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### Connecting Literacy and Popular Culture

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## Connecting Literacy and Popular Culture

### Abstract

This study examined the benefits of using popular culture in the classroom to teach reading and writing strategies. The research was conducted in a one-to-one meeting with a fourth grade student. During the study, the participant read a chapter book Dramarama, based on Zoey 101, a popular television show for teenagers. Data was collected and analyzed through means of observation, student work samples, and personal interviews. The findings suggest that it is advantageous to incorporate popular culture into literacy instruction within the classroom. Knowledge of popular culture is not hindering on education, but is a large part of what students directly identify with. By embracing this idea, students of all developmental levels can flourish and become engaged in literacy.

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Connecting Literacy and Popular Culture

By

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M.S. Literacy Education

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Dr. Gloria E. Jacobs

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

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**Abstract**

This study examined the benefits of using popular culture in the classroom to teach reading and writing strategies. The research was conducted in a one-to-one meeting with a fourth grade student. During the study, the participant read a chapter book *Dramarama*, based on Zoey 101, a popular television show for teenagers. Data was collected and analyzed through means of observation, student work samples, and personal interviews. The findings suggest that it is advantageous to incorporate popular culture into literacy instruction within the classroom. Knowledge of popular culture is not hindering on education, but is a large part of what students directly identify with. By embracing this idea, students of all developmental levels can flourish and become engaged in literacy.

### **Introduction**

Many students are very knowledgeable about popular culture and experience with this information has the potential to support literacy learning in a formal educational environment, yet teachers are frequently skeptical that this knowledge deserves recognition in the classroom (Alvermann, Huddleston & Hagood, 2004; Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Gainer & Fink, 2008; Lawrence, McNeal & Yildiz, 2009; Nixon & Comber, 2006; Norton-Meier, 2005; Ruday, 2009; Sanchez, 2010; Skinner, 2007; Stevens, 2001; Weinstein, 2006; Xu, 2002). Although there is a great degree of research that describes the advantages of using popular culture texts in the classroom, these nontraditional texts are often viewed as insufficient and lacking valuable academic stature (Alvermann, Huddleston & Hagood, 2004; Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Gainer & Fink, 2008; Lawrence, McNeal & Yildiz, 2009; Nixon & Comber, 2006; Norton-Meier, 2005; Ruday, 2009; Sanchez, 2010; Skinner, 2007; Stevens, 2001; Weinstein, 2006; Xu, 2002). Popular culture is a large part of students' home literacy practices in which they apply various literacy skills that are desirable in an academic setting (Alvermann, Huddleston & Hagood, 2004; Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Gainer & Fink, 2008; Ikpeze, 2009; Lawrence, McNeal & Yildiz, 2009; Nixon & Comber, 2006; Norton-Meier, 2005; Ruday, 2009; Sanchez, 2010; Skinner, 2007; Stevens, 2001; Weinstein, 2006; Xu, 2002). Different literacy skills necessary to comprehend popular culture texts are complex and advantageous for students to have experience with. Furthermore, students' interests and abilities to relate to popular culture can be used to help students understand the skills they are using when interacting with popular culture and apply them to academic texts. Popular culture should be implemented in an academic setting and can serve as a valuable

source of information. Educators need to stop dismissing popular culture as irrelevant in the classroom and start valuing this information for the sake of their students' learning.

To investigate this issue I worked with a fourth grade student. I met with this student four times over the course of a month and during our lessons together used a popular culture book, *Dramarama*, based on *Zoey 101*, a popular television show for teenagers. I used the book during the student's reading workshop time to create lessons that pertained to specific reading strategies. The reading strategies focused on were using specific evidence from the story to describe characters, their actions, and motivations. By using this method I found that the student achieved the stated learning objective for each lesson taught that incorporated popular culture texts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Many individuals enjoy interacting with popular culture in various forms. Popular culture makes up a great part of students' home literacy practices (Gainer & Fink, 2008). Literacy practices in home environments are a main component of an individual's primary discourse (Gee, 2001). Primary discourse is defined as one's primary socialization and interaction with oral language in a literate community that allows him/her to explore and construct ideas about literacy (Gee, 2001). When individuals interact in their primary discourse they are using literacy in the most confident and comfortable way that is personal to them. If popular culture is part of students' home literacy practices (Gainer & Fink, 2008), then they are incredibly familiar and confident with the conventions, language, and background of this range of information. One's primary home discourse is embedded in one's thinking and is a major part of an individual's identity (Gee, 2001). If associating with popular culture is part of one's

identity, then students are able to relate to this information and feel it has relevance in their everyday life.

In addition to interacting with one's primary discourse, individuals also construct meaning through secondary discourses. Gee (2001) argues that this refers to the skills and language an individual may acquire outside of his/her primary socialization environment. Secondary discourse develops through experiences and opportunities to practice linguistic skills in secondary institutions (such as schools, professional buildings, churches, etc.) (Gee, 2001). In addition, Gee (2001) notes that one's ability to manipulate secondary discourses is at the core of literacy. If popular culture is part of primary discourse and if secondary discourse is that which is learned outside the home, then students' interests in and ability to relate to popular culture can be used to bridge the gap between discourses. When similarities exist between a primary and secondary discourse, the acquisition and learning of the secondary discourse is more attainable (Gee, 2001; Heath, 1982). Educators must be able to help students succeed in learning secondary discourse while still appreciating the relevancy of their primary discourse, as it is pertinent to their academic success (Adger, Wolfram & Christian, 2007; Delpit, 2001; Mays, 2008). Teachers can help students achieve this through allowing them to become aware of literacy skills they have acquired through manipulating popular culture in their primary home discourse and apply these skills in their secondary academic discourse. If not, students are likely to reject secondary academic discourse and revert to primary discourse when interacting in a school environment (Wolfram, 2000). This can have harmful effects on their educational experience and cause a life time of disconnect to

school. By implementing popular culture in the classroom, teachers can help students make connections between knowledge in their primary and secondary discourses.

