GETTING WITH THE FLOW: POPULAR CULTURE IN THE UPPER
ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

by

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If we believe that education needs to proceed by taking student knowledge, identity and desire into account, we need to engage with multiple ways of speaking, being and learning, with layered modes of identity at modes of identity at global, regional, national and local levels. Unless we get in touch with this as educators, the flow will pass us by. (Pennycook, 2007, p.15)

Background

Jonas Brothers, Bone, Hannah Montana, Miley Cyrus, Family Guy, manga comics, anime, punk, rock, hip hop, techno, dance, High School Musical, Paris Hilton, Camp Rock, UFC, bhangra, J-Pop, Canto-pop, Tupac, T.I., and on, and on they go, like a rolling stone. There are perhaps many educators teaching upper elementary grades, usually considered to be students aged 10-12, who do not know or do not care to know what or who these things are. However, this view may be in dire need of being reconsidered. Pennycook's words serve as the starting point for a brief foray into the world of popular culture in the upper elementary classroom. As educators entrusted with the preparation of today's youth for success in the world, we must guard against being too disconnected from the flow of the world our students inhabit. We risk not knowing who our students are, where they are coming from, or where they may be headed if we close ourselves off from their popular culture.

Popular Culture

Popular culture is composed of language and texts, and language literacy is one of the most important things that educators are entrusted with teaching in order to prepare students for life in the 'real world'. The question here is that if we do not have a picture of who our students are and what interests them, how can we effectively engage them in our teachings? Popular culture is a significant influence in the lives of students and as such effects who they are. We ignore it at our peril and risk having our classrooms end "up like a bookstore at an international airport, selling whatever goods passing travelers feel may fill their empty travel time"

(Pennycook, 2007, p.158). Therefore, it is imperative to consider what the literature says about popular culture and its implications for education in the upper elementary classroom.

The Issues

1. What are critical pedagogy, language socialization, and popular culture?

2. What does the literature suggest about pop-culture-mediated learning environments for school aged L1/L2 learners?

3. What are the implications of these suggestions?

These considerations will be followed by a brief presentation of some potential popular culture activities for teachers to engage in with their upper elementary classes.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy focuses on "the importance of understanding what actually happens in classrooms and other educational settings" (Giroux, 1994, p.30). It is "an approach to teaching that seeks to examine the conditions under which language is used and the social and cultural purposes of its use, rather than transmitting the dominant view of linguistics, cultural and other kinds of information" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.134). Pennycook (1994) clarifies this definition for educators by stating that

> Critical pedagogy does not advocate the teaching of a fixed body of political thought but aims to help students deal with their struggles to make sense of their lives, to find ways of changing how lives are lived within inequitable social structures, to transform the possibilities of our lives and the ways we understand those possibilities. (p.302)

The words 'to help students deal with their struggles to make sense of their lives' are apt as upper elementary students are just beginning to develop new senses of self and the larger world around them. It is an opportune time for educators to help nurture and foster the development of these emerging identities in the most inclusive and caring way possible. By paying attention to

the students' popular culture in a thoughtful, engaged, and critical manner, educators pay not only attention to the students, but also to a powerful force seeking to influence those students.

Language socialization is "the process by which children and other newcomers to a social group become socialized into the group's culture through exposure to and participation in language mediated social activities" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.293). It is the process "which encompasses socialization *through* language and socialization *into* language" (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008, p.2). Language socialization is learning how to say, or not, what to who, when, where, and why. If school is a process for socializing children into a group's culture, should not that culture, or more specifically the group's popular culture, be discussed and examined within the school?

Dyson (1997) states that culture is "shared ways of interpreting symbols, based on shared experiences" (p.163) in which the 'symbols' are popular culture artifacts and ideas. Popular culture has been described as "neither an imposed mass culture, nor a people's culture; it is more of an exchange between the two." (Duncan-Andrande & Morrell, 2005, p.288) For educators, it is something that is "appropriated by students and helps authorize their voices and experiences" (Giroux & Simon, 1988, p.11). As such, it needs a place in the modern classroom if educators wish to remain relevant and connected to students' lives. How can something that plays such a large role in not only students', but also educators', lives be sidelined? Educators must overcome the "fear of the unknown, fear of a loss of control over our students and our curricula" (Norton, 2003, p.142) and recognize that it is acceptable 'to boldly go where no one has gone before', to borrow a phrase from Star Trek. However, a word of caution is in order as the intention here is not to create a blanket endorsement of popular culture in the classroom, or to view it as some sort of pedagogical panacea. Giroux (1994) summarizes effectively, "though I

do not wish to romanticize popular culture, it is precisely in its diverse spaces and spheres that most of the education that matters today is taking place on a global scale." (p. x).

Rationale

There are several arguments as to why an investigation of popular culture in the upper elementary classroom is worth examining. First, the need to belong and be accepted into a group is powerful, and in the upper elementary classrooms of today, shared popular culture is one of the ways students establish and maintain a sense of belonging and acceptance. Popular culture, or mass media, influences this belonging and acceptance as "adolescents spend a third or more of their waking hours with some form of mass media, either as a primary focus or as a background for other activities" (Santrock, 1993, p.316). Interestingly, for L2 students, and it could be argued that it is applicable to L1 students as well, Ibrahim (1999) states that "teachers need first to be in tune with popular culture, for television, music, newspapers, and other media – not the classroom – are increasingly the sources from which students learn English" (p.367). A critical approach that "involves recognizing the importance of popular culture in students' lives and including critical discourse practices in the classroom as a means of examining it" (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999, p.24) needs to be undertaken. If students, both L1 and L2, spend a third of their time with mass media, and if this mass media is influencing language learning, then it seems appropriate for schools to be places where students engage in learning about mass media. Students need to feel not only a sense of physical belonging and acceptance in schools and classrooms, but also an emotional acceptance of their ideas, their likes and interests. This will enhance student investment in their learning, and the relevance of the classroom and teacher in the modern world.

