the suffering of the African children, they equated this oppression to the fact that the African children were poor and those with power used them. Subsequently, several students hoped for a better life for the abducted children in Sudan and South Africa, and several students expressed their gratitude when people moved into help. Finally, some students were moved to want to act on their own from viewing the film. For example, Jacob writes, "Now I feel like I want to donate money. I wish the people in Africa can have a nice home and a great job that makes them money."

"They deserve better than what they are getting. If I could go over there right now, I would give them everything I could give them," David writes in his journal.

Another offer to help is made when Michelle writes, "I really want to go over to Sudan now and help those children and keep them out of the violence."

Finally, Lisa's words seem to capture the meaning of poverty from her perspective and an indication she has captured the film makers' hidden agenda for creating the documentary when she writes, "When I watched the film, to me it makes you want to help them, give them an education, home and food where they can enjoy life without having to starve or not have any clothes."

Using the film's influence, the teacher-researcher introduced the students to graphic images in order to shift their focus from poverty in the film, to poverty in the US. Photos of a homeless woman who carried her entire belongings in a shopping cart, children digging through garbage receptacles for food, and children and their families housed in homeless shelters were just a few examples the teacher-researcher used. The photos became a wake-up call for this audience who had little exposure to poverty. Accordingly, the teacher-researcher began to raise the students' responsiveness toward poverty in America by posing critical questions, such as: What does the photographer want us to know? What view of the world is this photo presenting? Whose voice is missing and or whose voices are silenced in the images and why? What forces exist in the United States that created the conditions for the people in the photos? By modeling for the student participants strategic practices in critical literacy, the teacher-researcher was able to scaffold learning such that the students began to ask why and for what reason does poverty exist in America and who profits at the expense of the poor? The teacher-researcher learned that through discussions that reflected a power differential between

the haves and have-nots, the students consciously gave thought about their world and voiced the actions they would take to enact social change. Naidoo (1992) supports this finding by explicating that students will not change their stance while reading if teachers do not challenge them to question literature. As a result, the students gradually developed the knowledge to question the film makers' purpose, to negotiate the meanings, and to fill-in the textual gaps and silences the photos posed (Fairclough, 1989). By engaging in critical conversations about poverty, the collaborative nature of the social learning environment gradually enabled the participants to co-construct knowledge and develop a personal and a social significance about the issue of poverty.

From analysis of the participants' response journals, the film and graphic images became a vehicle for the participants in this study to formulate a conception of poverty. In other words, the students reasoned that the lives of the African children were tormented and oppressed because of their impoverished circumstances. Further, the students developed an understanding that poverty has no boundaries and that people in their own country struggle each day to eat, find shelter, and exist in impoverished circumstances. From the film's influence, this conception developed first from a heightened awareness of poverty and then grew to the point the participants began to think about taking action to assist the students in Sudan and South Africa. This finding is supported by Luke (1999) who found that the use of film, video, and media images in classrooms not only teaches students to learn from media, but to use media materials in constructive ways to become critical competent citizens in social life. In conjunction, this finding is in keeping with Kellner and Share (2007b) who posit that the nature of critical media literacy focuses on empowering learners to become change-agents engaged in social action.

Wertsch (1991) assumed that learning involves social negotiation and mediation by tools or signs. This assumption provides support for the domain of heightened awareness. In short, social constructivism provided a lens to understand how the students in this study were involved in a continual process of analyzing assumptions, revising judgments, and comparing and contrasting their world to the world in the film to arrive at meaning. In addition, the domain of heightened awareness is supported by Comer and Simpson's (2001) views of the critical perspective paradigm. As the students developed an awareness of poverty, they were motivated to question, uncover the dynamics of power within the film, and strive to understand who benefits and who does not.

Domain of affective learning. The domain of affective

learning highlights the students' emotional responses to the video and the media's influence on the students' understanding of poverty. Bloom (1985) explains that simple affective behaviors, such as receiving and responding to phenomena, are the most basic examples in which students deal with things emotionally. The feeling dimension of learning can be found in the following brief written excerpts as students responded to *The Invisible Children* film. For example, Brandon writes, "I think that we should all appreciate everything we get even if we don't like it. I feel sorry for the African kids. They have nothing."

"The video made me feel thankful. I am thankful I have a house not a cardboard box. I am glad I can get an education and not be forced to fight in war or be scared that somebody will kidnap me," Ashley responds in her journal.

Adam's journal reveals, "I also realized how greed from many people has forced many more people into a life of poverty and filth, despite how foreigners such as the U.S. and U.N. tried to stop it. I worry about those children in the film. My life is warm and safe."

"This film has opened my eyes to the dangers of poverty. I've now realized my life is easy compared to what other children have to put up with. I question why the people of Africa or any country hurts children like this?" Mark reflects.

