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

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Literacy Playshop: 
Playing with New Literacies and Popular Media in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Preface

Time for Literacy Play

Time for play is shrinking in early childhood classrooms, even though it’s a primary way that children engage and understand the world around them. In this standards-driven era, it’s not enough to argue that play builds social skills or provides physical exercise. Time for play depends on demonstrating its curricular value as a core literacy with growing importance in this century. For example, playing and producing video text are highly effective literacies for communicating on YouTube and Twitter. Children’s play and media experiences are a natural starting point for developing their digital literacies.

Children’s play worlds are storied worlds with texts filled with vibrant dialogue, characters, and storylines. During play, children make their own imaginary versions of real life or fantasy worlds but on their own terms that allow them to make friendships and remake stories to fit their needs. Children’s play reflects their immersion in a stream of commercial messages and advertising, including narratives from popular television shows, movies, video games, and toy franchises. Critical approaches seem to have limited impact when pitted against young children’s passionate identification with their favorite princesses and superheroes which are highly valued in their peer cultures (Davies, 2003; Pugh, 2009). But when children play popular media narratives, they can experience firsthand the constraints of stereotypical characters, actions, and plot lines and improvise ways to play around these obstacles. For example, in Playing Their Way into Literacies (2011), I described how kindergartners revised passive roles for the Disney Princesses they loved when faced with directing peers in a child-produced film while playing an immobilized Sleeping Beauty. Their classroom was a Literacy Playshop, a wonderfully playful space with a creative and responsive teacher where children’s developing literacies flourished as they played together and made films with popular media.

I wondered how to help other teachers to create similar Literacy Playshops and to use literacy play to build on the unique strengths of their young students. I began working with teacher study groups to support teachers as they studied popular media and developed literacy play curriculum:

- How can early childhood teachers support children’s video explorations, mediate their collaborative film and drama projects, and better understand how children think and make meaning together during play and media production?
- What are the curricular processes in a Literacy Playshop? How do these processes inter-relate?
- What kind of collaborative support do teachers and children need?
- How does this kind of media-rich literacy play curriculum function with different age groups in early childhood classrooms?

Because most media production education has targeted older students, one of the challenges in this work is to find tools and, importantly, instructional goals that fit the abilities and strengths of young children (Rogow, 2002). Camera buttons and screens must be large enough for a preschooler’s fingers to manipulate and the camera small enough for a preschooler’s hand to hold. Similarly, expectations for a child-produced film must match a young child’s moment-to-moment
goals and fluid storytelling. In the same way, criticality must be reconceptualized for early childhood. Children’s responses that seem critical in class discussions may not transfer to their writings, or more important, to their playing of the narratives they know by heart. Early critical literacy begins with an awareness that media’s pervasive texts are malleable, can be reinvented by children in collaborative stories, and such reconstructions happen regularly and naturally in children’s play. With these strengths in mind, Literacy Playshop offers curricular activities for early childhood teachers who want to begin a new literacies adventure.

Overview of the Research Project

During the course of one school year, six early childhood teachers in three preschool and K-1 classrooms met in study group teams to develop and try out critical and productive approaches to media-rich literacy play curricula. In two preschool classrooms in the same childcare center, teachers Dawn Berkenstock, Karen Hahn, Michuru Oleson, and Sara Rush worked with over 40 3- to 5-year-old children who played stories about Dora the Explorer, Transformers, pirates, princesses, and more as they created their own films with popular media toys. At an elementary school across town, teachers Doriet Burkowitz and Elizabeth Winarski developed critical literacy and media production activities for about 50 5- to 7-year-old children in their shared kindergarten-grade one classroom.

The families served by the school and child care center in this university town in a U.S. Midwestern state represented a limited range of diversity: children were primarily from white, middle-class families. Many parent were faculty or graduate students, some had transnational or international histories and trajectories. Similarly, the teachers and researchers (discussed in the detail in the following paragraph) were primarily white and middle class; one teacher and two researchers have transnational histories to Japan, China, or Turkey.

Throughout the book, I use the term we to recognize the contributions and collaborations among co-researchers Beth Buchholz, Christy Wessel Powell, Nicholas Husbye, and Linda Coggin. Christy, Nicholas, and I facilitated and recorded the study groups, providing professional development and technical support. As the Literacy Playshops unfolded, Christy, Beth, Linda, and five additional graduate students recorded activity, visiting each classroom two to four days a week during the spring semester.

To explore the possibilities of a playshop approach, we needed to find sites that welcome educational innovation. As a university childcare and a public charter school, both settings enjoyed more freedom for creative programming than many under-resourced schools in high poverty areas that must follow mandated curricula and comply with testing-driven oversight that prohibits or severely limits play activities.