It is vital for educators to understand how individuals acquire knowledge and how to best help students recognize the skills they have attained. Students naturally acquire knowledge when they interact with each other in everyday life, in formal and informal settings, and in their primary and secondary discourses (Larson & Marsh, 2005). When students engage in popular culture under these circumstances, they inherently acquire knowledge and literacy skills necessary to comprehend information. In addition, these authors argue that learning is changing participation and that literacy knowledge occurs best in a classroom that focuses on cultural modeling (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Cultural modeling helps students bridge the gap between their primary and secondary discourses, and teachers use literacy as a tool for understanding culturally relevant practices in which different communities participate in throughout their everyday lives and recognize them all as relevant (Larson & Marsh, 2005). If popular culture serves as a culturally relevant practice for a wealth of individuals in which they utilize a variety of literacy skills (Gainer & Fink, 2008; Lawrence, McNeal & Yildiz, 2009; Nixon & Comber, 2006; Skinner, 2007; Xu, 2002), then teachers can participate in cultural modeling to help students recognize skills they use when interacting with popular culture texts to assist them in making connections between their home and school literacy practices.

However, this can only be accomplished when educators give value to this aspect of students' home literacies. Yosso (2005) refers to this phenomenon when discussing community cultural capital. The author describes this as a way of organizing institutions to build off individuals' strengths, interests, home and cultural knowledge (Yosso, 2005).



If educators value community cultural capital in which popular culture plays a major part in, then students' background with this information can be used to benefit and engage them. For example, students may have familial or personal backgrounds in certain types of popular culture texts that can be connected to different content area learning. In addition, students can be presented as experts on topics and teach others in the class. Students themselves may even make connections between their community cultural capital and academics if their unique intelligences are truly appreciated.

Each academic institution is unique in the way in which it ranks individuals, labels them and creates circumstances that privileges some people and disadvantages others. McDermott and Varenne (1995) argue that these circumstances define who is disabled within a school culture. In addition, these authors argue that each culture defines who is provided power and taken into consideration (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). Popular culture texts are often viewed as insufficient and lacking valuable academic stature (Gainer & Fink, 2008; Lawrence, McNeal & Yildiz, 2009; Nixon & Comber, 2006; Skinner, 2007; Xu, 2002). This disadvantages those students who have a wealth of knowledge about those texts, and can cause them to feel inadequate in school. If our academic institutions abandon this deficit model of popular culture texts and begin to value and implement them, student's knowledge in this area will no longer be viewed as disabling or needing adjustment to fit the mold of the academic setting, but seen as powerful, useful knowledge which privileges them as learners.

### **Research Question**

Given that popular culture is a large part of students' home literacy practices in which they apply various literacy skills that are desirable in an academic setting (Gainer

& Fink, 2008; Lawrence, McNeal & Yildiz, 2009; Nixon & Comber, 2006; Skinner, 2007; Xu, 2002), this action research project asks, how can popular culture texts be used in the classroom to support reading and writing strategies among students.

### **Literature Review**

Based on the review of literature for the purpose of this research several themes were prevalent and will be explored in this paper. The dominating themes presented are: popular culture is a large part of students' home literacy and cultural practices in which they utilize various literacy skills to make sense of the information presented and that this aspect of students' home literacy practices serves a meaningful purpose in the classroom and should be utilized by educators.

### **Popular Culture: A Home Literacy and Cultural Practice**

As new technologies and new mediums arise individuals interact, communicate and interpret information in new, nontraditional ways. Text-based print is no longer the center of literacy engagements, as a result of these new possibilities the notion of literacy has changed and alternative literacies have been created in which popular culture and multimodal texts are a large part of (Heron- Hruby, Hagood & Alvermann, 2008; Moni & Jobling, 2008; Lawrence, McNeal & Yaldiz, 2009; Sanford & Madill, 2007; Pelletier, 2005). These new texts and skills can be referred to as multiliteracies which involve an innovative spectrum of multimodal texts, mediums, technologies, interactions, interpretations and relationships (Heron- Hruby, Hagood & Alvermann, 2008; Moni & Jobling, 2008; Lawrence, McNeal & Yaldiz, 2009; Sanford & Madill, 2007; Pelletier, 2005). Students are increasingly interacting with these multiliteracies and they are becoming more relevant to students' existence.

Naturally, students interact in their surroundings and develop different types of knowledge. Alternative literacies, primarily popular culture texts, are a large part of these interactions and surroundings in which students gain confidence and a level of expertise because pop culture is part of their repertoire of home literacy and cultural practices (Alvermann, Hagood, Heron-Hruby, Hughes, Williams & Yoon, 2007; Dyson, 2003; Savage, 2008). For example, Moni and Jobling (2008) note that many students spend time viewing series television programs and can therefore talk about them extensively and confidently. Students regularly interact with popular music and spend much of their free time listening to music, looking up and reading song lyrics on the Internet, searching the Internet for various motives, reading advertisements, and interacting with popular media (Alvermann, Hagood, Heron-Hruby, Hughes, Williams & Yoon, 2007; Dyson, 2003; Savage, 2008). Younger children play with popular culture based toys and artifacts that reflect certain characters in movies and television shows (Dyson, 2003; Wohlwend, 2009). These texts are utilized by students regularly in a less than passive manner.

Furthermore, these pop culture texts contain powerful messages and images about how students should dress, act, talk and socialize (Dyson, 2003; Moni & Jobling, 2008; Savage, 2008). As a result of everyday interactions with pop culture containing these powerful messages, students begin to deeply connect and identify with them and they have an impact on who they portray themselves to be and these messages become a large part of their culture and the way students interpret the world (Dyson, 2003; Moni & Jobling, 2008; Pelliter, 2005; Savage, 2008; Wohlwend, 2009). Since pop culture greatly impacts students' identities and is engrained in their cultural practices, teachers would be doing injustice to students if they did not embrace this valuable cultural capital and use it

as building blocks for learning, yet teachers are frequently skeptical that this knowledge deserves recognition in the classroom (Sanford & Madill, 2007; Shegar & Weninger, 2010; Moni & Joblin, 2008; Xu, 2002; Parry, 2010)..