Literature Review

There is much discussion about the inclusion or exclusion of popular culture in classrooms. The goal here is not to engage in a prolonged discussion of this debate. As educators our primary concern is educating and preparing our students so that they may become actively contributing and participating members of society. We recognize that our students possess a multiplicity of identities, just as we do, and that popular culture plays a significant part in the formation and maintenance of these identities. Therefore, as critical pedagogy educators, it is in our best interests to pay attention, to 'get in the flow'. Pennycook (2007) claims that "remarkably little attention has been paid to popular culture within the fields of language education" (p.78) and there is some truth to this statement for popular culture and upper elementary school students. However, there are several relevant articles and books that do. These deal with both L1 and L2 students and can be categorized in three ways: upper elementary students (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004; Evans, 2005), primary students (Dyson, 1997; Newkirk, 2002; Rymes, 2004), and secondary students (Ibrahim, 1999; Duff 2001, 2002, 2004; Morrell, 2004; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005).

Norton and Vanderheyden's (2004) *Comic book culture and second language learners* article is an appropriate starting point as it provides an illuminating look into the language learning potential for upper elementary students through the use of one particular popular culture text, comic books. The study was conducted at an elementary school in the city of Vancouver with a diverse, L1 and L2, student population and involved students reading, communicating, and sharing their ideas about Archie comics. The authors state that "popular culture texts provide an important window on the activities and investments of students outside the schools" (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004, p.205). They further suggest that if educators continue to

ignore what is going on outside of our schools and "do not take seriously the social and cultural texts authorized by youth ... they run the risk of negating and silencing their students" (p.204-205). In the study, L1 and L2 students interacted and communicated more as a result of a shared interest in the Archie comics where before the two groups had been more isolated from one another. This leads the authors to deduce that "the literate underlife we associate with comic books and popular culture has much potential for building relationships among students of different linguistic backgrounds" (p.216) inside the classroom. One of the potential language socialization educational activities incorporating popular culture that they suggest is encouraging all language learners:

> To bring their mother-tongue comics to the classroom, to share different stories, and to compare comic book genres. In this way, a comic book culture, which includes comics in both English and other languages, might enrich the literacy practices in the elementary classroom and promote community relationships in which diversity is celebrated. (p.217)

The argument could be extended to include other popular culture artifacts as well, such as other books, music, TV shows, movies, posters, and so on. The authors conclude with the suggestion that "perhaps both teachers and parents need to rethink their conceptions of literacy in a changing technological and social world" (p.218) because "literacy references not only words on the printed page, but social relationships and community practices" (p.218). This rethinking of literacy conceptions regarding pop culture comic books suggests that there are many possibilities for upper elementary students and the potential inclusion of other popular culture texts in the classroom. The potential for positive language socialization in a pop-culture-mediated learning environment exists for elementary school L1 and L2 learners and teachers given the appropriate conditions and circumstances.

Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood's (1999) book *Popular culture in the classroom: Teaching and researching critical media literacy* is "written for teachers, researchers, and

theorists who have grown up in a world radically different from that of the students they teach, study and theorize about" (p.1). The authors suggest two reasons as to why the inclusion of popular culture in the classroom is important:

> First, in an age of expanding consumerism, children and young people who learn to question how their identities are constructed by the various form of popular culture that they elect to take up are likely to make more informed decisions about how they live their lives. Second, the abundance of media messages (both image based and verbal) in the home and community suggests that there is an urgent need to help students learn how to evaluate such messages for their social, political, economic, and aesthetic contents. (Alvermann et al, 1999, p.4)

They contend that at the very least "we would be well served to learn how readers, texts, and contexts construct and are constructed by the media, if for no other reason than to make visible popular culture's invisibility in the classroom" (p.11). The book centers on the teaching strategies the authors used with second grade, fourth grade, and eighth grade American students and their observations, discussions, and conclusions. The chapters of most interest are the fourth graders and the eighth graders as they border the boundaries of upper elementary school students in Canada. The authors caution that in terms of incorporating popular culture into the classroom without destroying students' love of it or simply glorifying it, "a balance must emerge so that critical media literacy is not purely a cognitive experience, nor is it solely experiencing pleasures without challenges to extend learning" (p.28). With specific reference as to how teachers can balance these various issues in the classroom, they suggest "a practice based on materials relevant to students' lives, a commitment to students' pleasures and to critical awareness, and flexible teaching strategies that allow for teachers to take on multiple roles within the context of a single lesson" (p.38). The two chapters of interest recount the steps the authors undertook in forming and implementing a popular culture lesson and what happened in the classroom. During

this process, the reader is encouraged to "consider how you would implement or alter these steps to design a lesson using students' popular culture for your own classroom" (p.62).

Hagood begins her chapter of the book with the confession that when she was a teacher her lunch hour conversations about popular culture with students never made it back into the classroom, "but now, exposing myself to these forms of popular culture has made me realize I missed out on valuable teaching opportunities" (p.62). She begins with a survey of Grade 4 students musical preferences and is surprised by the initial resistance to the idea until the students realize she means 'real' music, not 'school' music (p.64). She then selects several songs from the students' choices and prepares a four part lesson in which students will explore aspects of musical pleasure, reading bands' images on CD jackets, reading lyrics, and creating their own musical bands, song, and accompanying images (p.69). Like other popular culture educators, Hagood realizes that for these lessons she will have "to shift back and forth among roles of novice, guide, and expert" (p.69). During some of the classroom sharing and clarifying discussion that followed, Hagood, despite her initial fears, "noticed that children were able to defend their own beliefs to the satisfaction of others (and) the children concluded that differences among them were acceptable and that musical tastes were based on opinions" (p.71). At the end of the lesson, Hagood says that "by allowing students time to discuss and explain their rationale for their image formation and song lyrics, I learned about their active construction of the interplay of these components on their reading of popular culture" (p.84). The fact that the Grade 4 students were engaged, productive, thoughtful, critical, and interested during Hagood's lessons suggests that it is possible to incorporate popular culture into the upper elementary classroom in ways that are meaningful, yet not overly onerous, for willing educators.

