# PLAY AS THE LITERACY OF CHILDREN

## IMAGINING OTHERWISE IN CONTEMPORARY CHILDHOODS

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In this chapter, I examine play as a literacy of children—made by children for children—and argue for early childhood research and teaching that attends to the meanings children make for themselves and one another in contemporary times. First, a definition: Play is a set of imaginative practices through which players voluntarily engage to suspend the conventional meanings in the surrounding physical context and agree to replace these with pretend meanings for their own purposes, with transformative potential for their participation in home, peer, school, media, and digital cultures (Wohlwend, 2013). During play, children produce action-based stories and imaginary scenarios by enacting pretend identities with bodies or by animating toys, props, and other materials that enable players to virtually inhabit a shared pretend context.

But in this century, play researcher Vivian Paley (2004) cautions, "We have forgotten what it is like to be a child" (p. 3). Again. Early childhood educators have historically called for curriculum and instruction that honors the unique abilities and interests of the young child in order to provide appropriate learning. Over 150 years ago, Frederick Froebel conceptualized early schooling as a children's garden—*kindergarten*—and established a space for children to play, learn, and grow (Froebel, 1887/2005). But by the late 20th century, the garden had often devolved into a factory with children as the raw material (DeVries & Zan, 1994). Emergent literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984) provided a respite by showing children are capable of actively constructing literacy from a very early age and prompting a move toward a more developmentally appropriate curriculum (Bredekamp, 1987; Whitmore & Goodman, 1995; Whitmore et al., 2004). However, today early childhood teachers are again under intense pressure to stop playing around and to get down to the business of turning out better products. Time for play is vanishing from preschools and kindergartens, a casualty of demands to get ahead on governmental accountability benchmarks and multinational rankings (Bassok et al., 2016; Christakis, 2016).

In this chapter, I explore the sociocultural foundation for re-establishing play as a natural literacy of children, to examine its renewed significance in times of increasingly immersive and lifelike technologies, and to argue for the restoration of play to a central place in the preschool and kindergarten curricula. My argument aligns with a New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1996; Street, 1995) view of play as a key practice for engaging digital spaces and participatory cultures (Jenkins et al., 2009), but takes a new tack: rebooting play as first and foremost, a literacy in its own right; an untidy, just-fine-as-is literacy that young children choose and use to make sense of their worlds, reworking meanings with their friends for their own immediate social and cultural purposes.

The chapter is organized in four parts, each introduced and illustrated with a vignette of play excerpted from video data that I collected in a preschool classroom with children ages 3 to 5 years old. The first part sketches the foundation for theorizing children's play as natural and powerful storytelling. The second part theorizes and unpacks an episode of *imagining otherwise* in a preschool house corner, showing how children use play to construct action texts—action by action— as they quickly pivot among imaginary contexts to try on commonplace social practices such as book reading or online shopping. The third part moves from the house corner to the preschool's technology table to examine iPad play with an animation app, identifying multiple dimensions of play that shape young children's participation in digital cultures. The concluding part situates this action-oriented perspective on play in early literacy research and the realities of teaching in early childhood education, raising questions and implications for preparing young children for playing, reading, writing, and making in this century.

## Play as Natural Storytelling

A conflict erupts in the preschool classroom library corner when 4-year-old Joshua sits down to read on a double row of sturdy wooden benches, which Evan and Ahmed have just pushed together and are now industriously pounding with small hammers. The pair of 5-year-old boys are pretending to build a fort and Joshua has unknowingly plopped down on its roof, hampering their construction work.

Evan warns Joshua, "We're working here. You can't, you can't, you can't, you can't, you can't, you can't—," but Joshua is already engrossed in the book and doesn't look up. Exasperated, Evan shouts, "Dude! I need to talk to you!" waving his hammer in circles to emphasize his frustration. "You can't trick us."

Joshua glances up at Evan, but continues calmly paging through *The Complete Book of the Flower Fairies,* a thick compilation of short poems written and illustrated in the 1920s by Cecily Mary Barker. Joshua slides his finger over each page, studying the naturalistic botanical watercolors of wildflowers paired with a matching fairy.

Giving up on talk, Evan and Ahmed drop to their hands and knees. Growling softly, they crawl around Joshua, up on the chairs and wooden benches and down on the floor again: two dragons lumbering along, circling their prey. Suddenly standing upright, Evan stretches in front of both boys and rotates his arms in large circles, unfurling imaginary wings. "I'm a bigger version of Toothless [a main character from DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon*]. And I can both breathe ice AND blow fire. That's what I can do. Okay?" He disappears into the fort and quickly emerges again, flapping his wings in slow motion and breathing fire and ice, "Heeessssh."

Joshua remains immersed in the fairy book, but Ahmed wonders, "Why do you like dragons so much?" When Evan ignores him and continues on his flight path, Ahmed realizes the pretense is live again and shifts into his dragon character to ask a question, "Why do dragons scare them, Toothless?" Evan's response is lost in the droning hum of 20 preschoolers at play as the pair glide away across the classroom, occasionally jumping on and off the low furniture and hissing at the populace.

My theorization of play as a literacy in its own right builds on a large established research base in play theory and early childhood education, which defines play as a symbol-making system (Vygotsky, 1935/1978) that reframes physical reality (Bateson, 1955/1972) as pretend scenarios that generate fluid, ambiguous meanings (Sutton-Smith, 1997) and express the whims and desires of players (Paley, 1992). For example, Vivian Paley (1984, 1986, 1988, 1990, 2010) listened carefully to 3-, 4-, 5, and 6-year-olds in her classroom in the University of Chicago lab nursery school to uncover the intellectual, emotional, and social work that very young children accomplish during play. A teacher with an ethnographer's openness to uncertainty and willingness to challenge her own assumptions, Paley regarded herself as much a learner as the preschoolers and kindergartners she taught. She looked at play as a chance not only to learn *about* children but to learn *from* them, recognizing children's considerable expertise in play. Researchers who take an anthropological "sideways glance" at play (Schwartzman, 1976; Kendrick, 2005) look closely at play from a 4-year-old's eye level in order to understand the pretense from a child's perspective. This viewpoint provides answers to questions like "Why do you like dragons so much?" and uncovers the rich storytelling, emotional understanding, and social connection that emerge organically during play.