### **Popular Culture: Why Educators do not Embrace**

Although the notions of literacy and texts are ever changing and updating with current practices they may not always be accepted by all types of educators and those who influence school curriculums. Educators often do not see a place for multimodal popular culture texts in the classroom (Sanford & Madill, 2007; Shegar & Weninger, 2010; Moni & Joblin, 2008; Xu, 2002; Parry, 2010). Teachers often fail to recognize the wealth of literacy skills students utilize when they participate with these texts, instructors overlook the educational value of these texts and simply view them as mass culture produced for non-educational purposes (Sanford & Madill, 2007; Shegar & Weninger, 2010; Moni & Joblin, 2008; Xu, 2002; Parry, 2010). In the eyes of some educators, pop culture does not compare to the educational reputation that many American classic novels and traditional literacy practices uphold, pop culture texts are thought of as leisure activities that conflict, rather than coincide with academic purposes (Sanford & Madill, 2007). Adding to this dilemma, these authors argue that standardized testing and school accountability often constrict the limits of the school curriculum and offer little room for teachers to creatively utilize pop culture and multimodal texts, instead they often rely on textbooks and traditional print-based texts. Some educators view popular culture as harmful and manipulative and believe it is scattered with violence and inappropriate contexts and it is their responsibility to keep this material far from the education world to protect students from damage it may cause (Moni & Joblin, 2008; Xu, 2002).

Furthermore, the growing spectrum of pop culture texts and multimodality of today's literacy practices makes it difficult for educators to stay in touch with current trends and issues (Xu, 2002; Savage, 2008). However, Alvermann, Hagood, Heron-Hruby, Hughes, Williams & Yoon (2007) note that it is vital for educators to stay knowledgeable about students' home literacy practices with popular culture. In addition, Savage (2008) draws upon the idea that is not only crucial to for teachers to understand the importance of pop culture in their students' lives, but to actively involve students with pop culture in classroom.

Xu (2002) conducted a study that researched several teachers and examined their knowledge about their students' interests and experience with popular culture as well as their own knowledge. The study concluded that the participating teachers had very little knowledge about the wide variety of student popular culture as well as the modes of texts and technology interacted with. In addition, the teachers were discouraged to learn that the students did not often participate in traditional book reading in relation to popular culture, which supports the notion that print-based text is still one of the most valued forms of text in school (Xu, 2002). Concurring, Savage (2008) surveyed a group of high school students and found that some students believed their teachers have not stayed current with pop culture trends and have not embraced changing texts. In addition, one student in his article provided a profound quote in response to a researcher's question regarding English teachers keeping up with current mass culture:

“Oh yeah when you're teaching pop you've gotta be involved, like to teach that stuff you've got to be up-to-date so you know more than what the students know

about it so they learn as well, otherwise the kids will be teaching the teachers”  
(Savage, 2008, p.61).

This quote clearly articulates the importance and relevance of teachers staying current with popular culture trends and knowledge.

Teachers may also resist incorporating popular culture in the classroom because it has the potential to alter traditional student-teacher rolls. Lefstein and Snell (2001) present this thought in a research study focusing on one classroom teacher’s attempt to incorporate the idea of a popular talent show aired on television into a classroom lesson. The authors note that during the lesson, the teacher’s voice was not as dominant as the students who directly communicated with one another, paying little attention to the teacher’s suggestions. To some teachers, this may cause them to feel a lack of control for a number of reasons and therefore resist incorporating pop culture in their classroom as they may feel it is counter productive (Lefstein & Snell, 2011). The above arguments serve as a rationale concern, yet at the risk of causing disconnect with students. The following arguments present the idea that popular culture certainly has many benefits in the classroom despite the conflicting viewpoints.

### **Popular Culture: Purpose in the Classroom**

Popular culture is part of students’ home literacy practices and cultural capital, it certainly deserves recognition and involvement in the classroom to bridge the gap between home and school discourses. When teachers embrace this form of students’ cultural capital they validate students’ knowledge and experience and create relevant, meaningful, and motivating learning environments for students (Alvermann, Hagood, Heron-Hruby, Hughes, Williams & Yoon, 2007; Dyson, 2003; Heron-Hruby, Hagood &

Alvermann, 2008; Lawrence, McNeal & Yaldiz, 2009; Lefstein & Snell, 2011; Marsh, 2006; Moni & Joblin, 2008; Pelletier, 2005; Savage, 2008; Shegar & Weninger, 2010; Weinstein, 2007; Xu, 2002; Wohlwend, 2009). Moni & Jobling (2008) state this phenomenon is especially relevant with struggling and resistant learners such as students with severe disabilities. Students are experts at pop culture and can academically excel when they are provided with opportunities, Leard and Lashua (2006) rationalize this practice in a study with inner city youth in which they engage in exploring rap music. The students in this article were actively involved in creating rap music, participating in oral rapping, creating remixes, and critically discussing music. Students also reported a feeling of achievement and a reason to attend school as they were able to build upon well-established strengths and participate in an activity that was truly meaningful to them (Leard & Lashua, 2006).

In addition, a profound study conducted by Alvermann, Hagood, Heron-Hruby, Hughes, Williams & Yoon (2007) also explores the motivational aspect of pop culture texts. This study researched several struggling, underachieving adolescent students who identified themselves as uninterested in reading. However, when these students were introduced to pop culture texts and multimodal literacy they spent a great deal of time voluntarily reading and engaging in multiliteracies. Pop culture texts provide relevant means for students to interact with literacy and when educators recognize these relevance students are able to flourish.

Not only does popular culture serve as a means to motivate students, but the relevance of pop culture is heightened because students are surrounded by a variety of popular culture mediums in many different environments in which they must apply

different literacy skills to comprehend these mediums. When students interact with popular culture texts in either their primary home discourse or secondary academic discourse they are participating in multiple literacies (Dyson, 2003; Lawrence, McNeal & Yildiz, 2009; Nixon & Comber, 2006; Parry, 2010; Pelletier, 2005; Sanford & Madill, 2007; Shegar & Weninger 2010; Weinstein, 2007; Wohlwend, 2009; Xu, 2002). When students are passively and actively involved in multimedia such as videos, music, magazines, comic books, television shows, images, etc. they use a variety of literacy skills to comprehend and analyze the information presented (Dyson, 2003; Jacobs, Lawrence, McNeal & Yildiz, 2009; Nixon & Comber, 2006; Parry, 2010; Pelletier, 2005; Sanford & Madill, 2007; Shegar & Weninger 2010; Skinner, 2007; Weinstein, 2007; Wohlwend, 2009; Xu, 2002). It is important that teachers explicitly teach students how to make sense of the literacy skills they use when they participate in popular culture and help them utilize these skills in academic literacy (Marsh, 200; Parry, 2010; Sanford & Madill, 2007).

