

Literacy Playshop

New Literacies, Popular Media,
and Play in the
Early Childhood Classroom

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Playing with and Living in Popular Media

Imagine the variety of popular media products that a preschooler encounters each morning: *Brave* princess pajamas and bedding, *Little Mermaid* toothbrush by the bathroom sink, *Shrek* cereal on the breakfast table, and *Dora the Explorer* in English and Spanish running on television, interrupted by advertisements for fast food, toys, film trailers, and so on. Children don't just view, read, or play commercial messages and scripts from popular media films, television shows, and video games; they live immersed in these texts through omnipresent flows of transmedia—the franchises anchored by children's media (e.g., *Disney Princess*, *Spider-Man*, *Toy Story*) that spin off toys, snacks, towels, shoes, shampoo, and other consumer goods. Clearly, children's literacy experiences reach beyond their bedtime stories and even beyond their interactions with television or computer screens.

To be clear, my use of *media* includes image, print, audio, and animated texts such as video that convey meaningful messages, whether produced by children or corporations, while *popular media* indicates a subset of media connected to an anchoring brand, film narrative, television series, or video game. I use *transmedia* to indicate licensed popular media franchises of toys, entertainment products, and consumer goods.

From Markets to Playrooms

Hair-flinging Rapunzel and web-swinging Spider-Man are just two of the thousands of characters in transmedia that cover the taken-for-granted stuff of everyday childhoods. These characters come prepackaged with movie scripts, ad campaigns, and other identity messages that tell young consumers not only what to buy but who they should be and become. The most obvious texts that circulate through transmedia are the film scripts or video game narratives. For example, the storylines in the Disney Princess franchise (e.g., *Tangled*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Little Mermaid*) cast girls as damsels in distress and boys as heroic warriors. Disney Pixar's *Brave* (Chapman & Andrews, 2012) is a recent and notable exception with an active princess archer who determines her own destiny sans prince. However, at the time of this writing, Princess Merida has not been officially added to the Disney Princess brand. Transmedia also send messages in other ways, such as film marketing that sends out advance trailers, pop-up ads, and cross-promotions with fast food or other products. These messages focus on target demographics (particular gender, age group, geographic location, income level) and create identity texts that indicate who is expected to be a fan

and consumer. For example, it's fairly clear that boys are expected to identify with pirate toys, while girls are expected to identify with princess dolls (Wohlwend & Hubbard, 2011). Identity expectations frame marketing decisions for pink and sparkly packaging on Disney Princess dolls that alerts buyers that this product is intended for girls. In turn, parents and children participate by purchasing and using products in expected ways, thereby validating marketing decisions as consumers buy in and support corporate identity expectations for child consumers. Families further this buy-in by supporting their children's strong attachments to favorite popular media characters so that toys and dolls become necessary artifacts in daily routines and bedtime rituals (Marsh, 2005b).

From Playrooms to Classrooms

Despite the widespread presence of transmedia in children's lives, early childhood classrooms offer few opportunities for children to explore their often passionate attachment to favorite characters and thus to draw upon their literary knowledge of favorite animated films, video games, television shows, or websites (Marsh et al., 2005). Few teachers provide—or even allow children to bring—media toys to classroom play centers, an issue that is further compounded by accountability trends that reduce time for play in early childhood classrooms (Brown, 2009; Schoenberg, 2010). Mandates for basic skills literacy instruction and didactic teaching hit under-resourced schools particularly hard (Dyson, 2008), so that preschoolers who are already disadvantaged by economic hardship get fewer chances to play together in school (Stipek, 2004). Equitable access to play becomes a social justice issue when some children get opportunities to play in school while others do not. Literacy play levels the field by giving children access to their cultural expertise and time to play the stories they know best, whether classic children's books or popular media.