From this perspective, play is a first literacy, a child-friendly tool for meaning-making that has had and should continue to have a central place in the early childhood curriculum. Play produces a highly accessible "action text" made with moving bodies in familiar worlds that young children know best (Wohlwend, 2011b, p. 17). In other words, a play text does not need to be transcribed and pinned down with words on a page in order to mean and to matter deeply to children, as the dragon scene clearly shows. The action is already the text. Multimodality, or the interplay of sensory and semiotic aspects of language (Kress, 1997), conveys the enacted meanings of young children's play interactions through the low pitch of a rumbly growl (sound effects), the plodding speed of slow-moving bodies

(movement), or the upright torso and undulating arms that indicate a dragon in flight (posture). Players actively manipulate the material environment to convey the meanings of their action texts using *modes*, which are the culturally shaped meanings of sensory and material properties of objects and space (Kress, 2010). Modes can be embodied (e.g., body movement, posture, facial expressions, gaze, voiced sound effects, proximity among players) or environmental (e.g., costumes, props, physical layout of furniture, music). Children can craft quite sophisticated action texts with modes and bodies before they can write with print and paper in a way that conveys much meaning to others (Kress, 1997). They naturally play to comprehend, develop, and represent their ideas about their worlds (Göncü, 1999), making play an early literacy that is a strong foundation for—and complement to—reading, writing, and making.

Extending work by early childhood researchers who carefully transcribed children's retellings of stories pretended in dollhouses, block corners, and play kitchens, I argue for valuing the narratives that children create as they play, but with a twist: I reconceptualize play as an always/already literacy that does not need to be translated into speech or captured in print on a page. From early childhood through the lifespan, play is a literacy that makes meanings with bodies and stuff, resemiotizing physical objects by detaching a conventional meaning and reattaching an alternate one (Vygotsky, 1935/1978). Players produce action-based stories and imaginary scenarios by *imagining otherwise*: by pretending to be someone else, someplace else, or something else to provide an imagined reality that is not available or possible in the immediate location of a home, playground, or classroom. In short, play is already enough on its own, made for children by children, in no need of the literacy evidence—dictated stories, drawn storyboards, written scripts, or filmed videos—that satisfy school benchmarks and state standards. Rather than confining play to an artificially compartmentalized subject area, my view of literacy suggests early childhood instruction should build on the situated literacies in children's lived experiences. We need to see and understand children's play in ways that capture the depth of meaning in their pretending and designing and that notice unspoken social meanings as well as unwritten literacies. In the next section, I theorize an action-oriented view of literacy to see the complexity and purpose in children's play and the literate and social meanings in their imaginative production.

### Theorizing Play as a Literacy for Imagining Otherwise

Three girls are having a picnic, sipping from empty teacups and nibbling on an assortment of plastic cakes and tarts strewn on the floor of the preschool's play kitchen. Four-year-old Maeve approaches the group, fingering a small hinged plastic ladder, abstractedly opening and shutting it.

Five-year-old Angel waves her off, saying, "No one can play with us. We already have too much people. And we don't want to really play with those [ladders]." But a moment later, Angel abruptly changes her mind and decides the

ladder will be a cell phone, telling Maeve, "You need to get the Barbie Game. . . . Close it up and turn it on and now press Barbie Game."

Obediently, Maeve closes the ladder. "I did press Barbie Game."

Abandoning the picnic, Maeve and Angel concentrate on the toy-ladder-turned-cell-phone to select objects for their Barbie Game. Maeve pushes on its rungs to type letters on its imaginary keyboard while Angel helpfully pronounces, "A-P-S-T—that's how you spell Barbie. Now what clothes you want?"

Maeve replies, "I want sparkly clothes."

Five-year-old Erin leaves the picnic area and joins the Barbie Game too. "Sparkly clothes? I can help you do it." Erin guides Maeve to the nearby rack of princess gowns, superhero capes, firefighter coats, and plush animal costumes. Maeve pulls out a pink satin dress with a fluffy, tulle skirt. "Yes, and Barbie has her own baby," she explains, picking up a baby doll in a denim infant front-pack carrier.

Erin responds, "You can download the clothes or download the things you want for your Barbie. You want the same clothes that you want to wear today for your Barbie doll?" Maeve nods yes and Erin heads off to the dollhouse area to find Barbie clothes to match Maeve's dress-up choices while Maeve intently untangles the straps of the baby carrier, snapping it into place around her waist.

Moments later, Erin returns with a thick hardcover library book, "They didn't have any Barbies at all . . . but I did buy a fairy book because I know you like fairies."

Delighted, Maeve holds out the book, "I love—my favorite fairy book! Does this one have chapters too?"

Taking the book and opening it on the small kitchen table in front of her, Erin smiles, "Yes, Chapter Two."

"I love Chapter Two."

"And there's even Chapter Three, and Chapter Four, and Chapter Five. There's each chapter you ever wanted."

Straightening the baby doll in the infant carrier, Maeve sits down at the table and turns the book so that it's open and squarely in front of her: "I get to read a chapter in my fairy book!"

Erin repositions the book, tilting it up, but careful to keep it facing Maeve. She stands beside the book, ready to read from the side so that Maeve can better see the pages. "Ok, how about I read Chapter Two?"