Alvermann's chapter recounts her experiences with a Grade 8 class and popular culture texts in which she wanted to see if critical "theory worked as well in practice as it did on paper" (p.85). Specifically, she sets out to see if the students will be able "to unpack, or question, the underlying assumptions of some of the messages delivered by the lyrics" from two pop CDs (p.87). Unlike Hagood, Alvermann decides not to use Grade 8 students' music preferences as a starting point as she and the classroom teacher felt that "individuals feelings were bound to get hurt, and the more sensitive ones likely not to participate in the lesson" (p.88). The decision to use two more neutral songs makes sense when considering that the goals of her lesson were to juxtapose disparate elements in the pop messages in order to "disrupt what seemed commonsensical or natural about the way the pop stars positioned their audience (and) to provoke a lively discussion among the eighth graders" (p.89). Alvermann's lesson included a paper and pencil warm-up activity based on images from the two CDs, listening to two songs, and a follow-up discussion. The private school students engaged Alvermann in a lively discussion and she comes away from the lesson knowing that "this group of eighth graders was indeed capable of unpacking many of the messages delivered by the popular media" (p.106). Alvermann, like Hagood, determines that popular culture can and does engage students in meaningful ways in the classroom. She also "relearned the value of being up front and honest with adolescents" (p.106), and, if educators risk being dishonest with both themselves and their students if they continue to pretend that popular culture does not have a place in the classrooms. Based on their experiences in which students were able to successfully 'read' popular culture, the authors conclude that "as the media continue to find ways of producing texts for imagining or transgressing life experiences, it will become increasingly important to engage students in reading critically for the assumptions underlying those texts" (p.141).

The book *Literacy moves on: Popular culture, new technologies, and critical literacy in the elementary classroom*, edited by Evans (2005), contains several chapters with specific reference to upper elementary students. Evans begins with some of the new technologies the students of today are exposed to and states that "these technologies are influencing and changing the activities that children engage with and are in turn influencing and changing literacy" (p.7). She continues by saying educators "need to work collaboratively with them in a way that allows us to bridge the gap between the many dynamic, constantly changing worlds in which they live; and the older world that is still in existence for many adults" (p.10). Evans suggests the way for educators to do this is "to find out about, show interest in, and appreciate that children's popular culture interest" (p.10) are valued in school. Similarly to Alvermann, Hagood, & Moon (1999), the chapters in this book lay out popular culture lessons and offer specific, practical ideas for teachers in the end of each chapter.

Mackey's (2005) chapter *Children reading and interpreting stories in print, film, and computer games* sets out "to explore how ways of playing narrative computer games may reflect or alter encounters with other, more established formats" (p.52) for 10-14 year olds. Mackey begins with a discussion of rules, computer games, and storytelling. She claims that "contemporary culture fosters an engaged approach to texts somewhat more than a one-off approach of straight immersion" (p.57). The example presented is of a person who may be reading Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* books while also watching the film, engaged in online discussions, playing a spin-off video game, and so on (p.57). Mackey continues by stating "in fact, many of the media alternatives often lead back to books, or, perhaps even more powerfully, they lead *from* books, being developed on the premise that the user will already know the book" (p.59). She summarizes by saying that "as young people move back and forth among the many

forms of fiction available to them, they are carrying their assumptions about story along with their imaginations. We have much to learn from considering what this process has to offer" (p.60). Like other authors, she states that "the old model of teacher as expert, student as apprentice, is no longer as clear-cut as it once may have been" (p.60). Mackey's voice is another added to the chorus of advocates for the use of popular culture in the upper elementary classroom.

Evans's (2005) *Beanie Babies: An opportunity to promote literacy development or a money-spinner for the business tycoons?* chapter deals with 10-11 year olds. Her goals are to investigate children's views "in relation to Beanies Babies as popular culture icons (and to) investigate some of the influences on the marketing of popular culture icons since the beginning of this century and more recently" (p.107). She provides a brief overview about the history of branding toys and how that industry has merged and synergized to the point of ubiquity (p.109). Evans sets out "to use Beanie Babies as a stimulus for collaborative shared and guided writing with 10- and 11-year old children" (p.113). There were nine activities that students engaged with and three of those were the most interesting. The students were most engaged with 'The Rogues Gallery of Business Tycoons' and they "were clearly making links between the production of Beanie Babies and other mass-marketed goods by the multinationals that seem to be steadily homogenizing the world through sales of their branded products and lifestyles" (p.119). Next they chose to make 'Wanted for Deceit' posters for the creator and he was described by one student as "a case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: cute, cuddly teddies on one side, money making profits and all that on the other" (p.120). In the end, the "activities enabled the children to reflect on the decisions they made in everyday life; decisions in relation to making

choices about what they buy, eat, drink, listen to, and so on" (p.123). She closes with the statement:

> Using popular culture artefacts in the classroom situation can provide many different starting points for reflective thought and therefore closer investigation into the way we are positioned to lead our lives in a dynamic, capitalist society where events and happenings are not always as innocuous as they are often portrayed. (p.124)

The work of Evans again demonstrates that popular culture can be incorporated successfully into the upper elementary classroom.

