Popular Culture as an Educative Teaching Tool in the Elementary Classroom

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate popular culture to educate in the elementary school classroom. Using secondary research in education and cultural studies, we investigated how teachers can use popular media to enhance student learning and develop critical media literacy skills. Findings revealed popular culture is a helpful teaching tool in elementary school classrooms. Knowledge of popular culture does not impede education but is a large part of students’ literacy practices. By embracing popular culture, students develop the literacies needed to navigate 21st-century schools and engage in critical pedagogy. Further studies are required to establish how elementary school teachers can use popular texts in their classrooms and overcome literacy challenges they may face.

Keywords: Popular Culture, Multiliteracies, Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Popular culture permeates the everyday lives of people in society (Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Rogers, 2021). Media impacts us via films, television shows, books, comics, video games, the toys we play with, and the clothes we wear. Our interactions with media have influenced who we are, how we express ourselves, and our tastes and values.

Popular culture plays a critical role in children’s lives as most engage with many popular cultural forms outside of school (Parry, 2013; Rogers, 2021). There was a time when we all believed a chubby, rosy-cheeked, jolly man with a white beard would come down our chimney and leave a present under our tree (Theobald et al., 2018), and a fairy would leave money under our pillow after losing a tooth. We imagine ourselves as popular singers and perhaps as fictional characters (Wizard). Popular culture stimulates children’s imaginations and offers them a realm to escape, leaving the real world behind (Jenkins, 1999). Children can escape to a world with a magic flying carpet, talking animal friends, or dwarf friends. They can play with toys, such as lightsabers and wizard wands. They can also dress up in their favourite superhero costumes and save the world from alien destruction.

These interactions with popular culture texts affect a child’s development and critical thinking and literacy skills (Marsh & Millard, 2000; Rogers, 2021) as they process and reflect upon their beliefs, values, desires, and expectations (Brode, 2004; Tavin & Anderson, 2003). Commercial institutions, like the Disney oligopoly, are significant contributors to children’s popular visual
imagery in contemporary society (Brode, 2004; Giroux, 2011; Tavin & Anderson, 2003). Disney “has had such a wide, deep, and pervasive influence on the public imagination” since the mid-1950s (Brode, 2004, p. x). Disney, and others like them, use their access to resources, like cultural capital, media, and money, to maintain the status quo. As a result, many cultural texts that children interact with are “sutured to dominant discourses around gender, race, ethnicity, and history” (Tavin & Anderson, 2003, p. 24).

Some would argue that popular culture is simply a source of mindless entertainment, and people, without question, absorb their meanings “as if they were simply a natural or logical outgrowth of the story” (Jenkins, 1999, p. 2). Unfortunately, many people, especially children, do not scrutinize or debate the popular messages they see or hear. Instead, many children accept the stories and their messages presented in popular discourse (Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Giroux, 2011). They lack the tools or space to discuss their concerns and question media messages. As a result, they are not learning the skills to discern and critique the intentions behind popular messages.

Furthermore, because children interact with popular culture out-of-school, many teachers are reluctant to incorporate popular culture into the classroom (Adams, 2011; Jewitt, 2008). Herein, we explore whether popular culture has a place in the elementary school classroom. It was hypothesized that education should incorporate popular culture. We discuss how teachers should explore their professional identity (Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Delamarter, 2015; Fisher et al., 2008; Jewitt, 2008; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Sfeir, 2014) and suggest how teachers need to integrate students’ home and school experiences into the learning process (Evans, 2004; Jewitt, 2008; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Parry, 2013; Sfeir, 2014; Weld, 2011). We investigate how teachers can use popular culture texts to discuss racism, violence, sexism, and commercialism. By helping students become critical readers of popular cultural texts and their messages, students will learn to deconstruct the educational and social systems that reflect the dominant culture’s behaviours, values, and beliefs (Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Jewitt, 2008; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Rets, 2016; Saunders & Wong, 2020). We conclude by illuminating some of the challenges of incorporating popular culture and how teachers can overcome these hurdles (Arthur, 2001; Jenkins, 2009; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Moore, 2011; Mueller et al., 2018; Rets, 2016).

Scholarly research recognizes the prevalence of popular culture in the lives of children. Some researchers have provided theoretical findings for the benefits and challenges of incorporating popular culture into education. Other researchers have studied the importance of using popular culture to help students develop critical literacy skills. However, little scholarly research provides a comprehensive understanding of how teacher identity is affected by popular culture, why popular culture is vital in the classroom to acquire new literacies and engage in critical media literacy pedagogy, and how elementary teachers can transform theoretical findings into classroom praxes.

This qualitative effort explores whether popular culture is a useful teaching tool for elementary school teachers. We examine how a teacher’s relationship to popular culture has impacted their professional teacher identity. Second, we reveal how the intertwining of popular culture with the lives of children can be leveraged in the classroom to develop literacy skills. Third, we demonstrate how teachers can foster critical pedagogy in their elementary classrooms via popular texts that can challenge elements of violence, racism, sexism, and commercialism. We suggest practical applications of teachers using popular culture texts in their classrooms, which can help teachers think about how they can transform the theory into pedagogical practice. We offer recommendations to help apprehend the impacts of popular culture within the 21st-century school.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Popular culture permeates the internet, social media, visual images, television and film, making popular culture a strong cultural force in their lives. Researchers estimate that youth ages 2-11 are exposed to 25,600 TV ads yearly (Rideout, 2014). This daily exposure has significantly influenced their lives and shaped their attitudes (Sandlin & Garlen, 2017; Saunders & Wong, 2020; Sekarasih et al., 2015). Although many adults have learned to evaluate information, many children have not learned these skills. They have not learned to critically examine popular messages for truth (Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Giroux, 2011; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Rogers, 2021). Instead, they often accept
these messages as truth and are not encouraged or provided with the tools to engage in personal analytical and critical reflection.

Given how influential popular culture is in the lives of children, researchers of education and cultural studies have been interested in popular culture’s inclusion within the classroom to promote engagement and build critical literacy (Robertson & Scheidler-Benns, 2016; Saunders & Wong, 2020). However, incorporating popular culture within the classroom has faced some opposition (Mueller et al., 2018; Naumovska & Milenkovska, 2017; Rets, 2016; Sekarash et al., 2015). Some teachers have disliked using popular culture because of their biases (Adams, 2011). They view these popular cultural forms as low culture and transient compared to other literary works traditionally labelled high culture. Other teachers are reluctant to keep up with the continual change of our current society (Parry, 2013; Sfeir, 2014). Therefore, they rely on conventional literacy texts and practices.

Definition of Terms

Before attempting to explore if popular culture is a valuable tool in the elementary classroom, our first task is to define specific terms:

Culture

One of the first notable definitions of culture dates to Plato’s Republic (Marsh & Millard, 2000). Plato’s vision of culture was a social order in which a group of upper-middle-class men, or aristocrats, preserved a high cultural life, which counterbalanced “the ignorance of the general masses” (Marsh & Millard, 2000, p. 11). He believed aristocrats possessed a higher aesthetic appreciation and a more refined taste than the general masses (Jenkins, 1999; Marsh & Millard, 2000). These ideas informed the feudal era’s assumptions about cultural hierarchy and class distinctions, which counteracted the rapid growth of urbanization and progress in the technology of the nineteenth century (Jenkins, 1999; Marsh & Millard, 2000).

