

**Title: Constructing the Child at Play:
From the Schooled Child to the Technotoddler and Back Again**

Karen E. Wohlwend

Indiana University, Bloomington

Paper Presented at NCTE, 2011

Citation:

Wohlwend, K. E. (2011, November 20). Constructing the child at play: From the schooled child to technotoddler and back again. Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Chicago, IL.

Abstract:

This paper explores how three constructions—*the schooled child*, *the developing organism*, and *the digital native*--shape literacy learning, from play-starved classrooms under high-stakes testing mandates to online environments where technotoddlers tap through touchscreens on mobile technologies.

One hundred years ago, a fire at the Triangle Waist dress factory killed over 140 women and children workers (Weber, 2006), a tragedy that mobilized efforts to safeguard children from dangerous sweatshops. In the early 20th century, tragedies like the Triangle Waist factory fire drew public attention to poor working conditions and prompted a reform movement that resulted in U.S. child labor laws to protect children under thirteen from unsafe factory conditions. The discourses of child innocence and vulnerability, vigorously invoked in child labor reforms, created a regulated period for mandated schooling but also time, space, and justification for children to play. These laws institutionalized the chronological period we now know as *childhood* (Hendrick, 1997; Jenkins, 1998).

In this chapter, three models of childhood--the *schooled child*, the *developing organism*, and the *digital native*--illustrate how a tangle of past and present discursive constructions promote and/or prohibit play with digital literacies. According to Buckingham (2000), our notions of childhood are social constructions, that is, collective definitions which are enacted, and acted upon, by children and adults. Many of these representations are essentialist, homogenizing childhood by failing to acknowledge the effects of gender, class, and race, and by overlooking differences in children's social, cultural, and historical circumstances. Further, we are often unaware of the ways that these constructions influence the practices we read as child-like. The central question posed here is: How do long-standing constructions of the young child at play reflect and shape our beliefs about literacy, play, technology, and childhood? This chapter connects childhood constructions to overlapping assumptions and examines the discourses that complicate our understanding of children's digital play at school and in online environments (Buckingham, 2007).

THE SCHOOLED CHILD

*A faded portrait in black and white:
Uniformed children,
sitting at wooden desks, arranged in precise rows,
stiffly upright and silent, hands clasped,
intently gazing at teacher.*

As children moved out of factories and into classrooms in the early twentieth century, school filled the void left by the removal of children's work (Mills & Mills, 2000; Zelizer, 1985). In the construction of the *schooled child*, childhood is a period of preparation or apprenticeship for later work. The task of the schooled child is to absorb and reproduce the knowledge of the mainstream culture which is efficiently transmitted through direct instruction by teachers (Mills & Mills, 2000, Hendrick, 1997). (It is important to clarify here that each construction is an exaggerated model or archetype, promoted by a sociopolitical discourse that circulates particular beliefs and cultural models; that is, each construction is an oversimplified ideal, a vision rather than an accurate reflection of the reality of complex lived experiences. For example, contemporary perspectives on situated learning complicate the model of the schooled child, suggesting a more active learner in an interactive cultural space. "Socialization is reciprocal, dynamic and contextualized; is not one-sided, static, and *in vacuo*" (Mills & Mills,

2000, p. 20).) For the schooled child literacy is paramount while play is incidental or a distraction, characterized as nice but too trivial for the serious business of schooling, an expendable frill with little potential for improving literacy achievement. Positioned in opposition to schoolwork, play is overwhelmed by a dominant skills mastery discourse that leaves little room for traditional play periods in primary grades, or even kindergarten and preschool. In this discourse, literacy is equated with mastering isolated skill tasks (e.g., letter sounds, word recognition) through a unidirectional conduit from teacher to student who soaks up knowledge.

THE DEVELOPING ORGANISM

*A blurry sonogram, a portrait in utero:
Child-on-a-timeline,
careful notches marking growth in
weight, height, first tooth, first words
mapped onto percentiles on a bell curve*

The *developing organism* construction stresses the child's immature and biological nature. The rise of scientific measurement at the beginning of the twentieth century focused attention on children's physical and psychological growth and well-being (Burman, 2008; Mills & Mills, 2000). The industrialization that resulted in social upheaval and reforms to protect children from the dangers of the workplace also promoted standardization in education. A focus on cognitive development aligned with a modern belief in the deterministic nature of science and the advent of psychological examinations that quantified mental abilities into measurable units. Mental tests were devised in order to sort and rank individuals for more efficient instruction (Cannella, 1997; Foucault, 1978).