Millard's (2005) chapter entitled *Writing of heroes and villains: Fusing children's knowledge about popular fantasy texts with school-based literacy requirements* examines 8-10 year olds and "the power of story and its role in developing understanding about how language creates a range of realities" (p.162). In other words, she wants to consider "what 'reading' widely and being well informed might mean in the twenty-first century" (p.164). Millard recounts a series of small scale projects that she conducted over a five year period with the help of a motivated and willing classroom teacher. The activities were varied and "the emphasis was on 'fusing' the children's current interests with their teachers' school-based planning" (p.167). Millard and the classroom teacher found "that children had been very motivated to write and genuinely interested in sharing each other's ideas, recognizing the common currency of popular culture, which allowed them to have their say" (p.178). Perhaps most significantly from an educational perspective is that the student work had met teachers' external curricula demands so "the fusion of teachers' and children's interested had been accomplished effectively" (p.178). Millard promotes a 'fusion literacy concept' that "requires teachers to be attentive to children's interests and preferred ways of creating meaning, in order to enable them to both question and transform knowledge brought from their interests outside to meet the needs of the classroom"

(p.181). The modern educator can take heart that popular culture has been successfully incorporated into the upper elementary classroom and met curricular demands at the same time.

There is some literature about popular culture in the classroom that deals with younger students, both L1 and L2, from which connections can be made to the upper elementary classroom. Rymes's (2004) study *Contrasting zones of comfortable competence: Popular culture in a phonics lesson* investigated a specific incident in which "popular cultural references by second language learners are effectively ignored in favor of skill-based practice" (p.322). Her article is situated in a Grade 2 phonics class in the southeastern United States and was one interaction from a larger 2-year case study she conducted. It raises the question of what popular culture is valid or not in the classroom, more so than whether or not popular culture should be included. Rymes contends that during the pop culture interaction between the teacher and ESL students that two contrasting 'zones of comfortable competence' are at play: the teacher's zone and the children's language routine zone (p.330). The crux of her argument is that the L2 student does well with the Pokemon reference in his own zone, but struggles in the teacher's zone and that teachers need to be mindful of these zones so they can "be productive for both" (p.331). This situation can easily be imagined as happening in a classroom with older students as well. Rymes suggests that "teachers learn how to position themselves as learners or novices, and their students as teachers or experts – especially when popular culture (or any youth-specific reference) emerges during lessons" (p.332). She goes on to argue "that popular culture has the potential to highlight teachers' responsibility by augmenting our awareness of the sociocultural context in which students participate" (p.333). Rymes concludes with the notion that "it is possible that, in the process, classrooms can go beyond their existence as places of skill acquisition, to becoming places of socialization (for adults and children both) into a modern and

humane world" (p.334). It is interesting to see that similar popular culture issues and possibilities are at play with younger students, and their teachers, as well.

Anne Haas Dyson has several works that focus on children, literacy, and popular culture. The central argument of her ethnographic book *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy* is that

> Teachers, and more broadly, communities do have a responsibility to make judgments about, and provide the young access to, valuable cultural products – but they also have a responsibility to attend to those cultural materials children themselves find accessible and meaningful. To fail to do so is to risk reinforcing societal divisions of gender and of socioeconomic class. (Dyson, 1997, p.7)

Her book focuses on writing stories about superheroes and how "children appropriated cultural material through composing to participate in and help construct a classroom community of and for a diversity of children" (p.28). Dyson studies second and third grade students, but connections to intermediate students, both L1 and L2, can still be drawn. For example, Dyson writes that "all of the children, whatever their gender, sociocultural background, or individual style, shared ... a desire for social belonging and social fun" (p.33). It is reasonable to suggest that the word 'age' or 'language' could be included in the 'whatever' list as children, and adults, of all ages want to feel like they belong. Her study spends much time examining the evolving and changing social interactions, relationships, and issues between the children as they construct superhero narratives. The children use existing cultural material ranging from *Superman* to *X-men* to create new material in which "meanings do not come in any direct way from (the) stories themselves; meanings are constructed and reconstructed in the social world that takes up the story" (p.61). Dyson contends that the modern classroom "requires teachers of courage ... who are not afraid of children's worlds and children's concerns, who are interested in their ideas and, also, in challenging and extending those ideas" (p.185). For students and teachers, she suggests

that "given the opportunity – a diversity of others to know – we learn simultaneously about words and social worlds, about ourselves and others" (p.188). The final words of the book underscore the notion that teachers and students need to work together with popular culture as "ultimately, we have to look to each other to negotiate the common good (and the common evil) and, in this way, jointly construct our future" (p.188). Even though her work focused on primary students, her conclusions imply that educators need to get in touch with popular culture and bring it into the classroom, or else the flow might just pass on by.

Newkirk's (2002) book *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture* is another plea for the acceptance of a larger role for popular culture in the classroom. It is an easy to read combination of memoir, research project, cultural analysis, and critique of published findings. His "main worry is about boys who are alienated from school itself, who find the reading and writing in schools unrelated to anything that matters to them" (p.xxi) and his argument is for an expansion of texts, specifically popular culture ones, that are deemed appropriate for classroom use. This desire to connect with 'things that matter' is a sentiment shared by many other educators as well. Similarly to Dyson (1997), whose "footprints (or is it fingerprints?) are all over this work" (p.xiv), his work is with younger students, third grade boys and girls. His suggestion that a teacher's "ability to engage students in the deeply involved reading and writing is compromised by the often unspoken class and gender biases – ones that define the kind of story that can make it into the classroom and the kind that must stay outside" (p.68) gives food for thought. Newkirk could be described as a classroom pop culture humanist as he is "challenging the claims made for this (quality) literature and the implicit (or explicit) moral hierarchy that sets this type of reading *above* more popular forms of literary activity" (p.79). This book echoes many similar sentiments and arguments of some of the previous works