The class distinctions later influenced the thinking of Victorian educationalists (Jenkins, 1999; Marsh & Millard, 2000). Coleridge, the Romantic poet and critic, described culture as a process of ‘cultivation,’ a term from agriculture (Marsh & Millard, 2000). Cultivated land, like a garden or farm, is the idea of improving land from its natural state, like a forest or grasslands, through human activity (Jenkins, 1999). According to this model, cultural transmission is “a careful tending to intellectual, social and moral development with a goal of refinement or enrichment” (Jenkins, 1999, p. 3). In other words, culture is a process of the individual cultivation of the mind that influences and increases the nation’s civilization.

This notion of culture was later adopted by nineteenth-century British poet and essayist Matthew Arnold (Jenkins, 1999; Marsh & Millard, 2000). Arnold argued that we “required a new conception of culture, one which was defined through meritocracy rather than aristocracy” (Jenkins, 1999, p. 4). Furthermore, he argued that culture is at the peak of human achievement and thought (Marsh & Millard, 2000). However, he reserved cultural artefacts for middle-class intellectual men who could appreciate the forms of culture through a cultivated sensibility. Similarly to Plato’s conception of culture, Arnold did not believe that the general mass possessed culture.

According to Plato and Arnold’s conception of culture, cultural transmission involves “a careful tending to intellectual, social, and moral development with a goal of refinement or enrichment” (Jenkins, 1999, p. 3). These beauty, intelligence, and perfection characteristics assume that these values exist in the abstract as something to obtain. Their view of culture is idealistic and classifies culture with claims of elitism.

Today, scholars understand that the concept of culture is much more complex and dynamic than Plato and Arnold described (Danesi, 2019; Jenkins, 1999; Marsh & Millard, 2000). Marsh and Millard (2000) argue that the modern conception of culture is a “multifaceted, multilayered set of discourses, bound by hegemonic forces and subject to change when appropriated by the individual” (p. 16). Culture is a shared discourse that shapes individuals born into cultural values and norms. We use Danesi’s (2019) definition of culture, which suggests culture is,

A means of organizing and stabilizing communal life and everyday activities through specific beliefs, rituals, performances, art forms, symbols, language, clothing, food, music,
dance, and other human expressive, intellectual, and communicative pursuits and faculties that are associated with a group of people at a particular period of time. (p. 15)

Culture is, therefore, a system of social practices, values, and goals that a specific group of people develop and use to enhance socialization and transmission of knowledge (Danesi, 2019). It is a complex web of constructed social identities which interconnect and intersect. It is a multidimensional process that is symbolic and dynamic. Understanding culture and how our conceptions of the term have adapted and changed over time will help us to understand what is meant by the term ‘popular culture.’

**Popular Culture**

Jenkins (1999) argues that popular culture falls between high, folk, and mass cultures. He says that high culture refers to works that reward the intellectual competencies of the educated elite. Some examples of high culture are works associated with art museums, opera houses, and symphony halls. Folk culture “reflects more earthy origins in the culture of the peasant or working classes,” which includes folk tales, work songs, and quilts (Jenkins, 1999, p. 4). Finally, mass culture refers to mass-produced and mass-consumed forms, including Hollywood movies, television, and best-selling novels (Jenkins, 1999). Therefore, popular culture falls somewhere between these three terms.

Herein, we apply popular culture as a complex social structure comprising cultural elements dominating society’s vernacular language. It is a broad range of commercial materials integrated into daily life, from daily interactions, needs, cultural moments, and desires (Jenkins, 1999). It can include but is not limited to advertisements, social media, toys, games, films and television shows integrated into our daily lives. These texts can entertain, comfort, educate, and inform society.

Additionally, it is essential to note that different groups read popular culture texts differently. Each reader brings a cultural context and a personal reading history, influencing how they understand it (Marsh & Millard, 2000).

**Literacy**

Literacy is the ability to read and write. Traditionally, literacy encompassed the ability to decode words and images. However, society’s understanding of literacy is changing. For this paper, I will be using Paulo Freire’s definition of literacy as cited by Perry (2012):

> Acquiring literacy is more than psychologically and mechanically dominating reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate these techniques in terms of consciousness, understand what one reads, write what one understands, and communicate graphically. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables – lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe – but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s context. (as cited in Jönsson, 2014, p. 12)

Therefore, literacy is a creative act involving a critical understanding of the world. Defining literacy helps to understand multiliteracies, multimodality, and critical literacy.

**Multiliteracies and Multimodality**

Multiliteracies refer to two significant aspects of communication and representation. Literacy pedagogy must consider “the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). Cultural and linguistic differences have become central to the pragmatics of people’s lives, and students need to understand how diverse cultures interrelate. Moreover, understanding how communication channels support, extend or oppress cultural diversity creates the learning conditions for full social participation. The second aspect that literacy pedagogy needs to consider is the multiplicity of communication channels and media (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). It is because meaning-making is increasingly multimodal.

The concept of multimodality, coined by Kress, captures how 21st-century texts require multiple modes of meaning, including visual, aural, and spatial conventions, differing from the oral and print storytelling traditions of the past (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Parry, 2013). Multimodal texts include “sounds, music, movement, bodily sensations, and smells” (Gee, 2003, p. 14). With multimodality becoming increasingly significant in today’s communications environment (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), education needs to extend the range of literacy pedagogy to incorporate multimodal
representations. It needs to cross boundaries and consider the implications of technological change, digital media, and popular culture for literacy learning and communication (Gee, 2003; Kalantzis & Cope, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2003; Parry, 2013).

Critical Pedagogy and Critical Media Literacy

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education that provides a theoretical framework to examine oppressive structures and societal power issues (Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Giroux, 1997, 2011; Saunders & Wong, 2020). Saunders and Wong (2020) state that “political, social, and educational systems tend to reflect the dominant culture, and over time, the values, behaviours, and beliefs associated with that culture become so ingrained as to be invisible” (para. 4). Therefore, critical pedagogy provides students with the tools to approach information critically. It approaches education as a tool for empowerment, a place where students can develop the skills, practices, and knowledge to challenge oppressive structures (Saunders & Wong, 2020).

Critical media literacy is situated within critical pedagogy. Critical media literacy is to engage with media and popular discourse by critically examining structures, ideologies, systems, and power dynamics (Alvermann et al., 1999; Robertson & Scheidler-Benns, 2016). It focuses on the content of the media and the power behind the construction of the content. It does this by deconstructing media through discussions in classrooms and helps students build a critical consciousness (Robertson & Scheidler-Benns, 2016).

METHOD

This paper is a qualitative effort utilizing secondary research conducted by researchers in education and cultural studies. Over several months, we completed an integrative review (Cooper, 1982; 1989) of literature via online abstracts and databases such as ERIC, EBSCOhost, British Library Direct, Academic Search Elite, Libris, and High Beam. Journal resources were sourced from ResearchGate, Emerald, Sage, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. Dissertations were included as data were organized as themes, such as popular culture and educational media. Descriptors such as “educational media” and “popular culture” acted as mining themes and were broadened as the review deepened.

Our evidence-focused investigative review was systematic, following an integrative tactic focussed on literature published from 1960 until the present day. The process (Cooper, 1982; 1989) was evaluative via impact factors and journal quality metrics. The role of iteration was “not as a repetitive mechanical task but as a deeply reflexive process, . . . visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings” (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77). Our qualitative review illuminated elementary education, subculture, mass media and culture within education via multiple steps: Peer-reviewed journal articles using PubMed, ERIC, PsycINFO and Google Scholar were identified, and then we applied metrics to rank sources.