Maeve is puzzled by Erin's proposal to skip ahead in the chapter sequence: "Is that Chapter One?" When Erin ignores her question, Maeve turns to Angel and asks, "Is that Chapter One?" But Angel sniffs, "It's a fairy book," and walks away to stir the pots on the play stove.

"Chapter Two." Erin begins pretend reading at a random point about halfway through the book. She holds the book up slightly off the table, steadying it with her right hand while using her left hand as a pointer. Inventing the words, she places her index finger at the top of the right-hand page and moves it side to side and down the page, tracking across the print, left to right. "'People don't believe in fairies. And here's some of the fairies we have.'" She pauses to sweep her hand across the illustrations, noting, "'Cause there's some new fairies in there." She resumes her pretend reading, "'People think that people don't really like fairies. But that's not really true. Fairies are most best." Placing the book flat on the table, Erin turns the page.

On one level, this instance of reading a fairy book in the dramatic play center illustrates *playing to read*, a mixture of play and emergent literacy practices through which children learn to read by pretending to be readers (Wohlwend, 2007). Play allows children to learn how to read through exploration and approximation as they apply and imitate the reading demonstrations they've observed to coordinate conventions for tracking print, page-turning, voicing the cadence of storybooks, and creating story meanings (Whitmore & Goodman, 1995). Just as important, players who are pretending to read also explore who they can become as they try on identities as skillful readers. In this instance, Erin explored roles as reader and teacher while approximating the actions of her preschool teacher who reads from the side or upside down in order to display a picture book's illustrations as she reads aloud and demonstrates the left-to-right directionality of text by tracking print with a finger running under the words. At the same time, Maeve explored roles of avid reader and careful listener by expressing excitement for reading the book and by questioning Erin's skipping ahead to the second chapter.

On another level, the Barbie Game and fairy book reading vignette illustrates a different kind of reading-playing merger—*reading to play*—where emergent reading practices support children's pretend-play practices and make their performances as reader, teacher, app user, and online shopper more credible and more easily understood by coplayers. Children's pretend-play performances draw on their lived experiences: for example, knowledge of digital literacies enables the players to collaboratively change the meaning and use of a toy from plastic ladder to cell phone. This resemiotization is contingent on their mutual agreement to accept the ladder's revised meaning, and their corecognition of a repertoire of hand actions based on their shared knowledge of cell phones, apps, and digital cultures. These tacit understandings coordinate their joint agreement to open a pretend "Barbie Game," manipulate a pretend keyboard, and download pretend clothing.

**Play and Mediated Action**

In this vignette, the preschoolers poring over the illustrations of a thick book about fairies are coordinating several *mediated actions* that make up a common emergent literacy practice: pretend reading (Wohlwend, 2007). Rather than decoding the printed content of a text, pretend reading enacts the embodied actions of book handling: holding an open book, turning pages, tracking print, interpreting an illustration, inventing phrases that fit an illustration, pronouncing phrases with book-reading intonation, and so on. *Mediated actions* (Wertsch, 1991) occur as physical handling of objects that make meanings more accessible for participation in a cultural context. Said another way, mediated actions are small body movements with tools and artifacts that are used to make meanings for a particular time, place, and purpose. Mediation materializes abstract cultural tools such as language and literacy systems through concrete mediated actions that combine physical bodies, tools, and action to alter some aspect of the surrounding environment (Vygotsky, 1935/1978; Wertsch, 1991).

Within ordinary events such as a picnic, online shopping, or a read-aloud, mediated actions cluster into social practices (Bourdieu, 1977), the accepted ways of cooperating, belonging, and getting things done within a particular culture. Mediated actions are performed in sequenced patterns that make up social practices; and everyday events are made up of multiple social practices such as sipping tea, browsing through a rack of clothing, or reading a book. At times, social practices come together in ways that integrate and strengthen one another with significant impact on individual social and cultural participation, such as the development of literacy abilities or the strengthening of peer friendships.

When a mediated action is recognized as part of a valued social practice, it can become a marker of membership in its particular cultural group and members are then expected to be familiar and fluent in performing the action, in the correct sequence, and with other expected practices (Bourdieu, 1977). When a valued practice is performed, other members read and almost automatically respond with a sequence of expected mediated actions in the typical patterns of interacting in that culture. These interactions cluster in what Scollon (2001) termed *nexus of practice*—prevalent ways of reading and responding through action—that become familiar and unthinkingly enacted because they are ingrained into our bodies through everyday routines. For example, when people meet, they enact ingrained cultural expectations for pausing, nodding, and making eye contact (or not) during greeting exchanges. The appropriate response to "Hi, how are you?" might not be to answer with a report of one's current health status but to ignore the content of the question and correctly read the action as a perfunctory politeness that expects an echoing "Fine, how are you?" to close the greeting ritual.

Joining a preschool play group in progress is just as tricky and fraught with unspoken rules as entering an adult cocktail party conversation (Corsaro, 2003). In the vignette, for example, Maeve approached the group tentatively, waiting for

acknowledgment. Angel read Maeve's hovering physical presence and the mediated action *holding a toy* as an unspoken bid to join the play group. She then rejected Maeve's request to play and also rejected the toy ladder as an unsatisfactory entry vehicle, "No one can play with us. We already have too much people. And we don't want to really play with those [ladders]." Fernie, Madrid, and Kantor (2011) define entry vehicles as prized classroom objects, which can be any object that is highly valued in a particular preschool peer culture (e.g., a new paintbrush, a weirdly shaped rock, a Mario Brothers figurine). Entry vehicles provide children with the material capital to enter play groups if the toy is highly popular or suggests a role in an in-progress play scenario. In this instance, Maeve's toy ladder is neither a prized possession nor a sensible object to bring to a pretend picnic.