discussed. He asserts that "a broadening of the literacy spectrum will not only benefit boys; it will benefit *any student* whose primary affiliation is to the 'low-status' popular narratives of television, movies, comics, humor, sport pages, and plot-driven fiction" (p.170). It would be reasonable to suggest that this would be true not only for primary, but ESL, intermediate, and high school, students as well. Furthermore, any students who may not share the dominant popular culture of the classroom might benefit by allowing them the ability to access and incorporate their own texts and genres into their learning. Newkirk cites one telling example in which the teacher "created a 'big room,' one that could admit popular culture *and* classical literature, and where children, in their writing, often merged the two in unexpected ways" (p.173). Newkirk concludes that we must "resist those forces that would narrow the range of writing (and reading) allowable in schools" (186). In other words, it is time to rethink preconceived notions about what works and what does not work with regard to literacy education, especially for boys, and perhaps see popular culture as an ally rather than enemy.

With regards to the inclusion of popular culture in high school for L1 and L2 learners, some supportive studies are available. Ibrahim's (1999) article *Becoming black: Rap and hip-hop, race, gender, identity, and the politics of ESL learning* investigates "a group of French-speaking immigrant and refugee continental African youths who are attending an urban Franco-Ontarian high school in southwestern Ontario" (p.349). It focuses on how "they learn Black stylized English, which they access in hip-hop culture and rap lyrical and linguistic styles" (p.349). Similarly to Rymes (2004), Ibrahim's article is part of a larger study and he focuses much of his attention on learning, identity, and the pop culture of hip-hop. He argues that these African youths are being asked by society to "racially fit somewhere" (p.353) and "to fit somewhere, signifies choosing or becoming aware of one's own being, which is partially

reflected in one's language practice" (p.353). Upper elementary students are in the processes of fitting in somewhere, becoming more aware of themselves and the world around them. Ibrahim argues that this process leads the students in his study to assimilate and be socialized into a black hip-hop popular culture because of "the youth's desire to belong to a location, a politics, a memory, a history, and hence a representation" (p.353). This particular situation, this intricate interweaving of language, culture, and identity, for this group of youths leads Ibrahim to suggest that

> Language is never neutral, learning it cannot and should not be either. We as teachers must, first, identify the different sites in which our students invest their identities and desires and, second, develop materials that engage our students' raced, classes, gendered, sexualized, and abled identities. (p.366)

For upper elementary teachers, it could be argued that the process of identification and development of appropriately engaging materials is just as important as for older students. Interestingly, he also suggests that the popular culture of rap and hip-hop "should not be readily consumed but should be critically framed, studied, and engaged with" (p.367). Ibrahim's study illustrates some of the difficulties facing young immigrant students, and their teachers, and the effects, both positive and negative, that a particular popular culture can have on these students with regard to their language socialization. He summarizes his argument by stating that in order to engage students in language learning "teachers need first to be in tune with popular culture, for television, music, newspapers, and other media – not the classroom- are increasingly the sources from which students learn English" (p.367).

Duff's articles (2001, 2002, and 2004) recount her investigations into some of the issues confronting ESL students at a local Vancouver area high school. After spending time observing the role of popular culture in Grade 10 Social Studies classes during Current Events discussions, she determines that "a major issue is that students from different linguistic and cultural groups

often do not have equal access to or familiarity with the local pop culture scripts, texts, scripts

and references that are admitted into the classroom" (Duff, 2004, p.237). She states that "this

textured, pop-culture-laden talk was a complex, even bewildering form of both sociolinguistic

and intertextual practice for ESL newcomers" (Duff, 2004, p.253). This is not surprising as L2

students are already overwhelmed with new sociocultural and language information and

decisions to be made in their new lives, let alone attempting to understand new popular cultures.

However, it is interesting to note that:

> Students enjoyed observing the interactivity and emotional engagement of their peers
> and teachers in many cases but only wished they could understand what the issues,
> references, debates, anecdotes, and jokes were about. In order for them to fully engage
> with the topics and links they needed far more scaffolding, priming, or explanation by
> others. (Duff, 2004, p.260)

Therefore, popular culture in the classroom must be approached with sensitivity and caution for

"otherwise, the potential cultural 'third spaces' that might become arenas of learning for all

students will be restricted to those privileged enough to have grown up in local neighbourhoods

speaking English and enjoying the same vaunted cultural capital" (Duff, 2004, p.261). The

teachers in her study were thoughtful and caring individuals, and the L2 students interested to

learn. The problem is how to incorporate popular culture in a more effective and inclusive

manner. Duff (2002) offers three practical suggestions: having the teacher conduct a pop-culture

survey and follow-up discussion activities; having the teacher write down pop-culture references

during discussions on the board for later investigation; and having the teacher "initiate ongoing

critical reflection about the credibility or bias of different sources of news and pop-culture

reporting and the need to interpret information accordingly" (p.487). The inclusion of popular

culture in the classroom can be done successfully, but "effective, innovative, and sensitive ways

of encouraging ESL students and reticent local students to bring elements of their home (pop)

cultures, media, and news items into class are clearly needed" (Duff, 2002, p.487). This claim can be extended to the upper elementary classroom as L1, L2, and reticent students can be found there as well.

Morrell's (2002) study *Toward a critical pedagogy of popular culture: Literacy development among urban youth* is centered on urban teens in the San Francisco Bay area and southern California. He argues that for the critical educator "new approaches, such as the critical teaching of popular culture, can help students acquire and develop literacies needed to navigate 'new-century' schools" (p.72) and that "popular culture provides a logical connection between lived experiences and the school culture for urban youth" (p.73). In his classes, Morrell taught various units focusing on particular manifestations of popular culture such as hip-hop culture, popular film, television and media (p.74). He finds that his various popular culture "classroom activities laid the groundwork for more traditional academic work while fostering student activism" (p.75). He declares that "critical-literacy educators should envision teaching popular culture as (being) compatible with the current educational climate" (p.77). Furthermore, a critical examination of popular culture in the classroom can be used "to connect to the world of students, to promote academic achievement, and to prepare students for critical citizenship in a multicultural democracy" (p.77). If this sort of classroom work and engagement with popular culture proved to be effective with teenagers, it could also be altered and adjusted to be effective with other students as well.