We concluded that no study addresses all the gaps in the current literature on popular culture in elementary school education. We synthesized extant literature on elementary education and popular culture via four areas: teacher professional identity, multiliteracies, critical media literacy pedagogy, and practical teaching strategies. Understanding these areas will help elementary school teachers recognize the links between using popular culture and pedagogical practices in teaching.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Teacher’s Relationship to Popular Culture

Scholars have argued that it is essential for teachers to analyze their relationship with popular culture and how it has informed their professional identity before deciding to welcome it into the classroom (Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Delamarter, 2015; Fisher et al., 2008; Jewitt, 2008; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Sfeir, 2014; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Weber and Mitchell (1995) argued that “all of today’s teachers were once children and some of today’s children will be tomorrow’s teachers” (p.
5) and therefore, “the images of teachers enculturated in childhood affect the work and professional self-identity of teachers” (p. 5). As sociocultural constructs inform adults’ attitudes toward popular texts, teachers must explore how their relationship with popular culture may have influenced their teaching expectations. Teachers must become critical readers of their experiences and interactions with popular culture to understand how popular discourse has informed their professional identity and teaching expectations. This section explores why teachers should examine their relationship to popular culture to self-interrogate their professional identities as teachers. It will provide teachers with insights into their personal history and identity and their constructions of a teacher’s role (Delamarter, 2015; Fisher et al., 2008; Robertson, 1997; Rogers, 2021; Sfeir, 2014; Shoffner, 2016; Weber & Mitchell, 1995).

By being critical, teachers use popular representations to reshape concepts of teacher identity. Teachers can identify and challenge the ideological dimensions of how the images, clichés, and stereotypes of teaching in popular culture influenced their professional identity. We explore two activities wherein teachers can begin exploring the effects of popular images of and narratives about teaching and what it means to be a teacher (Delamarter, 2015; Fennell, 2015; Göker, 2016; Robertson, 1997; Shoffner, 2016; Weber & Mitchell, 1995).

**Reflective Journaling**

‘What is a teacher?’ ‘What do teachers do?’ ‘What do they look like in action?’” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 46). ‘‘How do you see yourself as a teacher?’” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 26). A questioning of teacher identity involves reflection. Reflective journaling is “one of the most common strategies employed [in teacher education programs] because of [its] practical utilization” (Göker, 2016, p. 63). Reflection “requires subtle observation, deep, self-reflection, cultural and social sensitivity, heightened awareness of interactions between the behaviour of the students and their environment, as well as courage to challenge the traditional political status quo imposed on schooling” (Sfeir, 2014, p. 23). It allows teachers to reflect on their thoughts, ideas, and feelings, which creates critical learning environments for them to evaluate their teaching characteristics and methods. It can reveal problems they encounter in their teaching and uncover the solutions to their problems (Göker, 2016; Sfeir, 2014).

Weber and Mitchell (1995) outlined how reflective journaling helped teachers critically reflect on the popular images, clichés, and stereotypes surrounding teaching. They asked two pre-service and experienced teacher groups to draw a teacher. These drawings were compared to the drawings of teachers from students. Their study discovered that “the children’s and student teachers’ drawings were generally quite similar in style and content” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 18). The drawings contained stereotypical symbols of teachers, including “blackboards, desks, apples, pointers, maths, and homework” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 18). These almost identical drawings reflect the social images surrounding us and become part of our sociocultural constructs.

Additionally, Shoffner (2016) asked preservice and practising teachers to keep a semester-long reflective journal throughout their analysis of diversity in children’s literature and a film. They found that reflective journaling enabled these teachers to explore their values, beliefs, and biases. For example, one preservice teacher reflected on her personal and professional growth by discussing the film *Like Stars on Earth* (Bijili et al., 2007, as cited in Shoffner, 2016). Her film analysis found that “there is more to teaching than just books and rigid procedures” (Shoffner, 2016, p. 29). She realized she needed to accept her students’ learning and cultural differences more. After viewing *Like Stars on Earth*, another veteran teacher wrote about her shame about her prior attitudes toward students’ learning differences. Shoffner (2016) claims, “[the teacher] had resented how hard she had to work to help students who seemed unable to learn” (p. 29). Her admission of resentment echoes the voices of other teachers. Some teachers often take personal accountability for their students’ welfare and education (Shoffner, 2016). Reflecting upon their beliefs gave the teachers in Shoffner’s (2016) study the opportunity to examine how their professional responsibility has been influenced by popular discourse. As demonstrated in these studies, reflective journaling offers pedagogical opportunities for teachers to problematize and expand their knowledge and understanding of how dominant images of teachers and teaching are embedded in society.
Analyzing Responses to Films

Another activity that teachers can use to explore their professional identity is films. Giroux (2001) noted that film has a powerful influence on popular imagination and public consciousness (as cited in Fennell, 2013). The film is an excellent popular text to examine narrative representations of teachers because of their engaging multimodal experience and ease of understanding (Shoffner, 2016). By asking teachers to engage with film representations of teachers, they can “study a wide array of teaching personalities and approaches … and they expand their understandings of the contexts in which teachers function” (Shoffner, 2016, p. 27).

One popular representation in many films about education is that teachers are often portrayed as charismatic, dedicated, and extraordinary; however, their knowledge, intelligence, skill, and political awareness are not acknowledged (Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Delamarter, 2015; Fisher et al., 2008). In other words, films do not show how a teacher’s content-based instruction leads to student success. Instead, they show how a teacher’s aesthetic and belief in their students leads to their success. These representations of success through emotional outcomes rather than academic outcomes can cause distortions for both teachers and students. They may misinterpret the reality of “good” teaching in actual classrooms (Delamarter, 2015; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). These distortions can lead to what Delamarter (2015) called ‘practice shock.’ Practice shock is “the disorienting, disillusioning, and sometimes traumatic identity crisis that often occurs during the first year of teaching” (Delamarter, 2015, p. 2). It is caused by the disparity between the expectations pre-service teachers have created from their interactions with popular culture and the reality of the teaching profession. These popular representations about the expectations of teaching undermine what it means to be a teacher and what teaching means to meet curricular demands and develop pedagogical strategies in the classroom (Fisher et al., 2008).

Furthermore, in Delamarter’s (2015) study, pre-service teachers watched one Hollywood film about education per week and then had group discussions. Participants created an analytical matrix to interpret the films, and over a few weeks, patterns emerged (Delamarter, 2015). They found that “very little screen is devoted to the content-specific instruction” (Delamarter, 2015, p. 5). Most Hollywood films foreground aesthetics and moral instruction, contributing to their imaginary ideals and expectations of teaching (Delamarter, 2015). As this study demonstrates, these representations in popular culture may reinforce expectations about teaching and teachers that often conflict with the actual practice of teaching (Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Delamarter, 2015; Fisher et al., 2008; Sfeir, 2014). Teachers can use film to analyze how expectations of teaching in film are mismatched with the realities of teaching and then try to establish a balance between content and inspiration (Delamarter, 2015).

Another popular representation of teaching that teachers should explore is the good and bad teacher tropes often overplayed in the media (Dalton, 2013; Fisher et al., 2008; Shoffner, 2016). Good teachers are heroes; they are inspirational, passionate about their subject, and welcome innovative teaching methods (Fisher et al., 2008). On the other hand, the bad teacher is a villain; they are oppressive, unwelcoming, and make derogatory remarks to other teachers and their students (Dalton, 2013; Fisher et al., 2008). Consequently, “this classical narrative structure simplifies complex issues and assures that every problem has a solution” (Dalton, 2013, p. 81). Unfortunately, it also informs teachers’ expectations in real life, which are incredibly “destructive and frames expectations of viewers who see the same patterns repeated onscreen in other films” (Dalton, 2013, p. 86). Real teachers are then reduced into categories of “good” and “bad,” undermining their training and professionalism. It is another example of how prior interactions with popular representations shape notions of teacher identity.