But in a quick reversal, Angel uses the fluidity of play to rescind her rejection, to resemiotize the ladder, and to reclaim it as a workable entry vehicle. The ladder becomes a cell phone, a ubiquitous object that could easily be found at a picnic. Not only is this a reasonable prop, it also represents a scarce desirable object in the players' materially rich but technology-scarce classroom. Cell phones are an adult-only technology in this preschool; cell phones are restricted artifacts that children see teachers using all day but can rarely get their hands on. Elsewhere, I've found similar improvisations in early childhood classrooms where children cannot access or use the technologies they want to play with; instead children imagine otherwise to invent their own pretend technologies from the things that *are* readily available: toys, paper, and tape (Wohlwend, 2009b). In one elegant move, Angel not only transforms the ladder into an out-of-reach technology, she also elevates it with an imaginary Barbie Game app that gives it even more cachet for this group of Barbie and Disney Princess media fans. Finally, her directive ends with a mediated action that will bring Maeve as well as the toy ladder into the play action, "You need to get the Barbie Game. . . . Close it up and turn it on and now press Barbie Game." With amazing economy of words and action, Angel creates a pivot that transforms the play scenario from family picnic to online video game.

**Pivots and Contexts**

A pivot is an object that players use to trigger a shift from the here-and-now meanings of a physical space to the imaginary meanings of a play scenario. Vygotsky's (1935/1978) well-known example of a pivot is a stick that becomes a horse through pretense, enabling a new set of actions in the move from stick to steed. A pivot changes the meaning of the immediate object but it also changes the surrounding context so that new meanings, actions, and identities are suddenly available for players to try on. In this way, the pivot from toy ladder to cell phone changes not only the toy's meaning but also the underlying shared agreements among players that ground where they are and what they can do. Although Angel's pivot to the Barbie Game changed the context for pretense, the initial imaginary picnic was already a recontextualization of the physical space and its meaning as "classroom." The play kitchen area was furnished with a wooden stove, cupboard, refrigerator, and table, pots and pans, dishware, plastic food of every ilk, clothing,

baby dolls, blankets, and pillows. These materials provide pivots that invite children to shift the frame from tangible experienced space to play frame (Goffman, 1974) so the meanings they create within this space are framed as occurring in imaginary elsewheres and "not real" (Bateson, 1955/1972). Maeve's doll and baby carrier are pivots that invite her to draw from her repertoire of mediated actions and identities. For example, the mediated actions of cradling the doll with one arm as she straps on the front pack transforms Maeve into a nurturing mother. When children play, their instant corecognition of the familiar meanings that the toys represent allows them to easily recontextualize their classroom into family dramas and replayings of mealtime, bedtime, and housekeeping rituals as children care for their dolls and stuffed animal pets. In this way, cultural histories of shared meanings for a common context are key to turning here-and-now action into meaningful social practice.

Angel's suggestion that Maeve select clothes indexed a mediated action in *online shopping*, a social practice typical in Barbie digital doll play where players purchase clothing and accessories to dress an online avatar. The mention of clothes draws Erin into the action as well. First, Erin guides Maeve to the rack of dress-up clothes to select a "sparkly" dress, then she elaborates on the Barbie Game and brings it into the world of action by suggesting that Maeve "download" clothes. Erin seamlessly blurs digital and classroom spaces by offering to find/download avatar clothes for the imaginary game, rummaging through the dollhouse accessories for miniature clothing. Unsuccessful in her clothing quest, she brings back an improvised substitute for Maeve, the fairy book, which serves as a new pivot to transform the context from digital game back to the classroom. The hyperflexibility of play has renewed importance for children growing up in a world where the boundaries between here and there, material and immaterial are evermore blurred. Such distinctions are nonexistent in the world of pretend play where you can pull a dress off the rack and hold it in your hands while you download a miniaturized copy for your doll that can be instantly fetched by your personal shopper.

Erin's mediated action of handing a book to Maeve is an opening move in the social practice of *gift giving* (even though the "gift" is from the classroom bookshelf and already belongs to any child in the classroom). Maeve read Erin's action and responded with a mediated action of instant acceptance, eagerly taking the book in her hands and holding it out to admire its dull green library cloth cover, "I love—my favorite fairy book!" Maeve placed the book on the table in front of her. The handing of a book also conveys an embodied invitation to read. In this way, Erin also initiated the social practice of *book reading*. Maeve read and responded to Erin's handing action by placing the book on the table. But there was silent contestation over who would be the reader in the repositioning that took place at the level of mediated action. As Maeve pulled up a chair to the table, Erin turned the book so that its print pages were facing her. This orientation made Erin the expected reader. When Maeve sat down, she turned the book on the table so that it faced her and opened it, "I get to read a chapter in my fairy book." Smoothly, Erin stepped to the side of the table and lifted just the top of the book off the table, "Okay, how about I read Chapter Two?" Her enactment of a read-aloud with teacherly hand actions

further strengthened her position as play leader and cemented her appropriation of the role as reader. Erin's posture and body actions with the book and its meanings mediated the context slightly to reposition herself as a teacher-reader and Maeve as a student-listener. This action orientation to reading and writing reveals how literacy practices are made up of mediated actions that do not occur as isolated decontextualized behaviors or skills, but powerfully assemble bodies, tools, materials, meanings, cultures, places, histories, and identity expectations.

*Action text* describes the meanings produced by the interactive assemblages among moving bodies and objects when children act out an unfolding play narrative. In an action text, verbal language is just one of many means for communicating a story. At times—such as when children talk to clarify the pretend meaning of a toy or prop—verbal language carries the semiotic load. This kind of clarifying talk can be explicit or implicit. For example, an explicit proposition to pretend that a toy is something else would sound something like "Let's pretend the plastic ladder is a cell phone and its rungs are the keys on the keyboard." But Angel relied on implicit expectations to convey an invitation to pretend through her directive "You need to get the Barbie Game. . . . Close it up and turn it on and now press Barbie Game." Children often remain in character and use implicit clarifications to avoid interruptions that can break a fragile play frame (Sawyer, 1997). However, meanings can also be communicated through actions, rather than words, as in the stationary pause at the edge of the group that silently requests a chance to join the play in progress, a dismissive wave that rejects an unwelcome applicant, or the smile and outstretched hand with a book that means *gift*.

