

Chapter 5

Ariel and Buzz Lightyear are Coming to School: Incorporating Children's Popular Culture Ideas in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will examine how preschool teachers can facilitate the use of popular culture oriented technology in the classroom. Acknowledging that ideology and social class play a major role in the inclusion/ rejection of popular culture technology children interact with in the United States, this chapter outlines the approaches teachers can take in understanding (and in some cases incorporating) popular culture technology into the classroom to more effectively bridge home and school environments.

INTRODUCTION: THE POP CULTURE WARS

I think it's time we called a truce in this thankless no-win war with our kids over popular culture. That doesn't mean putting aside our concerns or turning a blind eye to its excesses. Nor does it mean throwing up our hands, abdicating our

legitimate responsibilities as adults and giving kids carte blanche to watch and do whatever they want. But it does mean engaging in genuine dialogue with kids and making an effort to find some kind of modus vivendi with Kid Culture. In truth we don't have much of a choice: popular culture is a fact of contemporary life that isn't going to go away. The only way to avoid it is to go live in the woods or on another planet; even

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then the kids will find a way to build a satellite dish. (Mc Donnell, 2001, p.18-19)

Popular culture, often understood as images and ideas from television, video games and movies, is to say the least, a contentious subject and one with well known critiques. These critiques, based on conceptions of children as vulnerable, malleable and innocent (Cross, 2004; James, Jenkins; 1998; Jenks and Prout; 1998) by and large view exposure to popular culture images as detrimental. This notion, rooted in affect paradigms of developmental psychology typically construct children as powerless to stop the adverse effects of media images and messages (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004; Huesmann, 1986). As discussed by McDonnell (2001) in the opening passage, popular culture and media are also perceived as facilitating an adversarial relationship between adults and children. At the heart of the struggle is the assumption that parents and teachers will universally abhor popular culture and children will universally crave it.

Its reputation is well known, and not typically favorable. Popular culture is the soda and cotton candy to the fruits and vegetables of more quality practices; arguably more delicious and fun to consume but with no nutritional value. It is considered pedestrian, banal and sometimes even harmful, typically found lacking when compared to materials considered “quality”, and are not coincidentally aligned with educational practices and materials. As such it is typically rejected in schools, seen as non-applicable and treated as a distraction.

“Technology” in the purest sense is understood as hardware (television, video cassette and DVD players, computers, smart phones, videogame systems and educational learning systems). Often times the images and characters delivered through hardware are omitted. In this chapter, I use the amalgamated term *popular culture technology* to include images and ideas from media

in addition to the hardware systems (computers, games systems and accessories). In many cases it is difficult to define what constitutes popular culture as in early childhood there is a close marriage of popular culture images and technology, particularly in edutainment software and systems where programs featuring Diego, Dora and Mickey Mouse abound. These ideas typically pale in comparison to expected activities in many preschools. Based on recommendations from such groups as NAEYC, many schools prefer activities that are seen to promote emergent literacy skills and developmentally appropriate practice (Henward, 2012). They represent educational ideals that are manifested in activities considered typically more hands-on and active than might be found in traditional elementary schools. On the few occasions popular culture media is welcomed into the classroom, it is typically accepted with the intent of examining it through the lens of critical media literacy (though typically not in preschool), or included as a reward in after-school programs and holidays, reinforcing the separation between “serious” academic work and media as fluff. But as I suggest, drawing on a comparative/ critical ethnography of popular culture in preschools of stratified social class, conducted in 2009/2010, this “distaste” shown by schools and some parents for popular culture is not a universal belief; it is heavily dependent on its articulation. As such the interpretation of the subject and opinions surrounding it are informed by factors such as social class and ideology of parents and school officials (Tobin & Henward, 2011).

For the purpose of this chapter, ideology can simply be defined as the collective belief of parents and or teachers of a preschool. It can include educational philosophies such as Montessori, Waldorf or Reggio Emilia, but also can include religious approaches, such as those that would be found in a religious preschool setting (i.e. Church Temple or Synagogue based). Often times understood as goals or missions, these beliefs are often reflected in the curriculum of preschools. Understanding

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