Films may negatively shape teachers’ professional identity. However, they can also be used to develop teachers’ critical and creative thinking about teaching practices, democracy, power relationships, and the ethics of classroom teaching (Fennell, 2013). Through films, teachers can explore and challenge representations with their own experiences and identify social issues of race, class, gender, and ethics in teaching. Fennell (2013) used two films, Dangerous Minds and To Sir with Love, to provide participants with opportunities to gain deeper insights into why they thought about classroom experiences in specific ways and how it has affected their teaching practices. After
filtering their understanding of the teacher throughout the film, participants had discussions with each other about their experiences. Participants in Fennell’s (2013) study reported that:

The films provided opportunities to put theories and concepts into context, providing them with a platform to think about problems or situations from the perspectives of various characters and differing viewpoints and more meaningful experiences for visual learners. (p. 454)

Like the findings of Fennell (2013), Shoffner (2016) established that participants credited using films to filter their understanding of the teacher and how their worldviews are either challenged or reinforced. Through films, pre-service and experienced teachers were encouraged to take a critical view of how popular representations of teaching affected their teaching practices and teacher identity.

A teacher’s relationship to popular culture affects how they view themselves, their professional identity, and their understanding of teaching and teachers. Through critical reflection, Sfeir (2014) argued that teachers become researchers. Reflection empowers teachers to transcend their traditional role as authoritative figures as they become learners of the cultural, social, political, economic, and psychological factors that affect their students’ learning (Sfeir, 2014). Through reflective journaling and film discussions, teachers can construct their ideas about the nature of teaching and produce knowledge that challenges the standard curriculum (Delamarter, 2015; Fennell, 2013; Sfeir, 2014; Shoffner, 2016).

Popular texts contain powerful knowledge that can help teachers understand cognitive differences, including culture, race, ethnicity, values, and emotions, and how they affect students’ learning to embrace various interpretations of schooling (Sfeir, 2014). Moreover, it helps teachers become more effective at teaching critical pedagogy. Teachers need to become researchers and develop a deep understanding of themselves to become the teachers students need in the 21st century. Scholars have argued that using popular culture in classrooms helps students develop new literacy practices and supports the interests and knowledge children bring to their learning (Arthur, 2001; Evans, 2004; Jewitt, 2008; Jönsson, 2014; Lim et al., 2021; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Parry, 2013; Sfeir, 2014; Weld, 2011).

Multiliteracies Supports Children’s Interests and Knowledge

In contemporary society, popular culture and new media affect children’s home literacy practices (Arthur, 2001; Evans, 2004; Jewitt, 2008; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Sfeir, 2014; Weld, 2011). Children have their favourite movies, television shows, toys, games, websites, and music (Evans, 2004). At home, their literacy skills are impacted by text on screens juxtaposed with images, videos, and hyperlinks; they are multimodal in nature (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kalantzis & Cope, 2010; Marsh & Millard, 2000). Unfortunately, these literacies have little connection with the dominant literacies promoted in schools. Jewitt (2008) argued that most schools have a more monocultural and monomodal view of literacy. They rely on traditional print literacy texts, like books and plays, and traditional writing forms, like essays, poetry, and short responses (Marsh & Millard, 2000). However, in the 21st century, learning traverses institutional boundaries and blurs the line between in-school and out-of-school literacies (Jewitt, 2008). Educational scholars are pushing for the redesign of the educational landscape and curricula to bridge the gap between home and school literacy practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Jewitt, 2008; Jönsson, 2014; Kalantzis & Cope, 2010; Kress, 2003; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Lim et al., 2021; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Parry, 2013).

Multiliteracies are a pedagogic response to the curricular changes and pedagogical shifts in the 21st century (Lim et al., 2021). It bridges the gap between home and school literacy practices. Multiliteracies learning helps broaden the literacy curriculum to incorporate students’ multimodal experiences. It places students’ perspectives, needs, and desires at the forefront of learning. Burn and Durran (2007) state that “creating a space for production in which students can bring their home experiences to the literacy classroom enables them to articulate and make explicit their understandings of media language while also sharing their responses” (as cited in Parry, 2013, p. 54). It also promotes literacy development and enables learners to make meaning through practices that interest and engage them in the school curriculum. When schools put students at the centre, they can be powerful agents of change, capable of becoming designers of their social futures (Lim et al., 2021;
Trad, 2021). Therefore, teachers must examine students’ at-home literacy practices, everyday interests and preferred meaning-making methods to connect to school literacy practices (Lim et al., 2021; Parry, 2013; Sfeir, 2014).

Lim et al. (2021) highlighted that valuing the experiences of students “bring[s] about a shift in educators’ understanding of how best to facilitate learning and influence pedagogical practice” (p. 103). Jönsson (2014) also reported that teachers who connect with students’ experiences outside of school are more likely to stay relevant and retain students’ interest in learning. Therefore, teachers should create classrooms that incorporate multimodal dynamism. It provides new insights into how children negotiate and coordinate different modes and construct meaning in their lives (Parry, 2013). Popular culture texts are multimodal, and teachers should embrace these texts rather than “competing with the overflow of sensory experiences students encounter outside the classroom” (Jönsson, 2014, p. 7). Using a range of modes of communication and representation, like popular texts, facilitates literacy learning, enables teachers to be more innovative, and meets students’ diverse interests and needs (Arthur, 2001; Fisher et al., 2008; Jewitt, 2008; Jönsson, 2014; Marsh & Millard, 2000). Inviting popular culture texts into the classroom is one method that can help students develop and acquire the literacy skills needed to navigate the 21st century as they form their identities, acquire knowledge, and encounter new multimodal forms of representation and communication.

Popular culture promotes interest, engagement, and enthusiasm for learning (Sfeir, 2014). It is an effective tool that allows students to take control of their education (Jönsson, 2014; Sfeir, 2014). Teachers must recognise that “traditional education is boring and irrelevant to students’ needs, emotions, habits and preferences in our contemporary society” (Sfeir, 2014, p. 16). Learning is changing, and in response to the demands of the 21st century, students must be encouraged to incorporate every aspect of daily life into their schooling.

However, Callahan and Low (2004) caution against using popular culture in education to reinforce the traditional curriculum (as cited in Sfeir, 2014). Instead, scholars have argued that using popular culture in education should be used to develop student’s critical thinking skills (Adams, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Jewitt, 2008; Jönsson, 2014; Robertson & Scheidler-Benns, 2016; Sfeir, 2014).