To reiterate this point Dyson (2003) presents a study in which she researched a class of first grade students who applied their cultural knowledge of familiar scenes and dialogue from cartoons, television shows and films to academic writing. In particular Dyson (2003) notes that students showed extensive knowledge of different genres based on their experience with pop culture texts, particularly “scary stories”. The students in this study framed specific language in their academic writing to create a particular mood in their “scary stories” which revealed their comprehension of this genre. Students in this study also naturally integrated their literacy knowledge from a popular children’s film; Dyson (2003) noted that the students participated in narrative retelling, identifying



character motivation, and summarizing the film as they clarified the teacher's misconceptions of the story plot. The students also naturally integrated various parts of the movie into their academic writing; they used fragments of songs from the movie to write poems and take on the role of radio broadcasters and narrative story teller during play (Dyson, 2003).

Shegar and Weninger (2010) also explore literacy skills utilized with students' interactions with pop culture when they explain that it is important, particularly for emergent learners to make home-to-school connections as it can often be difficult for such young learners to separate the two areas. These authors investigated preschoolers' interactions with popular culture and how it can be used to support emergent literacy skills in one study. They offered the idea that students' use of pop culture gives them a great deal of prior knowledge about particular topics and gain familiarity with specific literacy skills. The findings in this study state that when emergent learners interact with pop culture texts they gain understanding and familiarity with rules of English syntax and can show evidence of this in their writing (Shegar and Weninger, 2010). Students in this study also showed how they interpret visual information when interacting with pop culture and can transfer this knowledge to the academic setting. Students also showed evidence of comparing, contrasting, and evaluating popular culture characters. The relevance of pop culture is incredibly evident in this report.

In agreement, Sanford and Madill (2007) explore literacy skills involved when students play and design video games in a study which investigated an out-of-school video game making summer camp. These authors observed that when students play video games they are utilizing literacy and learning skills. These skills include creativity,

innovative thinking, cause and effect skills, conflict resolution, and a wealth of experience with computer technology (Sanford & Madill, 2007). Many of these skills are valuable and relevant for real world interactions such as “leadership, competition, teamwork, and collaboration” (Jenkins, 200, p. 120). In addition, Sanford and Madill (2007) note that video game creation involves a type of discourse unique to the genre; a semiotic system is used for coding information and programming each aspect of the video game such as sound, music, instructions to the player, creating different scenes, character motions, moving objects, etc. Students in this study also participated in more traditional aspects of literacy such as reading instructions, scribing and visually representing ideas in their journals. Valuable literacy skills were utilized in these interactions with video games.

Furthermore, Weinstein (2006) presents an interesting examination of a group of inner-city teenagers with a troubled past and little motivation for academics. The students were involved in a study in which their cultural practice of rapping was embraced in school. The author documented that these students expressed rap as one aspect of poetry and utilized many different literacy skills while writing their lyrics such as “figurative language, voice, and rhythm” (Weinstein, 2006, p. 271). The students in this study were also incredibly motivated and inspired to participate in this activity, as it provided relevance to their home literacy practices and their cultural capital was embraced.

Coinciding with this framework, Parry (2010) explored a study in which students incorporated their knowledge of pop culture and media into their narrative story telling. The pop culture served as creative ideas and frames of references for students to build upon. For example, one student drew on his knowledge of characters from a popular

musical and video game to extensively develop a narrative story; he showed extensive understanding of specific character traits, story setting, mood, and he even incorporated specialized language specific to the themes of the musical and video game to show his understanding of genre (Parry, 2010). Also explored by Parry (2010) was the use of students' experiences with cartoons and comic strips to encourage literacy skills. As the students drew upon their knowledge of these modes they wrote narrative stories which incorporated language to help articulate the motions, sound effects, and moods associated with the characters (Parry, 2010). Students in this study also showed evidence of how their background with pop culture helped them incorporate understanding of writing for a specific audience and creating a story line.

Other skills, such as text roles as noted by Freebody and Luke (1990) were noticed in students (Xu, 2002). These roles include code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst (Freebody & Luke, 1990), all of which are desirable in academic settings. These high-order thinking skills and text roles are advantageous for students to possess, and it is clear that popular culture encourages this type of thinking and literacy learning.

In a slightly new perspective, an interesting angle is taken in a study by Wohlwend (2009) in which she researches various early childhood classrooms and takes a close look at how popular culture influences young students' play and the connection this has to literacy interactions in the classroom. She suggests that when young children, specifically females in this study, participate with toys influenced by pop culture during play in an academic setting they are creating identities for themselves influenced by pop culture (Wohlwend, 2009). The students then integrate their identity with the popular

culture icon identity and portray this in their literacy interactions during play and also during more structured writing. The author suggests that at this emergent literacy stage, students' play influenced by pop culture is intertwined with students' writing of characters, dialogues, plot sequence, and story lines. This article portrays one of the various ways popular culture is naturally weaved into academics.

Building upon this idea, Marsh (2000) also presents an article focusing on the importance of play for emergent learners. This author suggests that validating children's incorporation of popular culture into play can encourage spontaneous literacy interactions. Also, the teacher in this study explicitly provided guidance to students about how to make use of the literacy materials in the childrens' play area. This play area in particular was based on a pop culture television show, the teacher's explicit suggestions to students had a great affect on the amount of time students spent utilizing the literacy materials in the play area (Marsh, 2000). This supports the point that teachers need to explicitly teacher children how to make use of their pop culture knowledge in an academic setting.

Students that participated in many of these studies were given opportunities to recognize and apply their advanced skills. This was done by making associations between their home and school literacies, by working with popular culture throughout the classroom in which they proved to apply critical and high-level thinking skills (Alvermann, Hagood, Heron-Hruby, Hughes, Williams & Yoon, 2007; Lawrence, McNeal & Yildiz, 2009; Heron-Hruby, Hagood & Alvermann, 2008; Hill, 2009; Leard & Lasha, 2006; Marsh, 2000; Moni & Jobling, 2008; Nixon & Comber, 2006; Parry, 2010; Sanford & Madill, 2007; Savage, 2008; Shegar & Weninger, 2010; Pelletier, 2005;

Wohlwend, 2009). Students do not simply passively absorb messages and information presented through pop culture, but rather examine, compare, and judge the information (Marsh, 2000; Shegar & Weninger, 2010), as educators we are provided with the unique opportunity to help students decipher these forceful images.

