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# 1st Place: Critical Media Literacy: Liberating the "Criminal" and Empowering African American Males (Contest Entry)

Talia Cain

Chapman University, cain117@mail.chapman.edu

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## Essay:

### Applying Critical Thinking to the Research Process

I remember the moment I heard the prompt: “Choose any educational issue that interests you.” My heart started racing and pen started scribbling; complete intellectual freedom. I began by using the Leatherby Libraries online general databases, such as JSTOR and Academic Search Premier, to scan through abstracts of literature reviews and empirical studies that pertained to the African American male school experience. I used the subject terms: African American experience, schools, racial identity, educational equity, and academic achievement. I soon recognized a pattern: the role of the media in stereotyping African American males as criminals and the negative impact this has on them in school.

I redefined my research question to focus on media. Using an interdisciplinary approach, I searched the electronic databases Education Full Text, PsycINFO, ERIC, ScienceDirect, Criminal Justice Abstracts, and Sage Journals Online. Narrowing my subject terms to media, representation, achievement gap, criminality, and social constructivism helped me discover research on the benefits of developing critical media literacy in schools. After, I spent six hours searching for books in the library catalogue, leaving with 14 checked out. I then created an online document to organize my sources and evidence.

When finding sources, I paid close attention to how changing the keywords altered search results. The best results came from pairing two subject terms and indicating how the terms were related. Using the advanced searches option, I allowed the system to apply equivalent subjects and search words in order to get more related results. Also, I applied certain limitations to ensure credible, timely sources. I only allowed for scholarly, peer-reviewed journals that were published

from 1990-present. This narrowed my results significantly, in some cases from over 1,000 results to under a 100, and helped contextualize my research to be more reflective of contemporary conversations.

Applying the criteria of TRAAP was the crucial component to critically evaluating whether or not I would use a source. For example, I chose to use the article “African American men as ‘criminal and dangerous’: Implications of media portrayals of crime on the ‘criminalization’ of African American men” because it was published in a peer-reviewed journal (*Journal of African American Studies*), and provided an in-depth literature review of related studies to back up its arguments with evidence. The author of this study, Mary Beth Oliver, is credible because she serves as a distinguished professor of media studies at Penn State College of Communications. Also, the study took place in 2003, which makes it timely.

In contrast, a research article titled “These people are never going to stop labeling me: Educational experiences of African American male students labeled with learning disabilities” matched with many of my subject terms, however, was not relevant to my thesis. Also, the small sample size and qualitative data collection made it hard to generalize. Thus, when selecting sources, I aimed to find empirical studies that had quantitative and qualitative mixed methodologies, large sample sizes, and diverse demographics.

For this project specifically, I did not consult with a librarian or use a library service. In previous classes I have received library instruction sessions and sought library staff support. From these experiences, I felt I gained sufficient library knowledge, research skills, and understanding of the importance of citing sources correctly to complete this project independently.

As a result of this project, I learned the value in evaluating sources carefully and giving the research process time. I developed techniques for identifying whether or not a source is valuable and credible. I expanded my ability to use library resources, question the intent and purpose of a source, and apply both critical and creative thinking to the research process. I also learned how to use sources to challenge my own biases and assumptions. The researcher is ultimately entering a preexisting conversation on a certain subject. Thus, investing the time to listen to what is already being said about a topic allows the research question to develop, and helps the scholar engage with the subject in more meaningful and impactful ways.

The skills I gained in this research project will benefit me as I begin my own independent study on the relationship between school discipline and attitudes towards learning. I also plan on attending graduate school, where I hope to conduct social-justice oriented research that merges activism and academics to examine the educational needs and experiences of marginalized groups. For peer scholars, this research project is valuable because it helps raise awareness to the subtle ways blindly participating with media may contribute to disparities in academic achievement. Therefore, this project may serve to help people stop viewing minorities as the problem, but instead, see how larger social forces produce failure. Overall, I intend to use what I learned to be a more careful, critical, and thought-provoking scholar with goals of promoting equitable social change through research.

### **3. Summary and Bibliography Instructions**

Please provide a 250-500 word abstract of your paper/project along with a complete works cited list, reference list, or bibliography in APA, MLA, Chicago, or other recognized style. Do not submit your entire paper!

#### **Summary and Bibliography:**

News media overrepresents African American males as criminals, creating a problematic association between criminal identity and African American male identity. Film, television, music, and other forms of mainstream entertainment media also perpetuate the stereotype of African American male as criminal through their emphasis on violent and aggressive African American male characters. This project explores how media contributes to the criminalization of African American males, and the detrimental effects this then has on African American male students in school settings.

Psychological studies imply that, as a result of media, African American students have internalized harmful representations and learned to see themselves as only capable of deviance and criminality. By also analyzing current research on the socialization and educational experiences of African Americans, this project concludes that educators, policy makers, and community members must step out of their cultural deficit models and stop blaming young African American males for their achievement gaps and delinquent behaviors.

This project advocates that members of society must look closer at the structural inequalities and contextual influences producing these negative outcomes, and thus, hold the media accountable for the role it plays in maintaining harmful stereotypes. Finally, this project examines how critical media literacy should be implemented in required high school courses to

ameliorate stereotypical thinking and, thus, improve school and societal outcomes for African American males.

Critically media literacy empowers students because it provides opportunities to critically question systems of privilege and oppression, allows for diversity of interpretation, and enables students to bring their own experiences, perspectives, and culture to the classroom. Critical media literacy is exceptionally necessary for African American adolescent males because it offers them a space to reclaim their identity and interrogate the images that are projected onto them. Teachers of critical media literacy should merely guide students in discussion and by reversing authority in the classroom, learning becomes a two-way street, and no narrative or interpretation is privileged over others.

In the expanding digital age, where media dictates truth and influences a large portion of adolescent identity, it is essential that those most afflicted by the process, namely, African American males, be given tools for furthering social justice and equitable outcomes. Critical media pedagogy is one way of deconstructing the media's normalization of what it means to be a criminal, and therefore, is an effective way to reverse negative expectations and outcomes of African Americans in schools and society. The purpose of our education system should reflect the aims of our democratic system; therefore, schools *should* be utilizing their power to mobilize movements towards social justice, liberty, and equality.

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