**Facilitating Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy**

Critical media literacy pedagogy has become increasingly important in the 21st century as the media and popular culture have become part of our daily lives. Critical literacy is a transformative pedagogy that “builds a bridge between what is happening in broader society and what is happening in the classroom” (Robertson & Scheidler-Benns, 2016, p. 2248). Daspit and Weaver (2000) argued that popular culture texts are critical pedagogical texts. Through a critical lens of popular texts, children learn how to use media responsibly for communicating, learning, and participating in society (Alvermann et al., 1999; Arthur, 2001; Jenkins, 2006; Jewitt, 2008; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Robertson & Scheidler-Benns, 2016; Sfeir, 2014). They can “read the ‘world’ behind the text and the words on the page” (Marsh & Millard, 2000, p. 80). Critical media literacy allows students to analyze and negotiate popular discourse often overlooked or labelled as “mindless entertainment” (Jenkins, 1999, p. 2). Jenkins (2009) highlighted that critical literacy enables students to:

> Acquire a basic understanding of how media representations structure our perceptions of the world, the economic and cultural contexts within which mass media is produced and circulated, the motives and goals that shape the media they consume, and alternative practices outside the commercial mainstream. (p. 31)

Popular texts can reveal underlying power structures, assumptions, biases, and moral constructs of the society that produces its cultural products. Daspit and Weaver (2000) argued that critical pedagogy “addresses the potential for multiple readings of popular cultural texts, the contradictory and shifting meanings of texts, and the shifting power struggles over control of texts” (p. 13). Therefore, by developing a critical pedagogy in classrooms, students can critically explore how popular culture impacts society and their attitudes, feelings, and methods of expression.

that examining power structures, challenging biases and oppressive structures, and the status quo of society enables students to “become cultural producers who can rewrite their experiences and perceptions” (pp. 262-263). This view positions students as active educational agents who can exercise power over their lives and learning. As a result, students can constantly remake their identities as they discover new ways to represent themselves “in response to ever-changing postmodern worlds” (Daspit & Weaver, 2000, p. 13).

As previously established, popular culture texts can be used to engage in critical media literacy pedagogy (Alvermann et al., 1999; Arthur, 2001; Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Jenkins, 2009; Sfeir, 2014). Utilizing the knowledge of students’ multiliteracies, including from the media, film, television shows, and games, can encourage them to think critically about power structures while creating alternative visions of their own life stories and the world (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Jönsson, 2014). Therefore, teachers must give their students opportunities to critically assess popular discourses and how they often reproduce oppressive ideologies of reality.

Some educators and parents have argued that popular culture texts often reinforce dimensions of violence, racism, sexism, and commercialization. However, scholars have argued that critical pedagogy offers teachers and their students the opportunities to explore how popular texts can be used to subvert these dimensions and challenge oppressive power structures (Galligan & Miller, 2022; Ivashkevich, 2009; Jenkins, 2009; Jewitt, 2008; Lee, 2009; Lindstrand et al., 2016; Mueller et al., 2018; Sandlin & Garlen, 2017; Sekarasih et al., 2015).

Challenging Representations of Violence

Children’s popular culture contains images of violence (Marsh & Millard, 2000; Sekarasih et al., 2015; Sfeir, 2014). Violence is in both digital media as well as many traditional narratives, such as fairy tales, sports, and interactions within families and among nations (Arthur, 2001). However, Arthur (2001) argued that to say children imitate the violence they see “simplifies the issues and assumes that children are not able to distinguish between reality and the violence constructed by the media” (pp. 301-302). Instead, hooks (1994) suggests taking an analytical approach to violent messages in popular texts to reveal how they are “a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (as cited in Alvermann et al., 1999, p. 111).

Critical pedagogy-centred curricula can help students “develop comprehension, critical thinking, and critical attitudes toward media violence and the ethical issues involved” (Sekarasih et al., 2015, p. 4). As a result, teachers should be helping their students cultivate an awareness of how popular messages promote violence and are ingrained in society’s values (Alvermann et al., 1999; Sekarasih et al., 2015).

Thinking Beyond Racial Stereotypes and Imagery

Scholars have argued that popular culture produces and perpetuates the racial imagery and ideas we are familiar with today (Galligan & Miller, 2022; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Mueller et al., 2018; Solomos & Back, 1996). Mueller et al. (2018) argued that a system of racial hierarchy structures our everyday and institutional practices and ideologies. They also argued that given that these cultural representations are so closely connected to actual practices of racial stereotypes, popular culture should be critically examined in schools to decode historical misrepresentations and racist ideologies coded in the language of popular texts (Marsh & Millard, 2000; Mueller et al., 2018).

Furthermore, educational scholars have deconstructed Disney’s enormous power over children’s cultural media landscape (Brode, 2004; Giroux, 2011; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Tavin & Anderson, 2003; Sandlin & Garlen, 2017). They discovered that many Disney films often reinforce racial stereotypes, manifesting a negative view of others. For example, racial stereotypes saturate Disney films like Aladdin, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Lady and the Tramp, Oliver and Co., and Tarzan (Tavin & Anderson, 2003), Dumbo, Song of the South, Lady and the Tramp, and The Lion King (Sandlin & Garlen, 2017). Giroux (1998) highlighted how the film “Aladdin portrays the ‘bad’ Arabs with thick, foreign accents, whereas the anglicised Jasmine and Aladdin speak in standard, Americanized English (as cited in Marsh and Millard, 2000, p. 37). In Tavin and
Anderson’s (2003) study, they reported that one student associated Black people with apes “because of the continual representation of Black voices used for primate characters in Disney and other animated films” (p. 34). These racial stereotypes pervade many Disney films that children are still watching. Children internalize and integrate these stereotypes into their mental representations of these groups. Teachers must acknowledge how these racial stereotypes cause children to judge and treat others.

By taking a critical look at popular discourse, students can uncover the structural forces that affect the lives of people of colour and the systematic racism that continues to inform the everyday practices of society. For example, in a first-grade class, Galligan and Miller (2022) asked their students to analyze a painting of the Second Continental Congress from the American Revolutionary War. Students critically assessed the painting, and after their discussion, they realized that only white people were present. They had a conversation amongst themselves, and the teacher listened. One Black girl commented on the meeting. She said, “That’s not fair [that they get to pick the president]. Black people should get to pick the president too. If you don’t let them pick, maybe there would never be a Black president” (Galligan & Miller, 2022, p. 348). A Latina girl also commented, “Girls should be there. There should be Indigenous and Black people and people with all colour skin” (Galligan & Miller, 2022, p. 348). These comments demonstrated that elementary students, even first graders, can identify societal racial inequality. Students can converse about race, racism, and racial stereotyping and better understand systemic racism (Galligan & Miller, 2022). Critical pedagogy, even amongst first graders, enables students to challenge their assumptions, develop an awareness of their social positions, decenter authority in the classroom, empower students, and create a collective sense of community (Galligan & Miller, 2022).

Rethinking Gender

Lindstrand et al. (2016) highlighted a general lack of balance in representations of gender, including who is represented and how they are represented. They argued that female characters are often underrepresented and depicted through stereotypical means. Likewise, Ivashkevich (2009) argued that women are typically represented as sexually provocative and “are encouraged to create objectified relationships with their bodies” (p. 55). These narratives focus on whiteness, beauty, and heterosexual male attention (Ivashkevich, 2009). For example, Lee (2009) discovered that Disney films have biased representations of gender. She said that many Disney princesses are beautiful white girls. These representations impacted the Korean immigrant students in her class. The young girls viewed princesses as the American female ideal (Lee, 2009). This study shows that children’s understanding of princesses in Disney films is affected by and connected to their ideas of gender and ethnicity.

Critical media literacy encourages students to examine how gender is represented in popular culture and media. Teachers can help their students understand how these sociocultural ideas and gender-patterns influence their judgements and reasoning and dominate their everyday practices (Ivashkevich, 2009; Lindstrand et al., 2016; Marsh & Millard, 2000).

The Cultural Impact of Commercialism

Marsh and Millard (2000) found that children’s desires are tied to and “controlled by the needs of commercial interests” (p. 20). Under the tutelage of megacorporations, children have become captive to commercialism (Alvermann et al., 1999; Brode, 2004; Giroux, 2011; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Parry, 2013). One big megacorporation that is at the forefront of multimedia conglomerates is Disney. It aggressively markets products for infants, toddlers, and tweens (Giroux, 2011), and many children are fans of Disney’s toys, films, and characters. In the last 70 years, it has continually expanded “its products and services to reach every available media platform” (Giroux, 2011, para. 6).

