

January 2008

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Melissa E. (2008) "Book Review of Tooning In: Essays on Popular Culture and Education Cameron White & Trena Walker, Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2008.6.1.13>

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Abstract

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Book Review of *Tooning In: Essays on Popular Culture and Education*
Cameron White & Trenia Walker, Lanham, MD:
Rowan & Littlefield

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Educators acknowledge the significant impact popular culture has on students. Yet while many teachers attempt to curb its influence in their classrooms, others embrace popular culture as a framework to teach youth in engaging and innovative ways. In *Tooning In: Essays on Popular Culture and Education*, Cameron White and Trenia Walker tackle a key question: "If we are truly interested in providing meaning to kids' lives as we engage in teaching and learning, why don't we do a better job of integrating popular culture into education?" To answer that question, they explore how educators can incorporate popular media into social studies curricula in order to maximize students' critical thinking skills and to promote social efficacy.

"[G]ood thinking and good citizenship are highly correlated" (10), insist the authors, and they rely on their own research and that of others to emphasize the connection between critical thinking and an informed citizenry. They maintain that social studies education contributes to social efficacy when it prompts students to perform in-depth analysis of cultural events and controversies. The more students commit to understanding the everyday world around them, the better the chances they will challenge messages in popular media that reinforce stereotypes about themselves and others. Once kids can skillfully discern those messages, they can confidently situate themselves in the world. Social literacy is crucial.

Tooning In presents popular culture as an effective tool for children's social literacy—it is omnipresent, engaging, easily understood by kids, and immediately relevant to their lives. Because children interact with common culture every day, they are entertained and empowered when given permission to explore it in the classroom, a space that has traditionally attempted to dilute the influence of popular culture. Innovative teachers who use popular culture as a framework to navigate social studies with their students offer a transformational education model rather than the traditional transmission model by which information is passed to kids in a rote top-down manner. White and Walker acknowledge the tendency of well-meaning teachers to follow the transmission model for lack of class time or to meet standardized test requirements, but they reiterate that the transitive model is the least effective way to motivate students to investigate and challenge the cultural messages and assumptions by which they are surrounded.

How can an educator best incorporate popular media into social studies? The authors address that question by examining several types of media—including music, television, film, video games, Anime, and comic books—and how that media can lend itself to social studies education. Guiding students to look for

themes of power, gender, and race in Disney's *Pocahontas*, for example, is an effective way to simultaneously engage them in and teach them about civic issues.

The book's 16 chapters, or essays, carry a strong thread of continuity throughout, yet each is complete in itself—one need not read all the chapters to understand the book's central theme or elements. This allows those interested in, say, only popular music to read just a chapter or two yet easily understand the intent of the entire book. The focus on social literacy for children strays only in chapter 14, "Popular Culture and the Dark Side of Food," which interestingly explores media and eat-

ing disorders but does not connect to popular culture in the classroom as clearly as the other essays. This is the only loose end in a solid and stimulating work.

Tooning In appeals to general readers interested in cultural studies, history, and media; however, teachers especially will find it useful if they are searching for ways to incorporate common culture into their lessons. White and Walker encourage teachers to do just that if they are concerned with allowing kids to connect their real world experiences to the classroom and are invested in teaching young people skills that will enhance global citizenship.