

Chapter 4

Technology in Three American Preschools: Technological Influences of Ideology and Social Class

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the marriage of popular culture images, media and technology and the manner in which these are implemented in preschool settings. Discussing parents' choices and teacher's opinions, this chapter examines popular culture in children's lives as social symbols. It is specifically concerned with the manner in which social class and preschool ideology contribute to or detract from children's access to popular culture technology.

INTRODUCTION

It is 10:00 a.m., center time for the children in Faith Christian's Pre-K Classroom. The four and five-year-old children in the class are engaged in a myriad of activities: A few children are sprawled out on the carpet perusing picture books, while a

couple sit at tables with paper and pencils, tracing their names with the teacher. Not far away three children sit on a rug in front of a Teddy Ruxpin doll, a bear that moves his mouth animatronically when a cassette is placed in the player on his back. They are listening to Teddy "recite" a book on tape. In another corner, two other children are sitting at desks, headphones on their ears and a computer mouse in hand. Staring intently at the monitor

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in front of them, they are playing games such as Franklin's Adventures and My Very First Little People Farm. These children are autonomous in their interaction with the computer; although the teacher is near they need very little assistance in navigating the games as they move the mouse, point and click from screen to screen with confidence.

Computer time, books on tape and videos are all common activities for children in this preschool, they are seen as alternate modes of instruction, ways in which children engage with the curriculum. The above vignette illustrates how children in this particular preschool are expected and encouraged to interact with technology, specifically computer software. The rationale or goal according to the school is for the children to cultivate "basic computer skills and to develop eye-hand coordination" (website omitted for confidentiality). This preschool, like many others supports technology and the popular culture characters that pair as components of their instructional curriculum.

This is not the case for all preschools; as I will discuss many see technology, media and popular culture as bothersome or even harmful (Buckingham & Sefton-Greene, 1994, 2004; Hodge & Trip, 1986).

Definitional Problems: Amalgamation of Popular Culture Characters and Technology

Traditionally, when one speaks of "technology" they are concerned with hardware: television, video cassette and DVD players, computers, smartphones, videogame systems and educational learning systems. The images and characters, encoded with preferred meanings in a given society (Hall, 1999) are often left out. This omission is particularly problematic as in early childhood toy markets there is a close marriage of technology and popular culture. When using learning systems such Leap Frog Tag Reader, an interactive reading system, children "read" stories featuring

Tinkerbell from *Peter Pan*, *Cars* and *Madagascar* Penguins. And popular culture images, have in turn "branded" many hardware systems. As rudimentary laptops emblazoned with Hello Kitty and SpongeBob, Disney Princess television sets and Mickey Mouse Wii controllers have taught us, the explication from each other is difficult and boundary lines are often imprecise. Understanding the close ties, for the purpose of this chapter I use the term popular culture technology to include images and ideas but also the hardware systems needed to access the images and ideas.

This chapter explores the marriage of popular culture and technology in preschool settings, specifically the manner in which social class and preschool ideology contribute to or detract from children's access to popular culture technology. It draws on data collected in a study using comparative ethnographic methods in which I examined the uses and meanings ascribed to popular culture in three preschools in the United States that differ socio-economically and ideologically. For the purpose of this study I use the term social class to represent the income of parents in the United States and status of the students in a stratified system. I determine the socioeconomic level of each preschool by analyzing tuition required to attend each school. In addition I examine the economic criteria for tuition being waived for certain preschools.

Preschools that steadfastly reject children's interaction with technology and media figures may do so with the supposition that interaction with these media detract from a more authentic and "natural" learning experience. This critique often times pairs with the theory of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) to view children's interaction with popular culture through technological means as less than desirable and in many cases detrimental to social and cognitive development, particularly if the children are younger than three (Elkind, 1998; Haugland, 1999; NAEYC, 1996). In addition to criticisms of pedagogical implementations is the pervasive association of

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