Today, Disney is a multi-billion-dollar commercial entity that “is synonymous with entertainment, childhood, and family values” (Tavin & Anderson, 2003, p. 20). Giroux (1999) called Disney a “teaching machine” that wields enormous influence on the cultural life of children (as cited in Parry, 2013, p. 20). Their goods, messages, values, and ideas play a significant role in childhood
development (Danesi, 2019; Giroux, 2011). It affects children’s identity development and their ideas of fantasy and play (Annetta et al., 2009; Giroux, 2011; Wagner-Ott, 2002; Wohlwend, 2012). However, Giroux (2011) argued that Disney’s “titanium-clad brand image … manages to deflect, if not completely trounce, criticism at every turn” (para. 6). As a result, Disney’s products and ideas are rarely scrutinized or critically analyzed. Consequently, children are consuming Disney’s ideological texts without challenging their messages. As a result, they do not know of alternative discourses or the tools to see how their own experiences may be excluded or oppressed (Marsh & Millard, 2000; Giroux, 2011; Tavin & Anderson, 2003).

For these reasons, teachers need to understand the cultural impacts of commercialism on children. They must welcome discussions of popular texts in classrooms to help their students become more critically aware of the popular discourses that exert power and control in society, influencing their everyday lives and choices (Marsh & Millard, 2000). Otherwise, children are at risk of being unable to examine how advertisements use various tactics to persuade them (Stanley & Lawson, 2020). There is an urgent need for a newly conceived literacy curriculum that views popular texts as helpful teaching tools to critically assess the media-filled world that is increasingly interconnected, diverse, and multimodal (Evans, 2004; Jönsson, 2014; Marsh & Millard, 2000).

Teachers must recognize that every student brings different life experiences, interests, and educational needs to the classroom (Adams, 2011; Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Saunders & Wong, 2020). They all come from various backgrounds and have different identities. These differences “shape how learners experience the classroom, the content, and the learning activities, and ultimately impact what they learn and how they use that knowledge” (Saunders & Wong, 2020, p. 75). Therefore, to understand how existing sociocultural systems affect students’ experiences, teachers need to welcome difficult discussions around violence, racism, sexism, and commercialization to uncover the ideologies that are often present and infused in these popular texts (Arthur, 2001; Evans, 2004; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Sfeir, 2014; Weld, 2011). Scholars have argued that failure to incorporate critical media literacy opportunities silences children’s everyday experiences and further perpetuates and justifies the oppression and exclusion of people’s cultures (Alvermann et al., 1999; Jönsson, 2014).

Activities that Promote Critical Media Literacy Pedagogy

Contemporary educational research on children, popular culture, and critical literacy has examined the connection between children’s literacy practices and their engagement with popular culture (Alvermann et al., 1999; Arthur, 2001; Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Giroux, 2011; Jenkins, 2009; Jewitt, 2008; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Tavin & Anderson, 2003; Saunders & Wong, 2020). They have demonstrated that welcoming popular texts in schools aligns with students’ home literacy practices and helps them develop their critical literacy abilities. They can challenge their perspectives on popular texts they like, encouraging them to explore them more deeply and critique the messages behind them (Alvermann et al., 1999; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Alvermann and Hagood (2000) argued that students could examine their own beliefs and values related to issues of violence, racism, sexism, and commercialization. It helps students “fill out needed frames of reference for questioning some accepted ways of doing things” (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 197) that often go unquestioned and lead to societal injustices and inequalities. However, there must be careful consideration of using popular texts in the classroom. Teachers who come to the classroom hoping to offer students a space to analyze popular texts face a daunting task (Sfeir, 2014; Sperb, 2018). Students may resist being critical of the texts that give them intense pleasure and fond memories since childhood (Sperb, 2018). Therefore, teachers should approach popular texts in their classrooms as adding to students’ perspectives rather than restricting them.

Film and Television

Scholars have investigated how films and television are formal and informal learning sites that shape children’s identities and desires worldwide (Robinson et al., 2007; Sandlin & Garlen, 2017; Sekarash et al., 2015; Tavin & Anderson, 2003). It raises the question: how can teachers invite film and television into their classrooms and maintain critical discussion? Sekarash et al. (2015)
developed a program that included five sessions on media literacy for three sixth-grade classes. The students watched clips from the cartoon *Tom and Jerry* and then completed an activity to count the acts of violence within the clip. The activity:

It led to a discussion of the definition of media violence (What should count? What should not? Why?) and the various types of harm that might be portrayed in the media (physical, verbal, relational) as well as to an acknowledgement of the presence of violence — sometimes in rather large amounts — in media content targeted toward children. (Sekarasih et al., 2015, p. 5)

This activity encouraged students to analyze the depictions of media violence in the shows they watch and then openly analyze and discuss how problematic they may be.

In another activity, students watched clips from the movie *Shrek* (Sekarasih et al., 2015). Students considered why media institutions would want to use violence. They answered questions like, “Why did the creator of that show, movie, or game decide to put violence in it? [and] Do you think that this is generally a good thing, a bad thing, or neither?” (Sekarasih et al., 2015, p. 6). Students answered these questions in their homework journal entries, and three themes emerged. They found that violence is entertaining, violence is fitting, and violence is realistic. This study shows that teachers can use popular films or television shows in their classrooms. However, they should carefully choose clips so students can discuss the implications of continuous exposure to media violence and why violence sells.

Activities like the ones explored above demonstrate that students would benefit from using film to engage in critical literacy. It is because it encourages students to examine violence in popular texts and allows them to consider the political, economic, and cultural forces that shape and influence their values and interests (Adams, 2011; Lee, 2009; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Robinson et al., 2007; Sekarasih et al., 2015; Tavin & Anderson, 2003).

**Reading Books**

Schools in Canada and the United States see more students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Alexander, 2006; Jenkins, 2009; Kaminiski, 2000). Alexander (2006) argued that “all schools should be providing opportunities for students to read and discuss material from multiple viewpoints to develop attitudes of open-mindedness about diversity” (p. 183). Reading offers a model for inclusive and culturally competent classrooms (Saunders & Wong, 2020).

Alexander (2006) and Kaminiski (2000) recommended using folktales to explore various cultural values, beliefs, and ideas. Both scholars argued that teachers could build students’ multicultural understanding by having students compare the characteristics of the multicultural folktales of Cinderella. Alexander’s (2006) Multicultural Cinderella Project explored folktales to develop students’ attitudes of open-mindedness about diversity. The project had elementary students compare 34 versions of the Cinderella story. The activities included creating passports for each country, designing plays, and writing scripts, studying “maps from each country, making a Chinese quilt out of paper, drawing life-sized pictures of the characters, and tasting food that represented various countries” (Alexander, 2006, p. 184). Each activity encouraged students to explore different cultures, their clothing, and the various ways people love one another (Alexander, 2006). Students in the project reported learning about different cultures and having fun while learning. In Kaminiski’s (2000) study, she outlined multiple literature response activities that teachers can use “to help their students develop an understanding of literature types and their characteristics” (p. 4). She suggested that teachers begin with a teacher-led book introduction activity, followed by a read-aloud of the story comparing the literature content. Then, teachers can have an after-reading discussion with “open-ended questions and help children learn to ask their critical questions about content” (Kaminski, 2000, p. 4). Her class developed a book comparison chart to compare literary elements, such as characters, settings, plot, problems, and events (see Appendix A). As Alexander (2006) and Kaminiski (2000) have argued, folk tales are powerful tools that help students connect with their past experiences and knowledge about other cultures. They are also more manageable texts that enable students to “observe their use of a cognitive strategy” (Kaminski, 2000) while getting them excited.
about literature (Alexander, 2006). Reading folktales is also an excellent way to invite students’ interests and at-home literacy practices into the classroom.

