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Play, Literacy, and the Converging Cultures of Childhood

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In an era where rapid and widespread change is commonplace, it is not surprising that our ideas about play, literacy, and childhood are also in transition. It is increasingly difficult to separate ways of reading, writing, playing, consuming, producing, and projecting a text that are available in proliferating and constantly-morphing technologies. Even very young children read, write, or play on hand-held interactive screens, their at-home browsings mediated by distant others across global networks. Whether in play at home, on playgrounds, in classrooms, or in virtual worlds, children are producing dynamic texts that are co-played and co-written with others. Yet, early childhood educators know this has always been the case with play. Dramatic play often requires children to stop and work out the roles and meanings of their shared narrative and materials: who will play "Mother", what should happen next, and whether a tattered cardboard box represents a car or a doll bed. What *has* changed is the ways that negotiated and co-played literacies weave in and out of daily living within a thick mesh of overlapping cultures that make up 21st century childhoods.

In this chapter, *culture* is defined as neither a monolithic construct nor a geographically-bounded and othered group but as a glocally situated space defined by values, artifacts, and ways of doing things and being with others in a particular context (Scollon, 2001). *Play* is defined as a social and semiotic practice that facilitates pivots to imagined contexts by recontextualizing classroom reality and maintaining a "not-real" frame (Goffman, 1974). This chapter maps changing relationships around literacy and play within converging childhood cultures—school, peer, home, consumer, and digital—by looking closely at the tangle of literacies, texts, and identities in these spaces with the aim of considering how playful literacies might proliferate pathways for learning; such as pretending that opens access to children's familiar cultural contexts, resources, and ways of knowing.

Converging Cultures

Children engage literacy in multiple, interconnected cultures—in their homes, communities, and online sites—engagements that require expanded repertoires for managing complex texts in a new textual landscape (Carrington, 2005). The concept of *cultural convergence* (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006) provides a way of understanding these dense sites of childhood as multiple, fluid, overlapping, blurred, and simultaneously local and global. Cultural convergence

- merges literacy, technology, and popular media with artifacts of everyday living (e.g., toys, fast food, clothing, toothbrushes, etc.)
- fuses media narratives with material products, enacted desires, social relationships, sensory environments, and literacy practices
- blurs consumption, production, identity, representation, and learning.

To track children's literacy practices in these convergences, many early literacy researchers have moved out of classrooms into out-of-school spaces, including digital cultures where young children are logging on to participate in social networks (Dowdall, 2009) and reading, writing, and representing selves in online worlds (Black, 2009; Marsh, 2011; Merchant, 2011).

Each cultural context circulates particular discourses—socially expected patterns of "using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts,' of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member" among a group of people (Gee, 1996, p. 131). In each culture, whether in schools, homes, or virtual worlds, particular ways of combining voice, gaze, and handling objects come to be expected and tacitly valued. These combinations create a web of practices that appear as natural-seeming ways of participating that act as markers of identity (e.g., insider/outsider; novice/expert) that uphold unspoken patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Scollon, 2001).

Multiplying Literacy

When cultures converge, their literacies and discourses converge as well. Children's literacy practices are situated in and distributed among convergences of schools, playgrounds, homes, neighborhoods, communities, consumer markets, technological flows, and transnational networks (Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995). Literacies are stretched and contested in these mergers, spinning off new ways of making meaning. To understand the semiotic power of these innovative practices, we must expand extant definitions of literacy and texts, looking beyond reading and writing a page of print to include video sharing, photoshopping, blogging, commenting, tweeting and retweeting, podcasting, text messaging, and other ways of participating in global social networks. This redefinition recognizes that written language makes up only one possible aspect of any literacy. Literacies are multimodal, producing texts that coordinate many modes, such as "image, gaze, gesture, movement, music, speech, and sound-effect" (Kress & Jewitt, 2003, p. 1). Increasingly, literacies are interactive in ways that blur the line between readers and writers and consumers and producers, generating multimodal texts that reach across networks among multiple players, co-produced with a collaborative audience (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

Multiple literacies encompass more than digital practices and online environments.

> …the move from literacy to literacies expands the ways we think about familiar nondigital events such as play enactments, drawings, commercial toys, classroom layouts, and so on. These changes present an opportunity to rethink play as a new literacy and at the same time, revive it as a staple of early childhood curricula. We can now recognize play as a literacy for creating and coordinating a live-action text among multiple players that invests materials with pretended meanings and slips the constraints of here-and-now realities.(Wohlwend, 2011, p.)