In this construction, the young child is a work in process, developing through predictable socio-cognitive stages, furthered by hands-on experiences with the natural environment (Hendrick, 1997). A belief in linear staged development led to prescribed curricular experiences at strategic intervals intended to shape the course of future development of the developing organism. A predictable sequence of development constructs headstarts and lags, making acceleration and intervention possible. Children are pliable but only within temporal windows of opportunity. Timely and appropriate intervention is paramount in this discourse, creating a sense of urgency as closed windows imply that once molded, the child's nature is fixed.

Developmental discourse constructs a universal sequence of becoming. This construction ignores how our ideas about development change, shaped by specific historical contexts or political and cultural values (Cannella, 1997). An established body of research shows that a single developmental pathway often maps onto middle-class values and privileges a set of mainstream norms that do not reflect the rich diversity of children's lives and literacy resources (Volk & Long, 2005). Instead, a universal developmental hierarchy reflects power relationships which privilege those on top and marginalize those below. In the construction of the developing organism, erasure of diversity has political consequences when groups whose children are more

often at the developmental top can rationalize the marginalization of others as merely a developmental delay and not an act of subjugation. The delayed *others* are behind schedule (Burman, 2008), justifying intervention into the lives of children and their families to correct “deficits” and move them toward mainstream norms.

Developmental discourse continues to heavily influence contemporary research, through a focus on understanding the young child through biology, in terms of either normal or abnormal growth (Burman, 2008). For example, psychological and medical experimental research maps biological data onto trajectories of normal or abnormal development (apparent in recent fascination with brain scans). By contrast, research on youth is influenced by sociology and focuses on teen subculture, with adolescence constructed in terms of resistance (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 1995).

Developmental discourse also dominates our understanding of the young child at play. To meet the needs of the developing organism, play should be age-appropriate and focused on hands-on exploration of the natural world. In this view, early exposure to harmful influences (in this case, technology that supplants nature) threatens not only a child’s current state, but risks derailing future development as well. For example, the headline on a recent American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) press release warned parents and caregivers that “babies and toddlers should learn from play, not screens” (Council on Communications and Media, 2011). AAP’s construction of an oppositional relationship between play and technology is a typical discursive move that frames children’s interactions with digital technology as “exposure”—a term that connotes radiation. Instead, developmental discourse encourages play that involves dramatic pretense with other children, dolls, cars, or blocks and exploration of sensory materials like clay, paint, or sand but discourages play with digital avatars, media images, or virtual worlds on screens as unnatural and possibly unhealthy. Where technology is permitted, adults are expected to protect children from myriad dangers of online environments by limiting children’s exploration of technology to small amounts of carefully-supervised time.

THE DIGITAL NATIVE

*A digital portrait in a viral video:
A tech-savvy toddler,
iPad wobbling on her lap,
giggling and tapping the screen
as she browses programs, opens apps, and plays games
on her own.*

Discourses that advocate technology integration in early education put a new twist on children’s developmental pathways. The construction of the *digital native* (Prensky, 2001) promotes a cybernetic vision of childhood interwoven with early experiences with technoliteracies (Marsh, 2004) in hypertext environments. New technologies enable fingertip navigation and wordless communication in ways that make widely-available handheld devices manageable for very young children (Shuler, 2009). As children intuitively click their way

through apps on mobile devices like iPads, they process information as they fluently move forward and backward from screen to screen, multitasking and navigating multiple paths. In this construction, adults are laggards who will never be able to achieve the digital native's facility with technology, having missed the advantages of an early introduction to digital socialization.

Youngsters raised on the current crop of educational and/or arcade type of games, many of which are marketed to the preschool crowd beginning at age 2 or 3, come to school well versed with a very different set of 'literacy' skills from even a decade ago (Luke, 1999).

Discourse around the digital native resonates with an American view of the child as a young consumer capable of exercising choice and agency (Cook, 2007; Tobin, 2000). Key to the digital native construction is the reversal of power relations where children are positioned as more expert than adults; they are believed to have special aptitude for the newest forms of technology by virtue of their lifelong immersion in a computing society. For the digital native, play is not a just pleasure-seeking activity. It's a way of participating in online worlds, whether navigating screens as avatars or exploring new devices, apps, or websites. In this construction, play constitutes the most effective way of learning and a highly desirable practice for interacting with the world.