Hill (2009) is one author that explores this idea; he noted that when urban high school students were presented with culturally relevant hip-hop literatures in English class they were able to participate in critical literacy with the guidance of an educator. The students examined power struggles presented in their lives as well as social issues that directly related to their places in society (Hill, 2009). Sanford and Madill (2007) present an argument that educators can use students' passions for video games to engage them in critical literacy. They argue that students can be provided with opportunities to examine their own beliefs and values related to issues of fighting, brutality, war fare, injustice, discrimination, racism, sexism, and suffering. Savage (2008) noted a comment from a student that specifically identified the need for educators to help students make sense and examine implied meanings, messages and effects of pop culture and media texts they are presented with on a regular basis. Furthermore, even at a young age students are able to compare, evaluate, interpret visual images and show understanding of other critical thinking skills simply by discussing and being provided with an opportunity to explore pop culture in an academic setting (Shegar and Weninger, 2010). Critical literacy is a valuable experience for students, and the value of the experience can be heightened when relevant topics such as pop culture are integrated.

Critical literacy is only one of the many opportunities that can be utilized when incorporating pop culture in the classroom. Students' knowledge of popular culture can

also be used in the classroom to evoke interests and make connections between texts (Shegar & Weninger, 2010; Parry, 2010). Shegar and Weninger (2010) call this phenomenon 'quests for texts'. These authors noted in their study that students naturally made connections between different texts that featured pop culture topics; students' interests in popular culture icons lead to an interest in reading about these icons in books and newspaper articles. In addition, students made connections between pop culture videos and different modes of print in school (Shegar and Weninger, 2010). The authors observed that when students in this study showed an interest in a particular theme or genre introduced to them in their home experiences with pop culture, they would naturally seek to find texts in school with similar themes.

Parry (2010) also explores connections that students can make with texts based on their interests with pop culture. She discusses associations that students make between pop culture based games, cartoons, comic strips, and filmmaking in an academic setting as a result of teachers embracing this cultural practice and helping students make relations. This author indicates that although sometimes students can naturally transfer skills through multi modes, they may sometimes need explicit instruction when transferring skills from visual, audio, or video interactions to print interaction which often involves a different, more cognitively demanding type of discourse. In the hands of an open-minded educator, the learning possibilities with popular culture are infinite.

### **Conclusion**

It is crucial to implement students' cultural capital in order to make an authentic and interesting learning environment. The lives and cultures of students in relation to their knowledge of popular culture need to be embraced and respected by teachers

because this knowledge holds potential for helping students advance their literacy skills. This is especially important to help students recognize the valuable nature of the knowledge they possess and help them realize it absolutely has a relevant position in the classroom.

## **Methods**

### **Context**

Research for this study was conducted in a school library located within an intermediate school in a suburban town in Western New York. This school is located on a unique campus and sits just south of the New York state thruway. What makes this campus unique is that all of the schools including the early childhood center, primary, intermediate, junior high, and high school are housed on the same immense campus. This offers a distinctive school community which the students and staff embrace. The library, in which the research will be taking place, is a calm, spacious area. The student and I will often be meeting in the beginning of the school day when many of the students are busy being productive in their classrooms, leaving the library as a peaceful, undisturbed safe haven for completing our work.

### **Participants**

Evelyn (a pseudonym) is ten years and two months old and is a Caucasian female. Evelyn is an athletic girl who enjoys kinesthetic activities, she takes horse back riding lessons at a local stable and she participates in the ski club and school, and also enjoys skiing with her family. She is a fourth grade student, does not receive any reading services and reads at a low third grade level. Evelyn has difficulty with achieving fluency while she reads and this interferes with her comprehension level. Due to her lack of

success with reading, she is not an independent worker and struggles to be self-motivated. However, Evelyn will try if she has an adult working with her and providing support.

### **Researcher's Stance**

I am taking the stance of a researcher in this study working one-to-one with Evelyn. I was introduced to Evelyn after contacting the principal at her school, in which I am a substitute teacher at, I spoke with Evelyn's classroom teacher explaining my research proposal. After communicating with Evelyn's classroom teacher I met Evelyn only a few weeks ago and began working with her. In addition, I am currently completing my Masters Degree in literacy education for birth through grade twelve at St. John Fisher College. In addition, I hold a certification in early childhood and childhood education.

### **Method**

I used a popular culture book when I worked with Evelyn to determine how it could be used to support reading strategies. I used a book based on Evelyn's interest in popular culture television shows. One of her most favored shows is *Zoey 101*, I selected a book based on an episode from this television show titled *Dramarama* by Jane Mason. I used this book during Evelyn's reading workshop time to create lessons that pertained to specific reading strategies. The reading strategies that were focused on were using specific evidence from stories to describe characters, their actions, and their motivations. When I used the popular culture book I observed to what extent Evelyn achieved the stated learning objective for each lesson taught by examining her responses to the lessons and texts. I also observed how Evelyn incorporated her prior knowledge of the popular



culture to help her succeed in the specific reading strategy and motivate her interactions with the text. I met with Evelyn four times for about an hour each time, each meeting was one-to-one conferences.

When I implemented the lessons for knowledge of using specific evidence from stories to describe characters, their actions, and their motivations we took turns reading two or three chapters from the book and discussed the story, I asked Evelyn to describe characters in the story and what they were trying to. To capture her thinking about the characters we worked together to create a character trading card focusing on one of her favorite characters from the story. Following each discussion, we filled in different components on the card pertaining to specifics about the character. The following questions were addressed on the character trading card: What does the character look like? How would you describe the character's personality? What are the character's most important thoughts? What are the character's most important feelings? What is the most important or memorable thing the character says? What is the character's most important action? How does the character get along with other characters? What do you like most about the character?

### **Quality and Credibility of Research**

Quality and credibility is an important part of any research study. Credibility can be defined by Mills (2007) as the researcher's capability to consider and deal with complex situations and patterns that may arise in a study. To ensure credibility in this study I incorporated multiple procedures when I interacted with the student and collected data such as observation and I was an active participant. After each session, I informally interviewed Evelyn and asked her if she enjoyed the lesson and materials, taking her

opinion and motivational factors into account. I also had a questionnaire, anecdotal field notes from each meeting as well as student work including the character trading card to show if she achieved each lesson objective.