Globalizing Play

Converging cultures, literacies, and discourses challenge commonplace understandings of children's play as developmentally appropriate and innocent activity. In earlier decades, literacy play research and practice focused on classroom spaces and instructional strategies often bounded by the housekeeping corner. Teachers infused literacy into dramatic play centers by providing telephone books, grocery coupons, and other print materials for children to use as props in dramatic play scenarios (Owocki. 1999). Sociocultural perspectives showed us that children play purposefully to make sense of their cultural worlds (Göncü, 1999).

The unique ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997) is useful for establishing child space separate from the official space of the classroom where children can temporarily suspend school rules and teacher surveillance. Play purposefully masks meanings, twists language forms, slips cultural constraints, and muddies its own definitions, producing perfect conditions for testing power and stretching the ideological limits of the surrounding culture within a deniable, and therefore, safe space. Whatever happens within a play frame is ostensibly innocuous. Play provides a seemingly innocent space where rebellious acts or threats to authority can be paradoxically expressed and denied by framing the offending action as, "We were only playing" (Geertz, 1973).

Further, play in digital spaces involves navigating screens and projecting identities across global networks. In these immersive flows, children's play involves identity production as well as textual engagement with messages in commercial media, video games, advertised goods, and projected virtual worlds. Children in Sydney or Mexico City or London draw upon the same popular media that are produced and filmed in Hollywood, materialized in toys and goods manufactured in China, and franchised for global distribution by a single multinational corporation.

In this chapter, I reconceptualize play as an embodied literacy and situate it among young children's multiple literacies in the convergences of overlapping cultural spaces: school, home and community, peer, media, digital, and consumer cultures. Rather than a comprehensive review of the expanding and interdisciplinary literature on play, I draw upon a few key studies within each cultural frame (listed in Table 1) to tease out the cultural convergences and overlapping literacies to ask: What are the relationships among literacy practices, identities, and artifacts in children's play in and among cultural convergences? And where do we go from here?

Table 1. Studies across Childhood Cultures

Researchers/Studies	Year	School	Peer	Home & Community	Consumer	Digital
Kontovourki & Seigel	2009	✓				
Rowe	2008	✓				
Paley	2010	✓	✓			
Dyson	2003	✓	✓		✓	
Wohlwend	2007	✓	✓		✓	
Kendrick	2003		✓	✓		
Long, Volk, & Gregory	2007		✓	✓		
Edmiston	2008			✓		
Marsh	2005			✓	✓	
Carrington	2005			✓	✓	
Sekeres	2009		✓		✓	
Carrington	2003				✓	✓
Lee	2009		✓		✓	
Vasquez	2005		✓	✓	✓	
Grimes	2009		✓		✓	✓
Marsh	2011			✓	✓	✓
Black	2010				✓	✓
Wohlwend, Vander Zanden, Husbye, & Kuby	2011	✓		✓		✓

Playing to Be and Belong in Childhood Cultures

Playing to Read and Write in School Cultures

Ironically in the early 21st century, when the ways of producing, sending, and receiving messages are expanding at a mind-numbing rate (Luke, 2007), accountability trends in the U.S., the U. K., and elsewhere have dramatically constrained what counts as literacy in early childhood classrooms (Marsh, 2010; Stipek, 2006). For example, Early Reading First, a US federal grant program for early childhood centers, circulated a reductive model of early literacy that equated learning with mastery of a limited range of skills in oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, and alphabetic knowledge (http://www2.ed.gov/programs/earlyreading/index.html). As governmental and administrative policy mandates focused on raising academic achievement scores measured through standardized screenings and tests, teachers faced pressure to adjust their instruction to focus on skills tasks that closely matched the tests (e.g., letter naming, sound segmentation). In early childhood classrooms, skills practice and scripted curricula filled the schedule and squeezed out harder-to-test

but richer and deeper learning in purposeful, inquiry-based reading, writing, and play (Miller & Almon, 2009; Stipek, 2006).

These restrictive conditions continue to shape many *school cultures*, the shared set of valued dispositions, practices, and artifacts that carry out "the broad educational mission and demands for group participation inherent within classrooms" (Kantor, Madrid, & Fernie, in press, p. xii). In school cultures molded in the pressure-cooker of high-stakes testing, many early childhood teachers find it difficult to defend and preserve a curricular space for play, documented regularly in US newspapers that report widespread concerns that time for play is disappearing in schools (Brown, 2009; Stewart, 2005; Weil, 2007).