In the fairy book reading in this short vignette, early literacy educators can easily recognize the emergent literacy learning in book handling and pretend reading (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). The mediated actions of holding the book, showing the illustrations, and tracking lines of print are interpreted as a literacy practice, according to shared expectations in this school culture. In the literacy-play nexus identified in this chapter, the imaginative meaning-making of play intertwines with emergent reading and digital literacy practices, emotional responses to favorite media themes, and social work in deciding who can join, who will lead, and who will follow. Play is built from constant proposals and agreements among players to pretend together, to imagine otherwise, and to adhere to a shared set of rules to govern their imagined world. This makes play both flexible and fragile as the rules for shared pretense bend and break to accommodate each player's disparate ideas for the evolving narrative that shifts with each improvisation.

Using play to develop literacies or the young child's ability to read, write, and design is a commonplace strategy in developmentally appropriate literacy instruction: For decades, early childhood teachers have added print materials to classroom learning centers to encourage children to read bedtime stories to dolls, to write grocery lists in the play kitchen, or to design structures inspired by blueprints in the block corner. In this way, play is an inducement for practicing emergent literacy skills. As these are clearly appropriate and useful ways to encourage young

children to engage literacy, the early childhood literature from the 1980s and 1990s is replete with research and teaching strategies on literacy-infused play centers (e.g., Owocki, 1999; Whitmore & Goodman, 1995). Additionally, an extensive body of literature also shows the value of encouraging a playful social environment for writing and encouraging dramatic enactments of children's written stories (Dyson, 1989, 1997, 2003, 2013; Genishi & Dyson, 2009), dramatizing a book with toys (Rowe, 2000), or digitally composing e-books ( Burnett, Merchant, Simpson, & Walsh, 2017; Kucirkova & Falloon, 2017; Rowe & Miller, 2016). My work focuses on an aspect that is far less studied: play as a literacy that writes with bodies rather than print to produce an action text, whether dragon flights, family picnics, or imaginary video games.

## Methods for Researching Action Texts

To examine children's play as action texts, I use mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001; Scollon & Scollon, 2004) to look at play as a set of meaning-making practices with bodies, tools, and materials that players use to mediate and remake their worlds. Ron Scollon developed mediated discourse analysis by integrating ethnographic methods in linguistic anthropology with sociocultural theories of mediated action (Vygotsky, 1935/1978; Wertsch, 1991) and sociological theories of everyday interactions (Bourdieu, 1977; Goffman, 1974) that explain how a community's expectations for actions are ingrained into bodies and embedded into materials through social practices and cultural histories of use.

A filtering process in mediated discourse analysis provides an organizing framework for searching through the buzz of classroom activity to determine which of the countless moments of children's mediated actions with literacy materials produce transformations in meanings and social participation. The funnel design in this process progressively narrows the focus to find rich moments for microanalysis of mediated action. A six-step process unpacked the play interactions in the last vignette by providing a set of filters that guided data collection and analysis.

1. **Locations, players, and materials:** Where are the places that children choose to gather in play groups and which materials do they use to create play scenarios and build friendships (e.g., play kitchen, princess/Barbie play group, baby dolls, tea sets, fairy book)? Video analysis software enables examination of situated activity in each play center location in preschool classrooms and comparisons of groups to identify those who choose to play together frequently and their preferred play themes and materials.
2. **Prominent play practices:** In the focal locations, how do players wield materials to imagine new meanings for things in the physical environment? In other words, what are their *ways with things* in these places (e.g., ways of handling a picture book that make credible Maeve's and Erin's performances of pretend readers and teachers)? The notion of ways with things is similar to Gee's (1999) characterization of discourse as "ways of doing and

being" in critical discourse analysis, but with more emphasis on how artifacts and modes are used to produce meanings and shape participation in the group. Clips of key play practices are tagged in the video data and all practices are compared for their frequency and foregrounding by players.

3. **Nexus of practice:** For each key practice, what shared tacitly held expectations for particular combinations of practices are enacted during collaborative play? Which portrayals are easily recognized and implicitly agreed upon without much need for explanation (e.g., the instant recognition and use of a nexus of expected digital literacy and consumer practices with a smartphone: tapping on an imaginary screen to open an app and browsing to shop for clothing)? Video analysis of dense places where practices cluster are examined for patterns of interaction among players that can reveal their shared expectations for nexus (e.g., Erin's and Maeve's turn-taking and collaborative coordination of reader roles and actions with the fairy book). Looking at a practice across the entire video corpus and data set reveals how these nexus form and fit (or do not fit) with a group's shared play histories.

4. **Transformational moments:** Within a focal nexus, which moments produce collective transformations in the meanings in a play text that also substantially affect children's social relationships? Multiple passes across the video data set identify changes in play scenario meanings and players' participation in the context of each group's play histories (e.g., changing the meaning of the ladder to a cell phone pivots the nexus of practice from tea party propriety to online shopping but also shifts the pattern of participation so a child on the periphery of the group is able to take up a central role. It also expands the toy's potential play meanings for future play sessions).