Another important part of research is ensuring transferability in a study. Mills (2007) describes transferability as the researchers' beliefs that every part in the study is context bound and should not be generalized toward a larger population. To ensure transferability I recorded specific information from the particular contexts of the study and provided detailed descriptions of the materials used and each aspect of the lessons were accurately documented.

Furthermore, dependability refers to the constancy of the data collected (Mills, 2007). The dependability of my research is guaranteed by incorporating multiple methods of gathering data, ensuring triangulation, including observation, field notes, questionnaire, student work and artifacts. I also worked collaboratively with a critical colleague and professor to ensure my research was resonant.

Finally, confirmability was guaranteed in my data collection. Mills (2007) describes this as objective data collection. By using the triangulation process confirmability was ensured because the multiple methods used helped me attain a variety of data and compare and contrast the information. Also, collaborating with my critical colleague helped me to examine any biases or glitches in the research.

### **Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participant**

Before beginning the research, I attained a signed parental permission form and also received oral assent from Evelyn to complete the study. The permission form provided an overview of the study and asked for a signature to authorize consent to begin

the study. The permission form informed the parents that their child's name and location of the research will be changed and pseudonyms will be used, also identifying marks will be removed from data in order to protect the child's anonymity and to ensure confidentiality.

### **Data Collection**

I took anecdotal notes about the information Evelyn shared with me during each of our four lessons, as I was actively participating with Evelyn throughout the study. I specifically made note of what kind of background knowledge she implemented from her past experience with popular culture. I also took specific note of information that helped me to determine if she was able to identify the specific literacy elements and complete the predetermined objectives for each lesson. Student work including the character trading card was used as data. In addition, a student interest questionnaire was given in order to accurately identify the student's specific interests in popular culture.

### **Findings**

Analysis of using popular culture in an academic setting revealed two prominent themes. The first theme to present itself was the notion that the subject's prior knowledge and background knowledge of popular culture supported awareness of story elements and therefore, an increased understanding of the text. Second, the subject was able to use the popular culture text to support writing and reading development such as adding details and specific evidence from the text, literary discussion and analyzing character motivations.

### **Tapping into Prior Knowledge**

Prior knowledge and life experiences the reader brings to the text and situations surrounding it affects the reader's unique comprehension and understanding (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Gill, 2008; Fresch, 2008). Observations made during this research support the idea that popular culture is a large part of some student's knowledge base and can be used to support comprehension and various literacy skills.

Anecdotal notes reveals that Evelyn was exposed to literary elements during her viewing of the television show, *Zoey 101*. She expressed in depth knowledge of characterization including various character traits and relationships with other characters. Based on this extensive knowledge, the research focused on this area of strength Evelyn possessed. Also, the ability to identify and explain specific evidence from a story to describe characters, their actions, and their motivations is a forth grade New York State English Language Arts learning standard for reading. This skill represents a deep level of comprehension about the text read because the student must search for and cite specific examples about the characters given by the author. Students not only have to describe the character but present specific occurrence in the text to use as evidence which requires more then a surface level understanding. Evelyn being a reluctant reader, her teacher expressed that often times during reading activities Evenlyn had difficulty expressing her literary knowledge. However, her interest and extensive knowledge about the characters in this television show and book were used as support to help her succeed in fulfilling this grade appropriate learning standard.

Evelyn also applied her prior knowledge of the show and participated in a literary discussion following the reading of a chapter from the book based on this television series. For example, the setting of the story was not explicitly stated in the text, yet

Evelyn was able to discuss the setting of the story and provide a detailed description of it. She identified that the story took place at a boarding school the students attended and explained where characters in the story lived and with whom on campus.

Other understanding of literary elements evident from her prior knowledge was knowledge of characters in the story. Only after reading the first three chapters in the story, Evelyn was able to list all the characters, name specifics about them and list numerous character traits. She often referred to the television show to describe character traits. Specifics from episodes were also referenced to back up her claims about the characters. This is evident in the following comment given by Evelyn in a discussion about Logan, a character in the story:

“Logan is one of the meanest boys in school and he has a crush on Zoey but Zoey doesn’t like him. This one time he got asked to tutor Zoey because she was doing really bad in one of her science classes and he (Logan) was really good at this science class because his grandpa taught it at a college so he like knew it really well. But Zoey didn’t want him to teach her because she hated him so much.”

She went on to describe an occurrence in the story: “That’s why she doesn’t want to kiss him (Logan) in the play, she doesn’t like him and he’s one of the meanest kids at Pacific Coast Academy (the boarding school in which the story takes place).”

These meticulous details and descriptions were not stated in the three chapters of the text we read together.

In addition, she continued to articulated her understanding of different characters in the story such as Chase and Zoey, two of the main characters, and used this to make predictions and inferences about upcoming events in the story. Evelyn explained at the

end of one chapter that: “Well I know that Chase is just like a funny, joking guy so he will just make a joke out of what Zoey says when she tries to talk to him about her brother and his bully. And Zoey is so like serious that she will probably get mad that Chase won’t help her, I think.”

Evelyn understood the relationships that existed among the characters. She had prior knowledge of Zoey and her brother Dustin’s relationship. Zoey always wanted to help Dustin with his problems because they were away from home and did not have their parents to look after him. Zoey felt she had to take on the mother role for Dustin and look after him. As a result of Evelyn already having this knowledge about the relationships between characters she was able to gain a better understanding of the main problem in the story and therefore make predictions and inferences about how the problem might be carried out and solved in the end.

Evelyn discussed these topics with ease and enjoyment, which according to her teacher is not something she usually participates in. It was clear that her interest in the subject had a positive affect on her choice of the text, discussion, comprehension and overall experience.

### **Students’ knowledge of pop culture can be used to support reading and writing development**

As students reach intermediate grades they are expected to show extensive growth in their reading and writing skills. Popular culture can be used to help support students with higher level thinking, identify details and specific evidence from the text, participate in literary discussion, and analyzing character motivations.