Morell is involved in an article with Duncan-Andrade titled *Turn up that radio, teacher: Popular cultural pedagogy in new century urban schools* (2005) in which they "consider the teaching of popular culture to develop academic and critical literacies in urban classroom" (p.285). They "contend that popular culture provides an ideal site for study of new (digital,

visual, cyber, media) literacies in the process of working to develop academic competencies" (p.286). Similarly to other popular culture education authors, they state that "it is important to note that this article is not meant to advocate for the blind and uncritical celebration of popular culture in literacy classrooms, but rather to recognize and draw upon its centrality to the live of youth" (p.288). This centrality, this idea of putting students first by incorporating their popular culture in the classroom, leads the authors to claim that "this movement toward a curriculum that is more representative of students' daily lives is potentially the most powerful school reform that can be made" (p.292). They suggest that this would help save a failing urban school system in the United States, but it could be argued that this curriculum shift is also necessary in other places for other reasons. These reasons include things like the prevalence of reluctant students, ESL students, and perhaps teachers' resistance to standardization. They continue with the argument that student life is very different today, and that "schools are possibly the slowest of our primary social institutions to recognize and respond" (p.296) to this technologically changed world. Through the critical examination of rap lyrics in the classroom, they demonstrate how content standards can be met and literacy goals achieved. They argue that:

> Texts such as these are not meaningless adolescent rants tearing at the moral fiber of society. They are powerful representations of the intense emotion and rage that are dominating the sentiments of modern youth. Educators can no longer afford to ignore these voices because they are reaching young people with unprecedented intensity and consistency. (p.301)

They are not content to stop with rap lyrics and further suggest that "popular media texts such as films, given their thematic nature, can also be used as springboards to launch critical classroom discussions and assignments" (p.302). Morrell and Duncan-Andrade are strong advocates for the inclusion of popular culture in the classroom and they encourage new century educators to "see

themselves as agents of educational change, able to combine academic content knowledge with a commitment to social justice" (p.304).

Cheung's (1999) article *The use of popular culture as a stimulus to motivate secondary students' English learning in Hong Kong* states "that since popular culture appeals to students, it motivates them to become responsive and active learners" (p.56). Cheung describes Hong Kong students who "tend to find learning in school uninteresting or irrelevant to their daily life" (p.55). He argues that "students are far from reluctant to learn the language of pop culture" (p.56) because popular culture reflects "what society is, who people are, and what they like" (p.57). This description of reluctant students is not limited to Hong Kong students as these can be found in many schools around the world. The article does not actually present any direct evidence about how popular culture was proven to be effective with Hong Kong students. It is a theoretical argument based on some personal observations that leads the author to claim that "students are more motivated when popular culture is used in the classroom, as they easily learn from things that they know" (p.59). Cheung also suggests to teachers of students learning English in Hong Kong that "they should incorporate popular culture into meaningful and communicative tasks and activities, so that students have a purpose to achieve something, and feel the need to speak and to use English in realistic situations" (60). The article demonstrates that researchers and educators from different cultural learning environments are presenting similar arguments and thoughts about the potentially positive role of popular culture in the classroom.

Perhaps the major issue with practice raised in these articles is the positionality of educators. The suggestion is that teachers need to be able to reposition themselves as novices, or guides, rather than just as experts, in the exploration and educational analysis of students'

popular culture. This notion is not without some difficulty as it presumes teachers' willingness and acceptance to undertake such position switching activities. Interestingly, Lambirth (2003) describes a writing research project undertaken in southeast England in which "it was clear from this data that the teachers in the project did not value popular culture's potential as a tool for literacy learning" (p.9). He goes on to contend that both teachers in the study and those who advocate popular culture's use in the classroom share the same goal of enhancing literacy, but the teachers in his study wanted nothing to do with repositioning themselves or their methods. As with many other questions, theories, or suggestions regarding education, the role of popular culture and its accompanying positionality challenges in language learning and socialization is without a unified consensus. However, there does appear to be some significant evidence that at least suggests it is something educators should consider as to whether it merits further exploration for their own personal situations or not.

If school is a process for socializing children into a group's culture, then that culture, or more specifically that group's popular culture, should be discussed and examined within the school. There is the possibility of multiple popular cultures being present in today's multicultural classrooms. However, as many authors have suggested, activities that promote collaborative sharing of students' popular cultures improves learning and understanding for all students. By applying a critical lens to popular culture in the classroom, a space opens up for teachers and students where "popular texts should be read and studied as rigorous and relevant pieces with genuine academic merit" (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005, p.295). The literature does appear to suggest that by using the popular culture of students in the classroom, the potential for enhanced learning, connections, and interactions with and between students, L1 and L2, and their teachers is a distinct possibility

<u>**Connections for practice:**</u>

> As educators, we are in urgent need of a newly conceived language and literacy curriculum, in which we start where children are, in a media-filled world that is increasingly diverse and interconnected. We may begin by using children's experiences with varied media resources as bridges to a more traditional literacy curriculum. (Haas, 2005, xii)

Understanding Popular Culture is a mini unit designed to introduce students to the concept of popular culture and the role that it plays in their lives. The activities and lessons are designed to get students and teachers thinking about what popular culture is, what popular culture is composed of, what particular aspects of popular culture they enjoy, why there might be differences between students' popular culture preferences, and how their popular culture preferences might influence their behaviour. Students explore popular culture through discussing, sharing, presenting, writing, and creating.