We had three goals for the literacy play curriculum.

1. Draw upon children’s expertise and work with peer culture to enrich students’ reading and writing and expand their participation in classroom literacy activities (Dyson, 2003a; Fernie, Madrid, & Kantor, 2011).
2. Encourage critical awareness of commercial product messages and help children see popular media (films, video games, toys) as pliable texts that can be revised through playful production to create their own storylines and character identities (Wohlwend, 2011).
3. Incorporate filmmaking as a key literacy activity for producing action texts that integrate play and drama.

Teacher study groups met regularly, about every other week, to read research on critical literacy (Vasquez, 2004), play and popular media (Marsh, 2005a), and media production (Bazalgette, 2010; Riddle, 2009). Teachers also used this time to learn filmmaking techniques, plan classroom activities, and talk through issues and celebrate successes. During the first semester, the teachers acquired skills in filmmaking as they engaged in sample curricular activities such as storyboarding, framing shots, and film editing (for examples, see the Teacher Inquiry Activities in Part II).

In the second semester, the teachers brainstormed and problem-solved class activities. They also shared insights while viewing short video clips of filmmaking activities or student films created in their classrooms. Between study group sessions, we videotaped teachers as they tried out their planned media engagements with their students. For example in one engagement, children viewed popular films such as Pixar shorts to understand film conventions and composition. Children also collaborated to write scripts, draw storyboards, animate media toys and handmade puppets as main characters, and produce their own films with popular media themes. During classroom visits, we observed and talked with teachers and children, photographed storyboards and writing samples, and videotaped children during dramatic play, storying, and filmmaking activities. Children’s activity during play, writing, and filming with media toys was analyzed for mediation levels (teacher-led, tools, and child-led) and processes (playing, storying, collaboration, and media production). Finally, the research team analyzed three sets of video data (child-produced films, classroom filmmaking activity, and teacher study group discussions) to identify and compare patterns across levels and processes.

The literacy playshops were emergent and we all learned along the way. A key strength was the teachers’ willingness to explore new literacies and to invent as curricular processes unfolded. Always taking their cues from the children, the teachers listened to their ideas and responded to build on and link children’s storytelling strengths and media knowledge to their emergent abilities in media critique and film production, and of course, to school literacy benchmarks and standards.

About This Book

The purpose of this book is to help early childhood teachers develop their own productive media approach to literacy play curriculum and to show its potential for helping young children respond productively to a world filled with identity texts circulating through media franchises of popular films, television, video games, and more. This book is based on the premise that early childhood educators can proactively support young children’s abilities to critically engage media narratives by facilitating children’s pretending and remaking of commercial texts. Specifically, educators can help children see themselves as producers and promote critical responses to popular media by demonstrating that widely-circulating scripts and character identity messages are subject to change when children play together.

Part I introduces the rationale for literacy playshops and provides excerpts from these three early childhood classrooms to show how young children developed literacies through media play and
emergent filmmaking. In chapter one, I argue the need for critical and productive media curricula that moves beyond a permeable curriculum into “playful pedagogies” (Buckingham, 2003, p. 117) that provide very young children with opportunities to mediate—to make meanings accessible, sensible, and usable—as they produce media and transform media texts through play and filmmaking.

Chapter 2 (kindergarten/first grade) and Chapter 3 (preschool) provide excerpts from early childhood classrooms to show how young children’s media play and emergent filmmaking developed and how teachers’ notions of media curricula moved from familiar educational models of writing workshops or class pageants to Literacy Playshops. Each playshop was unique, reflecting the character of each educational setting. In Chapter 2, Beth Buchholz and Linda Coggin foreground literacy, describing how the K-1 literacy curriculum expanded through play and media production, highlighting how children negotiated gender in their media play and in their relationships with peers. In Chapter 3, Christy Wessel Powell and Nicholas Husbye foreground play, showing how using media production as a developmentally appropriate literacy recorded and enriched preschool children’s play and opened opportunities for diverse learners to tap into their technological and popular media expertise.

Chapter 4 provides the theoretical foundation for Literacy Playshop and its three levels (teacher-guided engagements, child explorations, and shared meaning mediators) and four processes (playing, storying, collaboration, and production). The chapter explains the supporting concepts for the model, synthesizing filmmaking processes across levels of mediation and summarizing key insights on creating literacy playshops and expanding school literacies.

Part II offers professional development activities and sample curricular activities designed to help children mediate media texts. Technology is a moving target with new apps appearing and others disappearing every day. These dynamic resources are invitations to explore and so, “technology try-its” in each section provide current resources and websites for readers to browse as potential extensions. The sample activities that make up Part II are provided to inspire and support teachers in designing their own literacy playshops.

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