5. **Mediated action:** Within these moments, how do actions, modes, and materials intersect in mediated action to enable transformation of story meanings and group participation? Children's pretend play, however fluid and fleeting, produces an immediate and concrete text, packed with shared meanings that become embedded in toys and ingrained in the actions of participants. Although play texts do not always involve tangible and durable literacy artifacts such as books or films, their actions, modes, and meanings are visible in context in the moment of imaginative production. Multimodal analysis (Wohlwend, 2011a) enables microanalysis of interaction (i.e., mapping movements and uses of actions, modes, and materials on video of children during play tracks shifts in meaning and participation). Close analysis reveals the mediated actions that hold the most potential for changing the nexus of practice—that is, a group's usual ways with things—with implications for early childhood teachers who seek to mediate children's play to offer more equitable participation.

6. **Circulations of discourse**. Throughout the process, mediated discourse analysis zooms out from video analysis or microanalysis of situated activity to trace the global histories and emanations of mediated action. The goal is to understand how a tiny physical action (e.g., tapping a cell phone screen or running a finger under print on the page) becomes a powerful site for circulating discourses and possibly changing expectations for appropriate ways of reading, writing, playing, and so on. Mediated discourse analysis looks closely at

mediated action but also looks globally to trace mediated actions in the swirl of media, policy, current events, commercial motives, and other scapes across time and space. This mapping is informed by discourse analyses and cultural studies that connect these circulations to discourses that govern the availability and use of materials, modes, and actions in a particular space.

Elsewhere, I have argued that play is not only a literacy but also a tactic (Wohlwend, 2011b), a way of transforming power relations by making alternative spaces through pretend "as-if worlds" where children "learn to detach themselves from their reactions to their immediate surroundings, to enter a play world—a conceptual world that differs from the everyday—and to react to the imagined objects and events of that world" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 50). Action texts can be transformative in the moment, as in Maeve's shift from fidgeting bystander to included player and pretend online shopper. Such transformation means and matters deeply to the players, whether or not it is dictated to a teacher, captured in a photo or film, or saved in a video game. Instead, the action text is ingrained in the group's shared histories and embedded into toys and other play materials. For example, the transformation in the vignette expands not only the accepted pretend meanings for a toy ladder to include cell phone but also expands player expectations for roles for Maeve.

The next vignette illustrates how the multimodality of actions with things shapes play texts and contexts, moving beyond here-and-now classroom pretense into digital worlds and media imaginaries, bounded by a nine-inch iPad screen.

**Multiple Dimensions of Play Imaginaries**

At the movie-making center, Erin arranges two tiny yarn dolls—superheroes Superman and The Flash—side by side on the table. Using the animation app *Puppet Pals*, she photographs the dolls with her iPad and then carefully traces around the dolls' image to make a cutout of the pair for her film (Figure 15.1).

Figure 15.1: Tracing The Flash and Superman

Sitting nearby, Ahmed notices an orange-and-green yarn doll across the table. "Aquaman!"

"Huh?" Startled, Erin looks up and quickly tosses Aquaman to Ahmed and resumes tracing around the dolls on her screen with a deliberate forefinger. "Perfect!" She saves the cutout and scrolls through the next screen, browsing the assorted images of superheroes, princesses, ponies, classroom toys, and selfies that other children have similarly photographed, cut out, and saved in the app. Erin taps the box to select the image she just created and then pauses expectantly—"What do you want?"—inviting Ahmed to choose a character and join the filmmaking.

Ahmed points to a photo cutout of a classmate, Lakin, and Erin selects the character by tapping its image. Ahmed adds, "I want Batman. Because he's your favorite superhero. And Superman. There. That's enough."

Erin notes that they are below the app's eight-character maximum: "We have four of 'em."

Ahmed points to additional characters. "Do Captain America, I mean, Green Lantern. Aquaman. Wonder Woman. That's enough now."

Erin turns the iPad slightly so that it is angled between the children and they agree on a castle and a forest as backdrops for their video. Erin taps Next on an arrow at the bottom of the screen and the screen populates with characters scattered around the forest backdrop. She slides the tablet a few inches toward Ahmed and he squares up the screen, presses the red Record button, and begins animating the characters with both thumbs. Erin twirls the Aquaman doll in her fingers as she watches.

Ahmed first resizes Lakin's image so that his classmate's face outgrows the entire screen and both children giggle. Using the same two-thumb resizing motion, he shrinks Green Lantern, then enlarges the Batman image until the Bat emblem fills the screen. Lowering his voice, he sings "Batmaaaan" as he repeatedly resizes the image so that it appears that the camera is zooming in and out on the logo.

Shrinking the Batman character to its original size, he next jiggles it furiously by rapidly rubbing a finger back and forth over the image, then repeats this shaking action with Wonder Woman. After dragging the remaining characters onto the backdrop, he saves the film by typing his name in the title bar and chooses Play to view the animation.

A few films later, Erin leaves and five-year-old Jane sits down next to Ahmed. "Do you like Wonder Woman?" he asks, offering Jane the Wonder Woman yarn doll in his outstretched hand. "You can be Wonder Woman," Ahmed assigns Jane a role in his superhero film. He slides a crooked arm around the other seven dolls, scooping them together to create a bounded and unavailable group of dolls. "These are the boys."

Jane accepts the Wonder Woman doll but what she really wants is a chance to trace on the iPad to make a character cutout like Erin just did. "I want to cut."

Ahmed replies, "I don't know what that is."

"I want to CUT." Jane repeats her request, louder.

"Oh! I know what you mean." After realizing what Jane wants, Ahmed returns to the home screen and begins a new film. On the character selection screen, he chooses Add Actor from Photo, then taps Take a Photo to launch the iPad's camera function. Jane places Wonder Woman on the table as Ahmed lifts the iPad off the table, frames the shot with the camera tool, centers the doll on the screen, and taps a button icon to snap the photo. The next screen displays the doll image with the cutting-tracing tool and Ahmed hands the iPad over to Jane. Delighted, she begins to trace around the edges of Wonder Woman's image.