Understanding Popular Culture

Level: Grade 5-7

Learning outcomes

Students demonstrate

-an understanding of the concept of popular culture and its components

-an emerging understanding of the role of popular culture and its effect on their life

-the ability to select and use strategies when expressing and presenting ideas, information, and feelings, including accessing prior knowledge, generating ideas, making and sharing connections, organizing information, and practising delivery

Part 1 - Out of School Interests

Teacher writes the words "Our of school interests" on the board and asks students what they think these might be (Evans, 2005). Solicit suggestions from students and redirect as

needed as they may not think of what they watch, listen to, or read right away. Write some of their popular culture suggestions on the board or overhead. Teacher shares some of their own personal list of out of school interests.

Next provide students with some time to generate a list of their own interests. After students have generated lists, teacher solicits a few more examples to put on board. Teacher asks students if there might be a way to categorize the items. Solicit suggestions that include things like Music, Movies, Internet, or See, Hear, Read, etc. Put some examples under appropriate headings.

Part 1 Homework Activity

To conclude the introductory activity teacher directs students to redo their lists using headings to organize it. Also, instruct students are to rank their interests while they do so. Use a scale from 1-10 with 10 being the items of most interest and 1 being the least. Complete task before next session.

Part 2 - Popular Culture Definition

Begin with a check of students' organized and ranked lists. Ask students to share their headings and organizational strategies. Teacher writes some of their headings and ideas on the board. Introduce the word popular and ask students for a definition. Write it on the board (popular is to be regarded with favour, approval, or affection by people in general; e.g. a popular song, a popular teacher). Ask students for a definition of the word culture and write it on the board (culture is the behaviours and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group; e.g. the youth culture, the Punjabi culture). Teacher then poses the question of what the two words might mean when joined together as 'popular culture'. Provide the following meaning on the board:

Popular culture is the arts, materials, entertainment, trends, beliefs, and values that are shared by large groups of society.

Ask students if they think this is an appropriate definition. Review parts of definition and discuss as appropriate. Ask the students if their lists contain any examples of popular culture. Ask students to provide some examples, or use examples previously written on board, that demonstrate an art, or a material, or an entertainment, and so on. Suggest to students that these are the components, the parts that make up, popular culture.

Part 2 Homework Activity

Ask students to list their encounters with popular culture over the next day or two. Suggest that they not limit themselves to their lists of interests, but try and keep an open mind for all popular culture interactions. Ask students to reflect on these encounters and determine which of these encounters they find the most enjoyable and why.

Part 3 - Popular Culture Differences and Sharing

Teacher asks for some examples of enjoyable popular culture encounters. Perhaps teacher can share one of their own examples as well. Ask students why those encounters were enjoyable for them. Next ask for some encounters of popular culture that were not enjoyable and what was it that made them that way. Teacher then poses the questions "Do you think there are any differences between your out of school interests and those of other students in the class? Why do you think that might that be?" Before answering, ask students to consult their out of school interests list to see what they have ranked the highest and the lowest. Have students compare their highest and lowest items with a partner. Then pose the questions again. Follow a Think-Pair-Share format here: think individually, then partner up to share, then group into fours to share as a group, then reconvene whole class to discuss suggestions and findings. A teacher statement may be necessary here to emphasize the point that even though we may not all share

the same popular culture interests, we will be respectful, understanding, and try to keep an open mind when encountering new things or things we don't like.

Teacher poses another question to class, "Did you recognize all of the popular culture items on your partner's list?" Teacher could use personal example if none are forthcoming from class to make point that not everyone knows all the items on each other's lists. Tell the class that they will be starting a 'Popular Culture Sharing Space' on a section of the board (Duff, 2004). This will be a space where the teacher, or an assigned student, will write down any popular culture references that are unknown as they come up during class discussions. This will be a collaborative effort between the teacher and the students and they will both be responsible for indicating when there are new popular culture items encountered. Remind students of the non-judgmental, collaborative nature of this undertaking and that the goal of it is to write down the items so they can be investigated as students wish.

Part 3 Homework Activity

Select one of your out of school interests that you are willing to share with the class. Prepare a short 2-3 paragraph written report that describes this interest for other students. This report will be presented orally to other students. If possible, bring the item or some representation of it to the class so students can look at it with their own eyes. Some questions to consider in your report include:

-What is it?
-Who makes it?
-What is it about?
-Where does it come from?
-When was it made?
-What do you like about it?
-Why do you like it?
-Who else likes it?
-How did you find out about it?
-What would you like us to know about it?

If possible, teacher should model a sharing presentation with some item of their own choosing.

Part 4 - Popular Culture Sharing and Influence on Your Life

A gallery of popular culture artifacts could be set up to coincide with the oral presentations. Students present their oral presentations today. If there are too many students to go in one day, this could be broken up over several days. Speeches can be evaluated based on answering all of the assigned questions and a public speaking rubric. Allow class members time to pose questions at the end of presentations.

At the end of the speeches, teacher poses the questions, "Now that we have shared many of other popular culture interests with one another, how do you think the item you told us about effects your life? How much time do you spend thinking about it, watching it, reading it, listening to it? How much money do you spend on it, buying other things like it?" Questions should remain open ended; perhaps teacher could provide a personal example.

Part 4 Homework Activity

Ask students to pay attention to their interactions with popular culture over the next day or two and consider what effect it has on them. Does the encounter make them happy, sad, hungry, want to go shopping, want to play a game, etc.? Students could be asked to talk to their parents or guardians as well to solicit their opinions as to what the effect of popular culture on their life is.