A recent meta-analysis of studies on literacy play in early childhood classrooms illustrates three prevalent school culture perspectives. Roskos and Christie (2010) categorized 30 years of literacy play research in early childhood education, mapping right, middle, and left position onto three models of play (Smith, 2010):

- right "play has no important function"
- middle "play is one of many routes"
- left "play is essential for development" (Roskos & Christie, 2010, pp.57-58).

The left model aligns with the view of play proponents who are concerned about the erosion of play in schools (Hirsch-Pacek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009) while the right "anti-play" position drives policies that privilege direct instruction over playful exploration. The authors identified with a middle position that promotes "blended early literacy programs" that use "guided play" to develop early literacy skills "such as print concepts of print and alphabet knowledge [which] can be developed through a variety of strategies, including literacy-enriched dramatic play, games, storybook reading, language experience dictation, and age-appropriate direct instruction (p. 58). However, the meta-analysis was limited by interventionist framing that privileges quasi-experimental and experimental research designs. Only 16 studies met the authors' criteria for a viable intervention and only 2 of these were conducted in the last decade so it is difficult to know how well the findings of the meta-analysis reflect the current status of classroom literacy play in the wake of governmental accountability mandates, mushrooming media franchises marketed to young children, the advent of the internet, and so on. Quantitative studies that attempt to test the effects of play as a variable in an experimental design to measure its efficacy as a literacy intervention are not equipped to capture the depth of learning and nuanced relationships among children's play, reading, and writing across rapidly-changing cultures.

Qualitative studies by leading literacy play researchers including Dyson (2006, 2008), Paley (2004, 2010), and Marsh (1999, 2000) provide a way to investigate a reconceptualized literacy/play relationship within school cultures. Ethnographic research on school cultures shows that through literacy apprenticeships (Rogoff, 1995; Wohlwend, 2007) within play-friendly school cultures, teachers "seek out opportunities to make space for play in their classrooms as a way to bring children fully into the curriculum whenever possible and to stretch who gets recognized as a successful literacy

learner" (Kontovourki & Siegel, 2009, p. 32). For example, Rowe's (2007, 2008, 2010) studies show that play-based teacher-toddler apprenticeships in preschool classrooms develop children's understandings of the meanings of book content as well as social expectations for readers and writers. In two-year-olds' book-to-play connections, as children move from shared meanings in read-alouds to collaborative dramatic play, they also shift their semiotic stance: "from comprehension to reflection as children represent book meanings in the new sign system of play…" (2007, p. 59).

Paley's (2004, 2010) classroom research demonstrates that kindergarten children play to make meaning through their invented narratives as well as to make sense of their lived lives. Her rich portraits depict preschool children authoring stories and selves through pretense in a responsive school culture that values children's narratives. Here, play provides a conduit that allows children to import their personal literacy resources and lived histories into the classroom. Further, the collaborative nature of play enables storying with others as children engage in the shared project of making sense of the events in their individual lives. She poses the question:

> Do children make up their stories in order to play? Or do they play in order to put themselves in a story? Perhaps the secret lies in another direction. What if children play *and* invent stories because it is the way to distinguish themselves from all the other individuals, even as they reach for common ground and community? (Paley, 2010, p. xii)

Even without dedicated curricular space, it is probable that young children are always/already playing in school cultures, under the teacher's radar and during curricular activities such as writing workshop. For example, Kontovourki and Siegel (2009) found that kindergarten children shifted their play to comply with school culture expectations whenever the teacher approached, in order "to leverage time for play".