Some teachers steer children away from playing, writing, or drawing about media themes, concerned about parent reactions or enacting their own perceptions that popular media are stereotypical and developmentally inappropriate (too violent, too sexual) for innocent children (Marsh, 2006). These well-intentioned aims to shelter children from inappropriate material are rooted in middle-class beliefs about taste and propriety (Pompe, 1996). The unintended consequence that results: children with fewer economic resources are particularly disadvantaged when transmedia are banned from the classroom:

The promotional, mass-market toys sold in Toys R Us and most available to and popular with working-class children are the toys most likely to be excluded from the culture of the classroom. . . . The familiarity of the material objects will be just one of the many advantages that will bear on the child's future success in the classroom. Promotional toys . . . are likely to meet a cool reception by teachers. . . . In an attempt [by the teacher] to censor mass culture, the children most in need of comfort, security and involvement in school are the ones most disadvantaged. (Seiter, 1992, p. 246)

Teachers who participated in our study were chagrined when they realized that the commercial-free stance that prohibited popular media toys in their school distanced children from their home cultures, violating a key mission. Dawn noted, “If I’m not allowing this in, I’m not respecting children’s home cultures. [Instead the message is:] What is loving and comfortable doesn’t belong here.” Through careful kidwatching (Goodman, 1978), she began keeping a record of the trans-media that had permeated her preschool classroom through children’s blankets, underwear, and diapers, despite the school’s commercial-free stance. Dawn wryly noted that she had a two-page list of popular media products “that don’t come into my classroom.”

Some teachers feel that they cannot justify taking time for play with trans-media toys (“they get enough of that at home”) or that children are just parroting media scripts rather than writing original stories. However, the devaluing of popular media knowledge in classrooms distances children from important literacy resources such as snippets of dialogue, richly developed settings, character personalities, or logical plot organization—all of which are gained through young children’s personal experiences viewing favorite films, television programs and commercials, and videogames. Dyson’s early childhood classroom studies (2003a, 2006, 2008) demonstrate that children’s writing development and social status benefit from a permeable curriculum that allows popular culture to seep into the classroom. My previous research (Wohlwend, 2011) shows that when young children engage in daily, sustained periods of 45 to 60 minutes to play and revisit media themes together, they improvise and create their own characters and revise scripts.

Connecting to other children through shared popular media knowledge is an important way for children to access play groups and reconfigure classroom power relations. For example, the most desired toys become badges of belonging in play groups (Pugh, 2009). When children pick up a popular toy, they also take up its complicated mix of messages. For example, a boy who picks up a Disney Princess doll and wants to play Cinderella must negotiate peers’ expectations for girls-only play groups, passive heroine roles, and children’s shared play histories (Wohlwend, 2012). Such items of transmedia provide readily available but also problematic identity texts that mingle beloved characters, familiar storylines, gender stereotypes, scripted roles, advertisements, and designs in everyday products that invite players to express fan and consumer identities, affiliate with a particular brand, and enact stereotypical roles.

Introducing Literacy Playshop

To address the realities of childhood today, educators need to think beyond print-intensive literacy skills tasks—or even book-centered reading and writing workshops—and to envision play-enriched new literacies curricula. In other words, we can expand reading and writing workshops into literacy “playshops” (Wohlwend,

2011, p. 121). In this book, my co-researchers and I describe one kind of Literacy Playshop: teacher-designed media-rich playshops where children produce digital film and collaborate as they play together.

The aim of this work is critical, but not through class discussions that deconstruct the gendered or raced stereotypes in popular media and books, an approach that has had limited success with preschoolers (Davies, 2003). Instead, we reconceptualize critical literacy for early childhood education as a play space that opens opportunities for redesign *on children's terms* using the materials and narratives that they know best. We reframe the notion of *critical* for early childhood settings by recognizing that power relations shape children's participation at school. Children's literacy practices and peer histories influence here-and-now conflicts and everyday negotiations as children play, share materials, and work out who should play with which toy (Wohlwend, 2011). When children collaborate during play, storytelling, and media production experiences, they must work out gender issues and media passions enacted through their friendships, character attachments, and co-authoring literacy practices. During Literacy Playshop activities, teachers can reposition children in relation to popular media texts and characters so that children learn to work together productively and think as media producers, not just as consumers. This repositioning opens more equitable ways for diverse learners to perform literate identities by expanding the range of possible entry points and avenues and by recognizing children's popular media passions as valuable *literacy resources*—knowledge about characters, plots, and story structure that can inform children's reading and writing.