The use of popular reading texts, like folktales, in the classroom is a source of instructional engagement, a medium for critical literacy, and a source of multicultural education (Alexander, 2006; Kaminiski, 2000; Saunders & Wong, 2020). It also encourages students to learn new literary concepts “before they are expected to use similar strategies to comprehend more difficult stories” (Kaminski, 2000).

Playing with Toys

Play is the learning catalyst, and Annetta et al. (2009) argued that many teachers lose sight of this notion. Children negotiate their identity through play interactions with popular texts (Annetta et al., 2009; Wagner-Ott, 2002; Wohlwend, 2012). Wohlwend (2009) argued that commercial entities that produce dolls “embed anticipated identities for doll players and child consumers into Disney Princess dolls through decisions about colour, fabrics, and doll body materials as well as film storylines and marketing practices” (as cited in Wohlwend, 2012, p. 4). In other words, each doll has embedded gendered identities, which children reinforce through play (Wohlwend, 2012). Media narratives, production processes, brand identity marketing, social histories in society, curricular expectations, and play narratives often restrict toys and perpetuate gender stereotypes (Wohlwend, 2012). By creating spaces for diverse gender performances, children can negotiate gendered identity layers, and blur expected gender roles and boundaries. They can also play around with their portrayals of media roles and character actions.

Wohlwend (2012) found that through repeatedly creating spaces for students to play, they “developed their own co-constructed and durable personas for particular dolls” (p. 24). Over time, students transcended the commercially produced gendered identity texts in toys and negotiated new play meanings. This study shows that children playfully engage with toys at school can deconstruct and critique gendered identity constructions clustered in with society’s commercially driven storylines and consumer expectations (Annetta et al., 2009; Giroux, 2011; Wagner-Ott, 2002; Wohlwend, 2012). Students can negotiate their previous play histories by repeatedly introducing play narratives and developing beneficial ways to “deal with issues of conflict, peer exclusion, and discursive boundary work” (Wohlwend, 2012, p. 28).

Video Games

Today’s children are growing up around video games for both entertainment and educational purposes (Adams, 2011; Erickson & Sammons-Lohse, 2021; Gee, 2003; Marsh & Millard, 2000) and are extremely video game-literate (Annetta et al., 2009). Video games offer opportunities “to design, implement, and study virtual learning experiences in real classrooms” (Annetta et al., 2009, p. 1105). Studies have shown that video games are engaging and effective educational tools (Annetta et al., 2009; Beserra et al., 2019; Erickson & Sammons-Lohse, 2021; Gee, 2003; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Toh & Kirschner, 2020). Gee (2003) even argued that “learning in good video games fits better with the modern, high-tech, global world today’s children and teenagers live in than do the theories (and practices) of learning that they see in school” (p. 7). Gee (2003) argued that good video games treat learning as an active and constructive process where students are encouraged to think proactively and critically to experience the world in new ways, form new connections, and be more prepared for future learning. Likewise, Annetta et al. (2009) corroborated this by saying that video games help students explore complex abstract concepts, like a magnetic field. Therefore, teachers can leverage children’s interest in video games to scaffold learning and increase student engagement, motivation, and participation.

Annetta et al. (2009) and Beserra et al. (2019) argued that video games supported mathematics, science, and engineering learning. For example, in Annetta et al.’s (2009) study of a fifth-grade class, students learned about simple machines by playing an educational game called Mr. Friction Multiplayer Educational Gaming Application (MEGA). They discovered that most students performed better on the post-test following game play. They reported that MEGA successfully enriched their boys’ and girls’ science learning experience. In Beserra et al.’s (2019) study, they
analyzed 110 second graders from two schools of different socioeconomic statuses. They found that an educational drill-and-practice video game with an interwoven narrative offered opportunities to motivate and engage students to study basic arithmetic. However, they discovered that students can only play games for about 20 minutes before managing student behaviour becomes more difficult.

Additionally, Squire et al. (2008) found that video games can support students’ history learning. They used a game called *Civilization III* to grow fifth and sixth-grade students’ “background knowledge in world history, new vocabularies, deeper conceptual understandings, increased self-efficacy, and creative problem-solving with technology” (p. 241). The game's interactivity gave players lived experiences to draw upon when learning physical features and cultural and political factors.

These studies demonstrate how video games are powerful tools for learning. They can increase students’ interest in their studies and develop their skills in mathematics, science, engineering, and history (Annetta et al., 2009; Beserra et al., 2019; Squire et al., 2008).

**Designing Multimodal Texts**

The notion of design is an active and dynamic process central to communication (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Dahlström & Damber, 2020; Husbye & Vander Zanden, 2015; Jewitt, 2008). Design enables students to realize their interests as sign makers. It also encourages them “to understand the multimodal organization of social relations through the design of communicative resources, including linguistic meaning, visual meaning, audio meaning, and gestural and spatial meaning” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 252).

Dahlström and Damber (2020) demonstrate how the notion of design can help students make sense of multimodal signs. They conducted a study on 23 Swedish fifth-grade students. Students combined multiple modal resources, including writing, images, video, sound, and speech. They created their stories on different themes, including “jealousy, conflict in love relationships, and the act of killing to achieve a goal” (Dahlström & Damber, 2020, p. 51). Some students’ stories indicated that violence was the best way to accomplish a goal. As discussed earlier, popular culture contains violence (Dahlström & Damber, 2020; Lee, 2009; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Robinson et al., 2007; Sekarash et al., 2015; Tavin & Anderson, 2003). Another student wrote a love story that described love involving pain and jealousy. Moreover, the students’ multimodal designs had stereotypes of how young people should look (Dahlström & Damber, 2020). Young men were physically fit and tattooed. Young women were thin, had long hair and blue eyes, and some were crying. Dahlström and Damber’s (2020) study revealed that when students design multimodal texts in classrooms, they create stories based on their interactions with popular culture.

Husbye and Vander Zanden (2015) discussed how filmmaking projects with elementary-aged students strengthened their writing practices, maximized their critical thinking, and included diverse student perspectives. The fifth-grade students in their study engaged in digital media production, which provided them with new and creative ways to respond to literature. Students wrote scripts, planned costumes and scenes through their projects, and rehearsed their roles (Husbye & Vander Zanden, 2015). They also made decisions about the plot's overall sequence, flow, and order of each image and sound. Through filmmaking, the students were empowered and motivated to construct literate identities as they collaboratively worked on creating and revising films while engaging in critical thinking (Husbye & Vander Zanden, 2015). Dahlström and Damber’s (2020) and Husbye and Vander Zanden’s (2015) studies demonstrate that students use popular cultural representations to design their stories when engaging with multimodal texts. It proves that critical reflections are crucial. Students need to examine the purpose of texts, how they use stereotypes, and whose interests are represented.

These studies demonstrate practical applications of using popular texts to encourage students to engage in collaborative, multimodal literacy practices when they turn to their familiarity with popular culture genres of film and television, books, toys, video games, and design. Elementary school teachers who provide learning activities encourage students to welcome their daily home literacy practices into the classroom. It enhances student motivation and engagement and improves their abilities to critically assess the violent, racist, and sexist dimensions of popular texts.
Challenges Concerning Incorporating Popular Culture in the Classroom

In this research paper, I have explored various scholarly research arguing why teachers should incorporate popular culture in the classroom. However, teachers who try to incorporate popular culture into their classrooms may face some challenges (Alvermann et al., 1999; Arthur, 2001; Draper, 2005; Jenkins, 2009; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Moore, 2011; Mueller et al., 2018; Naumovska & Milenkovska, 2017; Rets, 2016; Sekarasih et al., 2015). In the following section, I will examine some of these challenges.