This level of thinking is evident through literary discussions. These discussions are an important reading skill for students to master. In this research Evelyn participated in several discussions with me following the reading that took place during each meeting. We discussed her predictions, conclusions, inferring about characters and events in the story and various story elements. The following conversation displays one literary discussion that took place during the research:

1 Evelyn: "I think Zoey and the other girls will like not like the dog at first  
2 because, well, especially the one girl, um Lola I think. She like tries to be tough  
3 and stuff and the dog is so cute and small that she has to like him. Zoey doesn't  
4 want the dog at first because she just got in trouble in her dorm and they have a  
5 mean dorm person, that is in charge of their dorm and if she finds out all the  
6 girls will be in big trouble. Also, Zoey doesn't like doing anything to really  
7 break the rules because she is like really good."

In line one and two Evelyn predicts what she believes will happen next in the story. Also in lines two and three she infers how the characters in the story will react to a particular situation based on her previous knowledge from the television show and story. In line four and five Evelyn summarizes and draws conclusions by using specific evidence from the story. In line six and seven Evelyn makes an inference about Zoey based on what she knows about her character. The excerpt above represents how Evelyn displays knowledge of various literary elements with ample evidence to support her ideas.

Over the course of my four meetings with Evelyn we took turns reading two or three chapters from the book and discussed the story. Following the reading we worked together to create a character trading card focusing on one of her favorite characters from

the story. A character trading card is similar to a baseball trading card which contains a picture of an individual on the front of the card and specific information about the individual on the back of the card (such as age, height, weight, hobbies, interests, career information, etc.). When using this trading card in reading and writing activities, generally one character from a story is selected to focus on and specific information from the story is placed on the card to describe the character.

My goal for this activity was to utilize the pop culture book to help her use specific evidence from the story to describe characters, their actions, and their motivations. She self selected the character Dustin from the story to focus on for the character trading card. After reading a chapter we would discuss the characters and events and fill in remaining portions of the character trading card. The following questions are addressed on the trading card: *What does the character look like? How would you describe the character's personality?* These questions are more straightforward but do require the student to describe the character in a general sense using specific details. *What are the character's most important thoughts? What are the character's most important feelings?* These questions help the student analyze the character's motivations while presenting specific examples and evidence from the text. This helps the reader think more deeply about how the character thinks in certain situations, then analyze and select what they feel is most important. *What is the most important or memorable thing the character says? What is the character's most important action? How does the character get along with other characters?* These questions pertain to the character's actions that represent the core of their individuality. The reader must synthesize the character's actions and interactions with others in the



story, then select the best examples to represent the character in a way that correctly portrays them. *What do you like most about the character?* This question is more opinion based than the others and allows the reader to reflect upon the character in the story and provide their own critical examination while still using specific evidence to support their claim.

Dustin, the character Evelyn selected is the brother of one of the main characters, Zoey. He is smaller and younger than most of the other characters and therefore looked after by them. Although Evelyn had an interest in this character, at first, she had difficulty with providing specific evidence and details to write about Dustin. She often provided surface level answers that did not incorporate deep thought about the character and the specific story. However, when she was prompted to think about specific examples she was able to successfully complete the task. For example, the following conversation took place about describing some of the character's most important thoughts and feelings:

Researcher (R): "Let's think about some of the important things that Dustin thought about in the story and stood out and would tell us about the kind of character he is."

Evelyn (E): "He was kinda mad sometimes." (*Surface level answer*).

R: "When? When in the story did he seem mad? Can you think of any parts in particular?" (*Prompting to think about specific examples*).

E: "When he had to do the Keith's homework."

R: "Why did this make him mad?" (*More prompting*)

E: "Because he had to stay up late to do his homework and Keith's then the he wanted him to do his laundry."

R: "Was Dustin going to continue to do this?"

E: "No, well he didn't want to but he was scared, but he didn't want Zoey to help him because that was like embarrassing so he thought of ways to stop Keith and asked his friend Michael for advice about how to get rid of him."

R: "So do you feel that it was important when Dustin thought about how to get rid of Keith and make him stop bullying him?"

E: "Well, yeah, he didn't want to be bullied."

When we began to fill in the chart it was evident that Evelyn had to participate in higher level thinking which is cognitively demanding and require more than a literal response. Specifically, the higher level thinking skills she participated in include synthesizing, analyzing and evaluating. This type of thinking made it necessary for Evelyn to move beyond literal answers because she had to think back to all the situations in the story and infer why and how they were important to fulfill each component of the character trading card. She also had to analyze specific evidence from the text to determine and infer what that information revealed about the character. This is evident in the following conversation when Evelyn is thinking about specific evidence to support her ideas about the character:

Researcher (R): "Ok, so let's look at the next part. How would you describe Dustin's personality in the story or from what you know about him from watching the T.V. show."

Evenyn (E): "Well...he's nice, like he is always nice to everyone."

R: “Ok, what else? Would you say he is kind of timid or doesn’t stand up for himself because he is being bullied and just does what the bully says? Or do you think he is brave because he eventually stands up to his bully after a while?”

E: “Well he’s not timid because he like tells his bully he doesn’t want to do his homework anymore and he’s not going to do his laundry and stuff.”

R: “So how would you describe him then? What is his character like? Brave?”

E: “Well...not really brave. He is nice or pleasant, and he like brings out his defense when he tells his bully to leave him alone.”

The conversation continued in this manner and we worked together to discuss the best wording for the sentence to correctly convey her thoughts about the character without losing her original ideas. She did not want to lose the idea that he was one of the most pleasant characters in the story but also not timid, she explained that he just had to work up some nerve and think through a strategy before he could confront his bully.

I used the following note taking organizer to help her sort out her ideas about the character and what she thought was important about his personality:

What is the most important thing that stands out to you about Dustin’s personality:


That he is very nice, likeable and pleasant to just about everyone he knows but he doesn’t like to be bullied even though he puts up with it for a little bit.

Why is this so important? What does it say about Dustin?:

It means that he will stand up for himself and defend himself against people who are mean to him, it means he’s not like wimpy but he had to think about what he was going to do to get rid of Keith.

It can be interpreted that searching and thinking about evidence from the story to support her thoughts was a rather difficult task for Evelyn to complete. The conversation above and other conversations that took place make it clear that Evelyn needed several prompts before she was able to identify specific evidence to support her claim about the character. In addition, Evelyn knew more about the character than I did, and was very careful of the way she described him to portray the character she thoroughly had come to know from her television show. This was more evidence of her expertise with the character and story line which showed her level of mastery with these aspects of the television show and story.