The photography, animation, and digital puppetry in this vignette are examples of technology-mediated literacy practices that are alive with modally rich movement and multiplied meanings that blur material-immaterial boundaries. In digital contexts, new kinds of interactions with emerging technologies stretch Vygotsky's (1935/1978) play as a leading activity to include personal sensemaking (Edwards, 2011) with the wide range of global imaginaries that converge in contemporary everyday life (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014). This vignette illustrates how media imaginaries such as superhero film franchises intersect with the nexus of play and belonging in peer, school, and consumer cultures (Pugh, 2009; Wohlwend, 2009a). Such convergences make dense sites of engagement where the interplay of actions, meanings, modes, and materials can be tracked through four interdependent dimensions of play: multiplayer interaction, multilinear storying, multimodal production, and multimedia passions.

**Multiplayer Interaction, Actions, and Bodies**

Play enables multiplayer collaboration that requires children to jockey for storytelling space, whether in a child-sized kitchen or on a crowded touchscreen where they maneuver avatar characters on the same virtual landscape. To keep the action text going and the imaginary context intact, players smooth over contradictory meanings of character actions as they remix their disparate story ideas to create a mutually engaging, though not always sensible, text. Children also negotiate who will lead and who will follow, and the logistics of holding props and operating cameras. Erin's subtle hand movements and slight turns of the screen determined who was directing the story, but this authority quickly shifted from one moment to the next. Positioning the iPad so that the screen was squarely in front of her body meant Erin had sole control; tilting it slightly so that is was at a 45-degree angle between them opened an invitation for Ahmed to touch the screen and add a character.

**Multilinear Storying, Meanings, and Collaboration**

The improvisations of play unfold in unpredictable ways, facilitated by available materials such as touchscreens where the instant interactivity of a touch or a slide of a fingertip produces an immediate response, which allowed Ahmed and Erin to quickly shift direction and add three more superheroes. A child's desire to hold and create his own favorite superhero ("Aquaman!") as well as accommodate a friend's likes ("I want Batman. Because he's your favorite superhero.") produced multilinear storylines. Play creates an untidy tapestry, matted with abrupt stops and restarts, repetitions, and overlapping and looping plot threads that reflect the mix of players' literary knowledge, their cultural experiences, their friendships, their histories of negotiations and commitments to their shared play scenario, and their individual creative visions of how the story should unfold.

**Multimodal Accessibility, Modes, and Action Texts**

Ahmed's film is more an exploration of multimodal effects than a superhero story: a testing of the effects of fingertips sliding across a glass screen, images swelling beyond recognition, or movements zigzagging to create the appearance of vibration. The multiple modes in action texts thicken them and support collaboration by providing easily understood texts that allow children to quickly and clearly express ideas to one another through movements, props, voices, and sound effects. In this way, the multimodality of dramatic play action texts make them accessible and easy for very young children to make and to read. The lifelike multimodality of play also makes it a highly effective tool for collaboration. As children enact scenes, they instantly read and respond to one another's movements, facial expressions, postures, and gestures.

**Multimedia Passions, Materials, and Transmedia**

Children's play and digital engagements often involve commercial transmedia like *How to Train Your Dragon*, Barbie, and the DC Universe of superheroes in the three vignettes in this chapter. Transmedia are franchises of character-based multimedia that combine toys, games, and consumer goods distributed across video, gaming, shopping, and social media platforms. Children form passionate attachments to the appealing characters in films and video games that ground a line of consumer goods (Marsh, 2005; Marsh & Bishop, 2014). It might appear at first glance that children's media are benign and decorative with little power to do more that sprinkle character illustrations on themed products like toothbrushes, snacks, clothing, and video games. However, transmedia are designed to grow a brand and to incent young consumers to buy, guided by corporate profit motives rather than educational goals.

Children's transmedia play is both empowering and problematic. The extensive range and pervasive availability of transmedia products linked to everyday practices creates a widely recognized imaginary that peers recognize and value, creating capital that children can use to access play groups and strengthen friendships but to also enforce insider-outsider boundaries. Children's media knowledge can confer insider status in fan play groups where everyone can recite scripts or instantly recognize the difference between Captain America's and Green Lantern's costumes. In children's transmedia, the catchy songs and memorable snippets of dialogue in formulaic plots make it easy for very young children to recall and enact popular bits of media narrative—along with stereotypical characters and implied boy-only or girl-only player identities (Marsh, 1999, 2000; Wohlwend, 2009a, 2012). For example, there was obvious and uncontested boundary work in this vignette around gender: "These are the boys" and its unspoken subtext "and not for girls." Identities, desires, and attachments to beloved characters get tangled with highly available transmedia products, making it possible to consume, play, and live in character on a daily basis.

**Immersive Imaginaries**

The multiplicity of play—multiplayer, multilinear, multimodal, and multimedia—creates an immersive context that invites players to step in and imagine. It is important to emphasize that the product of play, with or without technology, is as much a context as a text, a space that frames a physical location, which all players agree to occupy and have a stake in maintaining through shared imagining (Corsaro, 2003). Children enact a storyline but the multimodality of their production also creates a tangible space that other players can see, touch, manipulate, and resemiotize, always contingent on the continued agreement of other players. These spaces are *collective cultural imaginaries* (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014), coconstructed improvisational pretend contexts that players collaboratively create, narrate, and inhabit. Like figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998), imaginaries are populated with identities, expectations, and prevailing cultural models for how things should be done in this space. When players share an understanding of an imaginary, they draw on their individual (and sometimes conflicting) knowledges and repertoires of cultural practices to guide their use of their bodies as they interpret, negotiate, and respond through their shared performance. This context, thickened with modes, meanings, bodies, and things, both supports and weakens a play context: by making it more lifelike and recognizable and by making breakdowns, ruptures, and tangents more likely as multiple players' ideas diverge and add more texture.