Controversial Nature of Popular Culture

Popular culture can be problematic in many ways. The representations of race, gender, and violence can be deeply disconcerting, and the inappropriate material in media texts may prevent some teachers from using popular texts in their classrooms (Marsh & Millard, 2000; Moore, 2011; Rets, 2016). For example, video games like Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare often privilege the narratives of white men and further reinforce the criminality of people of colour and justify violence and militarism (Mueller et al., 2018). Many films promote violence and reinforce gender and racial stereotypes (Arthur, 2001; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Mueller et al., 2018; Rets, 2016). Disney animated films, like Aladdin, Pocahontas, and Lion King, contain highly gendered and racialized constructions (Brode, 2004; Giroux, 2011; Lee, 2009; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Sandlin & Garlen, 2017; Tavin & Anderson, 2003; Wohlwend, 2012). Many popular texts construct stereotypical images and narratives that some parents, teachers, and other faculty argue should not be in schools.

Nevertheless, students cannot challenge these oppressive messages alone (Alexander, 2006; Annetta et al., 2009; Daspit & Weaver, 2000; Giroux, 2011; Kaminiski, 2000; Sfeir, 2014; Wagner-Ott, 2002; Wohlwend, 2012). They need adult and teacher intervention to provide them with the tools and skills to challenge these messages and offer alternative discourses. With the proper guidance from teachers, students can deconstruct the gender and racial stereotyping, the violence, and the commercialism inherent in popular texts by deconstructing or redesigning their texts using oppositional discourses.

Incorporating All Students’ Knowledge and Culture

Some parents and teachers have raised the issue of popular texts containing limited representations of all students’ knowledge and cultures (Arthur, 2001; Danesi, 2019; Giroux, 1997, 2011; Rets, 2016). They have argued that popular culture often represents the voices and experiences of the dominant class, thus excluding the voices of disadvantaged and marginalized minority groups. This dominant class perspective, or what Rets (2016) calls a “‘one-sided mentality’ … promotes ‘the ideas, conduct, attitudes and problems of the Western society and is ‘eurocentric’ in its nature” (p. 157). However, through a critical literacy focus, students can critically engage with texts to question their capitalist ideologies and “one-sided mentality” to become more inclusive and culturally competent (Rets, 2016; Saunders & Wong, 2020).

Negative Perceptions from Other Faculty and Parents

Administrative and parental disapproval of popular culture texts can influence whether teachers bring popular culture into the classroom (Draper, 2005; Moore, 2011). For example, Imel (1993) found that “some teachers have come under fire for their beliefs [of using magazines in the classroom], especially when the content of student selected magazines was in direct conflict with the values supported by parents or the school” (as cited in Draper, 2005, p. 32). However, with popular culture’s strong presence in modern society, it “makes exposure an almost certainty” (Draper, 2005, p. 32). Therefore, parents, teachers, and administrators must understand that children should not be sheltered from popular messages. Instead, they need to realize how crucial popular culture is to children and how their strong involvement will provide them with the opportunities to help them make sense of society and how popular messages are presented to them (Draper, 2005).

Furthermore, Moore (2011) suggested that teachers use an open inquiry-based learning approach to prevent or shape the judgements from administratores, other teachers, and parents. This approach
can encourage processes of asking thoughtful questions and critical thinking so that administrators and parents may further understand the relationship between children and popular culture and why it is necessary for classroom study (Draper, 2005; Moore, 2011).

Fears About Commercialization

Some teachers and parents have “fears about the commercialisation of the curriculum and the promotion of a consumer culture” (Arthur, 2001, p. 302). They fear that bringing popular texts into the classroom will further marketing initiatives and blur the lines between advertisements and programs (Arthur, 2001; Giroux, 1997, 2011; Jenkins, 2009; Jewitt, 2008; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Naumovska & Milenkovska, 2017; Rideout, 2014; Stanley & Lawson, 2020). However, Jenkins (2009) argued that the focus on the commercialization of the curriculum offers an incomplete picture. He said this focus does not “appropriately value the skills and knowledge young people are gaining through their involvement with new media, and, as a consequence, they may mislead us about the roles teachers and parents should play in helping children learn and grow” (p. 14). Children must be able to distinguish commercial and non-commercial content, and they cannot do this without the proper guidance from teachers and parents (Arthur, 2001; Jenkins, 2009; Naumovska & Milenkovska, 2017). Through a critical literacy focus, students will be able to recognize the intent behind popular messages, who created them and why, and how they influence their own lives and the lives of others (Adams, 2011; Jewitt, 2008; Naumovska & Milenkovska, 2017; Saunders & Wong, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

Scholarship on children’s relationships with popular culture is precious for teachers who want to deepen their examination of their beliefs and assumptions about literacy, popular culture, and schooling. This line of scholarship asks teachers to broaden their understanding of literacy, questioning why and how literacy is taught and how students gain literacy skills outside of the classroom. Moreover, it demonstrates that elementary school students must see their experiences, knowledge, and lives reflected in school curricula. Scholarship on children’s relationships with popular culture may be one helpful tool to stimulate teachers’ thinking about 21st-century teaching.

Although it would be easy to argue against using popular culture, scholarship on children’s relationships with popular culture should not be ignored. Given the rapidly changing literacy demands of the 21st century, there should be an increased focus on multiliteracies and popular culture texts for effective classroom practice. Teachers must create plenty of spaces to consider these texts’ significance and learn to work within the current standards to facilitate new literacy skills and sensitivity to diverse cultural perspectives.

As educational and cultural scholars within this area of research have examined, using popular culture in the traditional literacy curricula frameworks can enhance students’ learning and contribute to developing their critical literacy skills. In addition, this scholarship reveals that elementary students’ most crucial fund of knowledge is popular culture. Finally, by understanding how children learn and engage in the world, teachers can see themselves as agents of educational change and advocates for their students’ interests and lives outside of school.

However, this research on using popular culture to enhance learning and promote the development of critical media literacy does not deny the need to help teachers address the challenges of inviting popular culture into the classroom. Teachers must acquire the best conceptual and analytical tools to assess and communicate the best practices for using popular culture texts to create collaborative spaces for powerful classroom learning.

Suggestion

The research reveals how popular culture affects teachers’ professional identities. It also shows how using popular texts in the classroom is a powerful and transformative educational tool to incorporate children’s at-home literacy practices and engage in critical literacy. Based on the
synthesis of research on popular culture in education, elementary teachers should note how using popular texts will benefit classroom learning. Curricula should encourage students to bring their knowledge and experience to the classroom to take control of their learning. Teachers should find ways to put students at the centre of their learning. They should also help their students build critical media literacy skills to question unjust social issues and ideologies and negotiate new meanings to navigate the 21st century. Finally, elementary school teachers should take steps to use popular culture texts in their classrooms to support learning, make interesting and engaging learning environments, and promote critical pedagogy.

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### Appendix A

**Book Comparison**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOOK</th>
<th>CINDERELLA</th>
<th>ROUGH FACED GIRL</th>
<th>RAINBOW COLORED HORSE</th>
<th>TALKING EGGS</th>
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Figure 1. Book Comparison Chart (BCC) Example

Appendix A. Book comparison chart example (Kaminiski, 2000, p. 4).