As we worked to complete the remainder of the sections on the character trading card the same scenario was encountered each time. Evelyn had difficulty describing evidence to support her claim for each section. However, with prompting she was able to attain a high level of thinking and write about the character using specific evidence from the story and prior knowledge about the television show. Although the level of thinking required for Evelyn to complete this activity was extensive and I required her to push her thinking to higher levels she was engaged and interested in the lessons. She was willing to work throughout our lesson, was confident and knowledgeable about the topics we discussed and was able to provide ample evidence from the story. The completed character trading card with Evelyn's responses is as follows:

<b>Character's Name:</b> Dustin Brooks
<b>Story Title:</b> Dramarama by Jane Mason

<b>What does the character look like?</b> He is in sixth grade, 4 ½ feet tall, he has blonde hair, is skinny with tan skin.
<b>How would you describe the character's personality?</b> He is pleasant and eventually he stands up to his bully Keith. He brings out his defense and stands up for himself.
<b>What are the character's most important thoughts?</b> To get Keith to stop bullying him. Thinking through his problems and how to get rid of them.
<b>What are the character's most important feelings?</b> He felt tired after staying up all night doing Keith's and his homework. Fed up with being bullied.
<b>What is the most important or memorable thing the character says?</b> "From now on just leave me alone." (Important to tell Keith he doesn't like being bullied).
<b>What is the character's most important action?</b> Stands up to Keith and lets Zoey know he does not like to be babied.
<b>How does the character get along with other characters?</b> He is very friendly with Chase, Michael, Zoey, Nicole, Dana, and sometimes Logan. He goes to his friends for advice about things that bother him like being bullied and he couldn't talk to his sister about it. He never purposely tries to hurt anyone, even when he's being bullied.
<b>What do you like most about the character?</b> He is smart, he's in sixth grade but he takes eighth grade geometry. He's very nice and funny.

**Implications**

The findings of this research suggest it is profoundly crucial for teachers to acknowledge the valuable nature of children's knowledge of television shows, movies, video games, technology etc. Knowledge of popular culture is not hindering on education, but is a large part of what students directly identify with. By embracing this idea, students of all developmental levels can flourish and become engaged in literacy.

This research suggests there are numerous ways popular culture can be implemented in the classroom when in the hands of an open-minded teacher. There are, of course, topics within popular culture that are inappropriate for a school setting and can be offensive, usually students are aware of topics appropriate for school and it is important these limits be discussed with students. With this in mind, allowing students to contribute their knowledge and ideas in the classroom can provide them with the opportunity to take control over their learning. This notion was evident in my research as Evelyn contributed valuable knowledge about popular culture to be successful in a literacy activity.

In addition, this research suggests that authentic activities can be designed with the help of student ideas and contributions. Their knowledge of how to interpret and interact with popular culture texts in print and non-print form can be valuable. Also, general knowledge of popular culture icons can be contributed in a classroom. Students can collaborate with teachers to design ways to connect popular culture texts and icons to academic literacy practices. For example, students and teachers can develop ways to examine popular television shows to support learning about plot development, symbolism, characters, story elements, sequencing events, and writing (Alvermann,

Huddleston & Hagood, 2004; Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Xu, 2002). Movies can help teach aspects of history, science, math and other content areas as well as analytical thinking, forming hypotheses, as well as drawing conclusions (Norton-Meier, 2005; Stevens, 2007). Finally, popular songs can be analyzed in the classroom to help develop students' abilities in identifying themes and main ideas presented in texts (Sanchez, 2010; Stevens, 2001; Weinstein, 2006; Xu, 2002). These opportunities are important as they create an authentic learning atmosphere where students can feel comfortable and believe their personal knowledge and interests are genuinely valued.

### **Conclusions**

This research set out to determine the benefits of using popular culture to teach reading and writing strategies among students in the classroom. This investigation was derived from the research of Gee (2001) regarding individuals primary and secondary discourse. Specifically, considering that popular culture is a large part of students' home literacy practices and therefore a vital element of their primary discourse. In addition, theories of the sociocultural model and aspects of cultural capital were referenced to support this research.

Literature explored for the purpose of this study revealed popular culture is a large part of students' home literacy and cultural practices in which they utilize various literacy skills to make sense of the information presented and that this aspect of students' home literacy practices serves a meaningful purpose in the classroom and should be utilized by educators. Although extensive research studies have explored the benefits of using popular culture in the classroom to teach various literacy activities, many teachers are still reluctant to embrace this phenomenon.

The findings from this research suggest that prior knowledge and background knowledge of popular culture support awareness of story elements and therefore, an increased understanding of the text. Also, popular culture can be used to support writing and reading development such as adding details and specific evidence from the text, literary discussion and analyzing character motivations.

Implications from this research imply that it is profoundly crucial for teachers to acknowledge the valuable nature of children's knowledge of television shows, movies, video games, technology etc. Knowledge of popular culture is not hindering on education, but is a large part of what students directly identify with. By embracing this idea, students of all developmental levels can flourish and become engaged in literacy.

Although my findings are concurrent with the literature and research I explored for this study there is conditions I would change to improve the study. For example, it would be beneficial to have a longer amount of time to complete the research so different aspects of using popular culture could be explored in a more in-depth manner. This would also be beneficial for exploring different types of texts and pursuing more in depth projects with students. I would also work with more students of various grade levels with diverse interests. This would allow me to explore how popular culture can be used in different academic settings in the elementary, intermediate, middle, and high school grades. In addition, I would be able to explore multi-modes in terms of types of pop culture and discover how different topics can be used in the classroom.

Limitations of the study included the time restraint placed on the research. When I first met with Evelyn, I was only allotted a brief amount of time to select pop culture texts based on her interests. I was also only able to explore one aspect of her pop culture



interests, television. I attained several other texts and activities based on her interests in music, movie actors, and sport icons however, was not able to apply these texts in the research due to the limited amount of time.

Results of this research leave me wondering how texts as movies, magazines, music and other forms of pop culture can be used to support state curriculum learning standards for English language arts as well as content areas such as math, history and science. In addition, I would like to explore different age groups and different target groups such as English language learners.

Incorporating students' home literacy practices of popular culture in the classroom is crucial in order to activate schema, make an authentic and interesting learning environment, and connect primary and secondary discourses. Respecting students' knowledge of popular culture is important to help students recognize the valuable nature of the knowledge they possess and help them realize it absolutely has a relevant position in the classroom.

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