Literacy, Play, and Overlapping Constructions of Childhood

Scollon and Scollon's (2004) nexus analysis helps explain how these constructions support embodied practices for students and teachers that are consistent with each model of childhood. For example, nexus analysis shows the schooled child is expected to follow approved ways of speaking--and not speaking. But children are also taught to comply with institutional rules that tightly control body actions (Luke, 1992) with sanctioned materials: pencil and paper. For example, there are body regimens for writing practices that have little to do with composition: sitting still, a "proper" pencil grip, correct angle of bottom edge of paper in relation to the writer's body, feet on the floor, sitting erect in a chair, and so on (Wohlwend, 2009). Teacher intervention is the expected response to the schooled child's lapses, a disciplinary move that inscribes institutional discourse as it retrains bodies (Foucault, 1978), through teacher actions that reposition fingers to the approved grip and expected ways of putting print on paper (Luke, 1992). On the other hand, digital native discourse interprets sweeps, pinches, stretches, and taps by tiny fingers playing Angry Birds on an iPad as evidence of intuitive (natural rather than learned) acquisition of technoliteracies. The young child's constant observation of demonstrations of adults' everyday use of smartphones and touchscreens is backgrounded, to construct the apparently magical technological talent of very young prodigies.

When constructions overlap, conflicts among disparate expectations create tensions such as the tension between our need to protect children from online predators and our desire to believe in their ability to function independently. Overlapping discourses complicate our picture

of young children's digital play. For example, an instance of a toddler playing with an iPad can be simultaneously interpreted

- through a schooled child work-centric lens in which this instance of play is acceptable to the degree that it strengthens overt skills tasks such as letter recognition
- through a developing organism protective lens in which an adult is expected to hover and intervene to prevent the child's overexposure to technology
- through a digital native agential lens in which early introduction to technology to facilitates an early adopter disposition and intuitive skill set of new literacies

Discourses are always doing something, that is, these discursive constructions have social, cultural, and political uses. The ideal of the schooled child in a view of childhood as cultural preparation could be used to promote the need for digital play to achieve technical literacy as a requisite for future employment. But ironically, schooled child discourse echoes its century-old roots: we are now urged to protect children from the dangers of "failed schools" rather than factories. Rather than learning to produce digital texts or to play with interactive apps, the schooled child is tested again and again, then assigned intensive paper and pencil print literacy tasks intended to increase test scores, pushing out time for play.

Overlaps among notions of children as information workers-in-training, vulnerable developing organisms, and active digital natives illustrate how social constructions of childhood can create resonances that reinforce dominant beliefs, in this case, how longstanding beliefs about early literacy and play work together against technology. When schooled child discourse combines with the developing organism, the emphasis on print literacy reinforces a prohibition against exposure to screens, so that sitting just-so while working on paper and pencil tasks seems somehow more appropriate than sitting in front of a computer screen. Similarly, decades of play research and practice have relied on developmental discourse that privileges exploration of nature or traditional classroom materials (e.g., play kitchens, dollhouses) as developmentally appropriate but keeps the latest technology out of the hands of our youngest children. This disadvantages children who can't access technology at home—the ones who might benefit most from school experiences with hand-held devices, touchscreens, animated apps, and icon-based navigation.

Discourses also create slippages that are productive so that children and teachers can agentially combine or move among constructions for their own, rather than institutional, purposes. Schooled child discourse combined with digital native discourse justifies access to educational apps even when children play for entertainment rather than for ostensible educational purposes or access to more sophisticated content than developmental expectations might suggest. "By constructing themselves as competent, as knowing the distinction between reality and imagination, children become advocates for their own usage of products that adults might think is inappropriate" (Linderoth, Lantz-Andersson & Lindström, 2002, p. 231). The realities of children's lives breach and blur discursively-constructed binaries of appropriate/inappropriate or structure/agency, bringing constructions together in a middle ground as children

simultaneously take up and resist various identities according to their immediate purposes (Wohlwend, 2009, 2011).

Carmen Luke (1999) suggests that our conceptualizations of childhood morph as rapidly as one technological innovation replaces the next. As literacy educators, we are teaching among rapidly shifting technoliteracies and global innovation. We need to be aware of the discourses behind constructions of childhood so that we can recognize how they are used to make a particular literacy or technology accessible or inaccessible to children. For example, in our classrooms, do we enact developmental discourse to privilege “natural” activities over screen time or oversimplify technology tools in early childhood classrooms? Can we combine new literacies with institutional discourses to argue for digital play spaces or for retooling the curriculum to reflect digital natives’ technological repertoires? Recognizing that the child at play is a dynamic and negotiated idea opens up possibilities to question typical assumptions and reconsider ways of doing things—in school and online. We can question:

- Do our own assumptions and reluctance to provide experiences with technology in early childhood education perpetuate an ongoing digital divide built upon economic or gender disparity? For example, a great deal of technology research suggests boys spend significantly more time playing video games and developing critical technological knowledge (Anderson, 2008). However, we also need to expand what counts as technology play and look beyond computer games to recognize a broader range of technological play including digital toys such as Barbie dolls that are video cameras or interactive stuffed Elmos. Expanding definitions of technologies as well as literacies will enable educators to better appreciate all children’s diverse interests and familiar literacy and technology resources (Burnett, 2010).
- How might we reconceptualize early literacy education to alleviate an “app gap” (Rideout, 2011) between children who can access the latest technologies 24/7 and children whose primary screen is a television and do not know what an app is? Television is the dominant (perhaps the only) screen for many low-income families with young children; further, as in the AAP statement, developmental discourse advises them to turn off their primary source of media, including educational programming. This produces an app gap when young children in affluent families can not only consume media across multiple screens but more important, produce and share their own media texts using touch screens on smartphones and tablets. If affluent households provide abundant apps and low-income households are screen-deprived, it will once again fall to the schools to provide some sort of technological equity for young children. . [It’s important to note that a recent position paper by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media (in press) steps away from this anti-screen stance, a softening of discourse which seems promising for securing more widespread access to technology in early childhood education.]

Currently, few preschool and kindergarten teachers have the resources to provide and teach with sophisticated digital technologies. Even innovative teachers who teach with mobile

devices with the latest apps face filters, firewalls, and no Facebook policies that discourage rather than encourage young children's use of new media. In a connected world, it is no longer possible to just "close our doors and teach". We must first examine our own teaching to question how our assumptions affect children's equitable access to offline and online play; then we can educate and convince policymakers, which means we need to understand how to address policies that are situated in sociopolitical discourses as well as in institutional and economic realities. We can better prepare children for learning in this century when we understand these fluid constructions are—and will continue to be—endlessly contested and remapped within living, changing cultures.

References

- Anderson, J. L. (2008). *The kids got game: Computer/video games, gender and learning outcomes in science classrooms*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston College, Boston, MA.
- Bazalgette, C., & Buckingham, D. (1995). *In front of the children: Screen entertainment and young children*. London: British Film Institute.
- Buckingham, D. (2000). *After the death of childhood: growing up in the age of electronic media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Buckingham, D. (2007). *Beyond technology: Children's learning in the age of digital culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Burman, E. (2008). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. New York: Routledge.
- Burnett, C. (2010). Technology and literacy in early childhood educational settings: A review of research *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 10(3), 247-270.
- Cannella, G. S. (1997). *Deconstructing early childhood education: Social justice and revolution*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Cook, D. T. (2007). The disempowering empowerment of children's consumer "choice": Cultural discourses of the child consumer in North America. *Society and Business Review*, 2(1), 37-52.
- Council on Communications and Media. (2011). Policy Statement: Media use by children younger than 2 years. *Pediatrics: Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, 128(5), 1-6. doi: DOI: 10.1542/peds.2011-1753
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: An introduction* (Vol. 1). New York: Random House.
- Hendrick, H. (1997). *Children, childhood, and English society 1880-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (Ed.). (1998). *The children's culture reader*. New York: New York University Press.

- Linderoth, J., Lantz-Andersson, A., & Lindström, B. (2002). Electronic exaggerations and virtual worries: mapping research of computer games relevant to the understanding of children's game play. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 3(2), 226-250.
- Luke, A. (1992). The body literate: Discourse and inscription in early literacy training. *Linguistics and Education*, 4(1), 107-129.
- Luke, C. (1999). What next? Toddler netizens, Playstation thumb, techno-literacies. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 1(1), 95-99.
- Marsh, J. (2004). The techno-literacy practices of young children. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 2(1), 51-66.
- Mills, J., & Mills, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Childhood studies: A reader in perspectives of childhood*. London: Routledge.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children, & Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media. (in press). Technology in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9, 1-2.
- Rideout, V. J. (2011). Zero to eight: Children's media use in America. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. W. (2004). *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Shuler, C. (2009). *Pockets of potential: Using mobile technologies to promote children's learning*. New York: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop.
- Tobin, J. (2000). *"Good guys don't wear hats": Children's talk about the media*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Volk, D. & Long, S. (2005). Challenging myths of the deficit perspective: Honoring children's literacy resources. *Young Children* 60(6): 12-19.
- Weber, K. (2006, March 25). The factories of lost children *New York Times*.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2009). Dilemmas and discourses of learning to write: Assessment as a contested site. *Language Arts*, 86(5), 341-351.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2011). *Playing their way into literacies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Zelizer, V. A. (1985). *Pricing the priceless child: The changing social value of children*. New York: Basic Books.