Production and Collaboration as Critical Processes. Studies in preschools and kindergartens show that young children can critically engage popular media (Dyson, 2003a) and corporate marketing (Vasquez, 2004) when they play and produce media of their own (Nixon & Comber, 2005; Wohlwend, 2011). Further, when children play gendered, classed, or raced texts in contexts that matter to them, they engage in transformation at the level of lived practices and classroom power relationships (Heffernan & Lewison, 2005; Vasquez, 2004; Wohlwend, 2011). As children collaborate to produce a play scenario or a film, they work through issues of conflict, peer exclusion, and gender expectations while negotiating peer culture relationships (Boldt, 2002). They also must agree upon a shared narrative that brings together their competing ideas for story actions, interpretations of commercial narratives, and notions of what makes sense:

- Who gets to hold the camera?
- Who can play a girl or a boy?
- What character actions are possible and who can authorize changes?
- Who decides?

Such collaborative, productive remakings of popular media requires deep engagement with multiple layers in complex identity texts—the kind of embodied and immersive engagement that play naturally provides.

Play and Filmmaking as Collaborative Literacies. In a climate of high-stakes testing, it may seem risky or frivolous to set aside the scripted teacher’s manual, to make room for play with mass-market toys, and to encourage children to explore filmmaking in school. The last section of this book offers strategies that teachers have used to gain parent and administrator support for play-based learning (see Component 1 for the teacher inquiry activity “Building Support for Play”). It is also crucial to help parents, administrators, and policymakers see that mandates that seek to increase individual children’s test scores depend upon a 20th-century view of reading achievement (Meyer & Whitmore, 2011). This outdated perspective relies on “basics” that are remnants of print-based literacy in industrialized economies rather than digital economies where information is increasingly image- or video-based and can be instantly Googled. Early literacy education needs an updated set of basics (Dyson, 2006), informed by modern childhoods, children’s diverse cultural resources, digital technologies (Vasquez & Felderman, 2012), and global media repertoires (Medina & Wohlwend, in press). Literacy 2.0 (Knobel & Wilber, 2009) represents a new way of thinking that moves away from the literacy 1.0 model of an individual interacting independently with a print text, whether in a book or onscreen. Literacy 2.0 represents the multiple ways of making meaning using the principles of web 2.0 interaction: global participation, multi-user collaboration, and distributed resources and knowledge.

We argue that a literacy 2.0 mind-set encompasses children’s viewing, playing, and producing of digital popular media as well as daily interactions with the most ordinary transmedia products. The U.S. Department of Education recently recognized the educational potential of media texts by expanding its support of children’s television viewing to include their interactions with transmedia. An evaluation of the Ready to Learn program identified the following benefits of including transmedia in early childhood education (U.S. Department of Education website, 2011):

- It presents children with multiple entry points to learning. Children can start learning via any one of the individual media, but when these media are interconnected, children will be motivated to explore even more;
- It enables educators to use individual media for the functions for which they are best suited. For example, games are particularly good problem-solving environments that encourage children to try difficult things without fear of failure; they are not as good as video, however, at presenting more linear and orderly information; and
- The rich, fictional worlds of transmedia tend to create a greater level of social interaction that can inspire children to create their own stories and media products and to share them with each other.

Conclusion

Literacy Playshop is a literacy 2.0 approach to early childhood literacy teaching, learning, and curriculum based on children's expertise and teachers' responsive mediation; the Literacy Playshops described in this book focus on play-based filmmaking with transmedia. This approach assumes a strength orientation to diversity and development (Volk & Long, 2005), which appreciates and integrates children's rich cultural repertoires (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) and family literacies and technologies (Vasquez & Felderman, 2012). The following chapters provide glimpses of early childhood classrooms where teachers encouraged popular media play and filmmaking as productive literacies that give children more equitable access to their diverse literacy resources.

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