Part 5 - Influence on Life Discussion and Final Evaluation

Students can share some examples from their journals and how popular culture influences their lives. Teacher might ask students how it makes them feel to be influenced this way by popular culture. Do they feel manipulated? Used? Exploited? Or do they feel it is all part of

life in the modern age? (This discussion could lead to some further investigations and lessons about critical media literacy if desired.)

To wrap up this series of lessons, have students write down what they think popular culture is. Also consider whether or not we all share the same popular culture or if there are some differences. Why do you think there are differences? What could we do to see past these differences? Are there any new popular culture things you learned about during these activities that you are now interested in? How do you feel about some of the effects of popular culture in your life? Encourage students to provide examples to illustrate their understanding.

Part 6 – Popular Culture Pop Art

Take the students to a computer lab with relatively up-to-date technology and good internet connection. Have students open up a word processing file and type in their lists of popular culture interests they created in the first lessons. Students should use their rankings as a guideline for how many times to repeat the word. For example, if a student has selected Hannah Montana as one of their musical interests and ranked it as a seven, they would repeat Hannah Montana seven times.

After students have finished typing lists, direct them to the Wordle web site (http://www.wordle.net/). Review the home page and explain to students how the process works. Explain to students that Wordle uses the amount of times a word appears to determine how big or small it will be. If possible, teacher could model for students using a projector before students undertake their own Wordle. Teacher could use a piece of text or their own interest list. Demonstrate how to copy text and paste it in to the Create section. Once this is done, students can hit Create to see what their lists might look like. Students can print their Wordles and then they could be displayed somewhere in the classroom or hallway for students to see.

Part 6 Homework Activity

Students could be asked to record their observations after examining each other's Wordles to see what sort of differences and similarities they notice between them. A possible extension might be to direct students to investigate 'pop art' and respond to the question, "Is your Wordle art?"

Observations

The lessons presented above are a refined version of lessons presented unofficially in a local Grade 6 classroom recently. For Part 1, it took this particular group a few minutes to get to popular culture interests as many of them are involved in athletic and artistic extracurricular activities. However, once they realized the goal was to list media type interests, they had no problems. For Part 2, students accepted the definition of popular culture and concluded that the things they liked were enjoyable while the things they disliked were not. This rolled into Part 3 where the concept of liking and disliking proved nebulous, elusive, and changed as various class members voiced their support or opposition for various things. Not surprisingly, friend groups or gender groups tended to support similar interests. Girls generally liked High School Musical 3 while boys said this was not cool and was for girls. Interestingly, the concept of 'cool' and 'not cool' subdivided gender groups although the subdivided groups both perceived their preferred popular culture items as cool. For example, girls were split in two groups respectively as to whether or not The Jonas Brothers or the Twilight novels and movie were cool.

In Part 4, the sharing activity led to some students discovering new off shoots of certain items or genres they were interested in. Several boys, who were already interested in graphic novels, began reading new graphic novel series after being introduced to them by other boys. The students and teacher learned many things here as students recounted in detail the various

members of a band, the cast of a film, or the characters in a show that were previously unknown. The passion, conviction, and energy with which many students presented was palpable. For Part 5, students recognized that television commercials made them hungry and made them want to buy things. They felt a bit manipulated by this, but did not seem overly concerned by it. In hindsight, this may have been a good place to introduce some critical media studies. However, the focus of these lessons was just to introduce the ideas of popular culture and its influence on students' lives, not to begin a sophisticated, critical discourse. For the Final Evaluation, students generally demonstrated an understanding of popular culture and its components. They also recognized that even though not all students liked the same things, they generally shared the same North American youth popular culture.

Part 6 was enjoyable for students as they had fun entering their lists multiple times into the Wordle site to see different configurations. Students enjoyed comparing their creations to those of their classmates. One interesting trend was that students tended to rank the high items on their lists similarly with many 8s, 9s, and 10s. This resulted in Wordles that had many similar sized words as it ranks word prominence. With some readjustment of rankings, students began to produce more visually distinctive Wordles. This activity, like many of the other activities, was enjoyed by a majority of the students. The majority of these lessons and activities were completed in satisfactory terms by both L1 and L2 students of various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Finally, throughout these activities, the level of enthusiasm and interest among and between students in the classroom was sufficient to suggest that inclusion of popular culture in the classroom is worthwhile.

Conclusion:

> As educators, we learned the importance of reading our own teaching. By exposing our own agenda, we were able to force ourselves to confront our own ideologies, tastes, and experiences in an effort to keep from falling into the trap of a singular reading of the world. We learned, again, the importance of curricular choices, especially those that tap into students' lived experience. (Guenther & Dees, 1999, p.53)

The modern educational experience is a more multifaceted and complex one than perhaps ever before in the history of schooling. This is true for teachers, students, and, to an even greater extent, for ESL students in Canadian classrooms. The issues facing the modern classroom educator can appear overwhelming, but as committed advocates of critical pedagogy and language socialization, we must strive to do our best. These ideas are culturally biased, but they are significant ideas within the culture of our education system. Learning and teaching are more interconnected than ever before and popular culture is just one piece of the puzzle of our astoundingly complex lives, languages, socializations, and identities. However, it is a significant flow in the lives of students and educators would do well to give it more space inside their classrooms. The technological world of today, like the education system, makes many demands for students' time and attention, albeit both make their demands in significantly different ways. It would be wise for educators to begin to give more of their own attention and time to these forces that seek to influence the students they are entrusted to prepare for life in the 'real' world. By ignoring popular culture and its influence on students, educators run the risk of being ignored in turn. More appropriately "the responsible reaction to this changing world reality is to provide spaces for students to discuss and critique this reality in the presence of a qualified and caring adult – a teacher" (Duncan- Andrade & Morrell, 2005, p.298). It is time for upper elementary educators to 'get with the flow'.

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