Many other participants' responses mirrored the statements above by Brandon, Ashley, Adam, and Mark. In other words, the participants realized that they have a home, free education and food, while children in the film lack proper shelter, if any, food, education and a safe environment. The participants' statements show that they made an emotional connection to the children in the film and in doing so, their response reflections indicate they reacted from the perspective of their own lived experiences. The glimpse of poverty and war from children of comparable age allowed the participants to offer sensitive journal responses and develop empathy for the children in the film. This finding parallels other research conclusions (Gainer, 2010; Rogers and Schofield, 2005) that critical media literacy functions as a tool to teach students reflection. Analysis of the data further showed that as the students perceived and inferred the emotional state of the children in the film and the graphic photos with their own, they in turn voiced their own conscious affective state through channels of written communication. Bloom (1985) refers to this as a process of internalizing values and is characterized in such a manner that it is not enough to understand, even deeply, students must communicate that understanding through a prescribed internal system of beliefs and values. To state

succinctly, the feeling dimension of learning became evident through the journal response reflections. The following brief excerpt from Kaley's dialogue journal highlights the personal connection she has made from viewing the film and the examination of graphic images.

I feel sorry for those children. I can somewhat connect to all the poor children I saw 'cause I know I don't have what others in my class have 'cause my mom can't afford them. I never thought about it but I guess I'm poor. I know I'm hungry all the time but I still feel sorry for those children in the film.

At the same time, the students' journal responses highlight how the participants began to unwittingly engage in social and cultural criticism. This behavior is supported by the critical perspective paradigm. Paul (2005) explicates that reality and knowledge are constructed but driven by power and the inquirer attempts to uncover the dynamics of power. In this context, the students' responses reveal they were beginning to grapple with the dynamics of power. When Adam writes about "greed" and Mark questions "why the people of Africa or any country hurts children like this," the responses reveal they were beginning to associate poverty and its relation to the concept of power. This finding is supported by McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) who found with the incorporation of critical media literacy, students no longer watch films just for exposure; students watch films with a critical eye and learn how social and political forces marginalize many lives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to understand how critical media literacy enables middle grade students to understand poverty. The research focused on teaching poverty in Sudan and South Africa through the use of critical images and the *Invisible Children* film to serve as a catalyst for understanding poverty in America. The research findings indicate that the use of critical media literacy creates an environment where students gradually develop an understanding that poverty is real, poverty is cruel, and that poverty does not recognize international boundaries. Within this context, the findings show that the participants tapped into their own personal feelings and by doing so, the process provoked a level of heightened awareness of poverty and the affective domain of learning occurred. In this study, several factors contributed to transforming the participants' conception of poverty and include: (1) the realism of the images (2) the age similarity of the participants in the study to the age of the children shown in the *Invisible Children* film, and (3) exposure to images outside of the textbook. First, the realistic images gave the participants an accurate

representation of poverty in Sudan and South Africa that are frequently not shown in classrooms or from textbook resources. The graphic photos of children and families who struggle to survive in the United States, served as a catalyst that many endure impoverished conditions in their own country. In addition, the age similarity of the participants in the research to the children featured in the Invisible Children created an emotional connection for the participants in the study such that the participants were able to view the pain and suffering from the perspective of a child in the featured film. Finally, the harsh exposure to images of poverty in Sudan, South Africa, and the United States outside the textbook resources gave students the chance to view poverty as realistically as possible from primary sources.

When taken together, the three factors provided a context for learning that acted as an agent for the students to develop an understanding of poverty, such that poverty became poor nutrition, substandard housing, and the threat of violence from those in power as in the film. These conceptions gradually replaced their first impressions that poverty means a lack of material goods. The students' reflections highlight the comparative nature of what it means to be poor as they grappled to understand the forces that exist to allow poverty to occur.

Through a heightened awareness that children on the other side of the world and in the United States live in deplorable conditions, the conscious state of others in poverty made the students become empathetic to those in poverty and less fortunate than themselves. To summarize, this research found that critical media literacy creates an environment for students to begin to understand poverty and its ramifications and from that understanding, the participants in this study became empathetic to the needs of the poor, both globally and at home.

Concluding Remarks

In an attempt to build new forms of knowledge, young adolescents in the US can begin to understand poverty is real, both at home and internationally, when teachers implement critical media in the classroom. When teachers teach critical media literacy skills, they equip students to ask questions about the text, about power and social issues, about images used in texts, and how those images portray different groups of people (Kellner & Share, 2005). Critically literate students seek issues of fairness in what they read and see, and they learn to be more than critical thinkers; they learn to be proactive and take on social responsibility.

The significance of this study lies on the assumption that reshaping literacy experiences for middle grade students, leads to the construction and development of particular types of knowledge and competencies. From this stance, the development of critical media literacy, including the responses of the participants and contextual practices that facilitated it, and the influence of media images and film that evoked the responses from a sociocultural perspective adds a new dimension to the field of social studies and gives middle grade students a fresh alternative to become critical consumers of information. In addition, this study adds to the argument that critical media literacy improves students' abilities to be multimodal in their meaning-making (New London Group, 2000), to be critical thinkers, and to establish social justice awareness (Kellner & Share, 2007a), which are competencies needed if middle grade students are going to begin to address poverty as a real issue.

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