## Imagining Otherwise in Early Literacy Education

### Situating Play as Literacy in Early Childhood Education

Play and literacy have been extensively theorized and studied in early childhood research, both in relationship to one another and separately as distinct bodies of knowledge, sets of behaviors, systems of stages, and ways of enacting identity. Literacy research on early childhood play tends to study ways to leverage play to foster reading, writing, or language development. Such research produces justifications for play (as a means to produce literacy) by showing how symbolic play supports the development of narrative storytelling and writing (Fein, 1981; Pellegrini, 1985) or how dramatic play produces more and better interactions with print (Owocki, 1999; Strickland & Morrow, 1989). However, these approaches subsume play as an instructional strategy for developing literacy skills, defending time for play in terms of its deferred benefits on later achievement tests. We need critical approaches that recognize children as always/already cultural producers who play to express their diversity and engage inequity in their worlds: in language and written stories (Genishi & Dyson, 2009), in action texts on playgrounds (Thiel, 2015), or in repurposed artifacts in community makerspaces (Thiel & Jones, 2017).

Recent literacy research on new technologies, popular media, and digital cultures opens a new pathway for valuing play as a literacy in its own right, within user engagements with multimedia and social media in participatory cultures on

global networks (Jenkins et al., 2009). In this view, playing apps on a phone or posting videos on Facebook or Twitter are contemporary ways of interacting with, producing, and sharing action texts. The ability to instantly create and wield live-action videos on social media has global impact. Video sharing is a powerful means of political participation that has launched recent social justice movements through raw video posted from bystanders' cell phones or police dash cams and body cams. Recent calls for critical media literacy have focused on the need for civic education that includes critical reading and consumption of news, websites, or social media silos. However, critical consumption is a partial answer. There is an equally urgent need to prepare students as media *producers* who communicate effectively and persuasively through action texts and immersive imaginaries (Sefton-Green, Marsh, Erstad & Flewitt, 2016; Marsh et al., 2015). Play offers a way for children to learn to engage the same challenges that filmmakers and app designers face as they anticipate the moves and intentions of viewers/players/users; coordinate or code sequences of potential actions; manipulate the effects of sound, light, and camera framing in digital tools; and negotiate and collaborate in a team of designers, actors, animators, coders, and other media production crew members.

However, educational innovations in technologies and social media have largely focused on older youth and adults while early literacy education is increasingly focused on print-and-paper tasks, often at the expense of playtime. In addition, developmental and safety concerns about screen time are constricting young children's access to mobile devices and computers in early childhood settings (Bassok & Rorem, 2016), not only shutting down learning through digital literacies but also further foreclosing classroom opportunities for developmentally appropriate play that might arise through filmmaking and video games. The iPad filmmaking center described in this chapter gave preschoolers in this classroom a rare opportunity to make original content and produce their own videos. As is the case in many early childhood classrooms, these young children did not usually read, write, create, or play with computers and iPads; instead the preschool teachers used their smartphones to photograph and document student learning or communicate with families (Blackwell, Wartella, Lauricella, & Robb, 2015; Wartella, Blackwell, Lauricella, & Robb, 2013). At best, this represents a significant underutilization of a widely available child-friendly technology. For example, the touchscreens and digital apps on smartphones and tablets have intuitive interfaces and fingertip operations that enable the youngest children to easily take photos of favorite toys, edit and animate the images, and produce short films to replay and share with friends, as they did with the puppetry app play in this chapter. In response to the chilling effect of screentime warnings (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016), the National Association for the Education of Young Children in partnership with the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media (2012) and multinational research initiatives (Marsh et al., 2015; Sefton-Green et al., 2016) have called for more nuanced research that recognizes the productive value of interactive screens and the need for digital literacy and media literacy in early childhood education.

**Raising Questions and Imagining Possibilities**

Why does recentering play in early childhood education matter? It is easy to see that ensuring play in school is a matter of social justice by reframing this question: Who gets to play in school? Play is rapidly becoming a perquisite of affluence, only for children whose families can afford to send them to progressive schools where pretending, exploration, and child-directed inquiry are welcomed at an early age (Thiel & Jones, 2017; Wohlwend, 2017). Early opportunities to play provide young children with open-ended, peer-scaffolded spaces where learners can explore literacy practices in innovative ways. Play experiences allow children to collaboratively test the limits of their shared meanings and to develop ingrained actions, expectations, and dispositions toward evolving literacies in use in their worlds.

Why does teaching through play matter for early childhood teachers? Key to the reinstitution of play in preschool and kindergarten is allowing teachers the flexibility to create curricular space as well as time and physical space for children to explore. Teaching through play is a small change that can have a big impact on opportunities to teach in more culturally responsive ways since it allows children to bring in their families' cultural resources and enact their personal areas of expertise (Lewis-Ellison & Solomon, 2017).

What would happen if we dreamed big and redesigned early childhood spaces for a reconceptualization of children's play and making as action texts and imaginaries? What new tools and spaces would emerge if we designed classrooms as playscapes and makerspaces? Children's pretending is world-sized, too large to be contained in a script or even an animated film and already equipped for the emerging literacy practices and virtual realities that mold and mobilize materials, bodies, and artifacts.

What would happen if we dreamed concretely and imagined what could be done Monday morning? What if we expanded our expectations from reading and writing print to include play, toys, and iPad cameras as valid literacy tools? What would happen if we put play first on Monday's agenda? This could be as simple as letting go of the idea that children should write scripts or put words on paper before they can play a story.

Finally, there is power in allowing children to play and play and play. Repeated and regular opportunities to play in school allow children to deeply engage and work out the meanings of their stories through their imagining, to hold hands and learn about their worlds, and to find new paths forward to otherwises and elsewheres within the safety of pretense.

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