Playing to Belong in Peer Cultures

In contrast to a top-down perspective on play that looks for a deferred benefit (e.g., play leads to increased academic achievement measured by standardized test scores), a "sideways glance" (Schwartzman, 1976) reveals how children learn from and with each other through their literacy interactions and play transformations as they collectively imagine new social contexts, import literacy resources, and negotiate pretended identities. For example, a sideways glance reveals players' complex positioning among selves, other players, and enacted characters:

> The metaphor captures the idea that if you look to the side of a child at play, you inevitably find other children. From this perspective, children become not only the subjects, but also the objects of their own play because they are required to simultaneously define and communicate who they are in the play event and who they are as real people in the social context…From this perspective, a sideways glance at play as a communicative event has the potential to disclose "a story that players tell themselves about themselves". (Geertz, 1973, p. 237, quoted in Kendrick, 2005, p. 6)

Research from a sideways perspective asks, "How do children mean and belong through their play?" that is, how does play create shared meanings and narratives, sustain friendships, and provide

social benefits in the immediate peer culture? Corsaro (1985) defined *peer culture* as a set of "common activities, routines, artifacts, values, concerns, and attitudes" (p.171) developed by children for children in a particular space. Peer culture is ideologically structured

> by the possibilities and limits of the physical environment, by the socially constructed peer culture of this event (a patterned history of who plays with whom, around what themes, where, and with what materials), by the wider school culture (norms and expectations for materials use, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, etc.), and by participants explicit and implicit understandings of this way of doing everyday life in their setting. (Kantor & Fernie, 2003, p. 210)

Young children open and restrict access to group play in order to protect their fragile construction of negotiated meanings and play frames. Corsaro (2003) viewed this conflict as productive, resulting in negotiations that allowed children to preserve their pretense while they worked out social relationships in a multiparty space.

Dyson (2003) describes the collaborative playful composing of six- and seven-year-old children who wrote "from inside a particular child culture out toward school demands" (p. 5). The children in this classroom used play to imagine a pretend school family—the "brothers and sisters"—as they appropriated "textual toys" from popular media—bits of songs, rap, playground rhymes, sports talk—and remixed the texts make them their own while tapping into popular appeal in ways that reconfigured and upheld classroom social relationships. Similarly, preschool children drew upon superhero roles to assume leadership positions in peer culture and altered superhero play narratives to accommodate peers in ways that strengthened children's friendships, in part due to thoughtful negotiations by teachers (Galbraith, in press). In one toddler classroom, teachers negotiated the peer culture interest in wrestling and rough and tumble play with school culture concern for children's physical safety, leading to innovative practices (Sanderson, in press). In classrooms like this, teachers acknowledge and engage peer cultures so that they converge " in ways that create a very mutually supportive intersection…" (Fernie, Madrid, & Kantor, in press, p.xii). "[I]f teachers take play seriously, that is, as a way to learn more about children and their literacies, they may come to treat it as a valuable resource for child and teacher learning" (Kontovourki& Siegel, 2009, p. 37).

In other classrooms, Dyson (2006, 2008, 2010) found that peer and school cultures do not always mesh comfortably. In some classrooms, children's cultural resources and peer culture purposes are devalued and supplanted by a school culture focused on "the basics". Despite such constraints, young children did find ways to play to gain more control over literacy practices and as a source of pleasure and a resource for transforming social relationships and peer culture.

Playing to Participate in Home and Community Cultures

Through history and around the world, children have played at home, learning from siblings, parents, and grandparents, appropriating materials, gathering cultural resources, and trying out their developing repertoire of social practices as they participate in neighborhoods and communities (Goncu, 1999). Long, Volk and Gregory (2007) explored how children learned from siblings and

friends as they co-created and sustained play scenarios in ways that developed their multilingual abilities and knowledges. Three case studies in multicultural environments—an American child with Icelandic friends, Puerto Rican siblings in the Midwest United States, and Bangladeshi siblings in England—showed children actively and intentionally pooled their cultural literacy resources and produced blended multilingual texts that enriched and supported their immediate play goals and literacy performances, whether playing *House, School,* or *Church.* Arguing against deficit perspectives that marginalize "children from nondominant cultures by focusing on what they do not know and what they are not able to do," the authors found that in play, children syncretically

> drew on multiple schemas, perspectives, and texts; negotiated with play partners; and kept an eye to the future. They understood what counted as knowledge in home, school, and community settings and practiced the use of that knowledge in their play. They rarely privileged one culture or learner over another. Reciprocity of learning and teaching did not necessarily assume the superior knowledge of older children or dominant language speakers as they alternated, sometimes moment to moment, between the roles of expert and novice. (Long, Volk, & Gregory, 2007, p. 254)

Literacy researchers who play alongside children also find that playing allows children to explore tensions and power relations among cultures and languages as they imagine "communities to which they hope to belong" (Kendrick, 2005, p. 9), imaginings that allow them to expand their participation in their lived communities of practice. Kendrick acted as playmate-researcher to better understand the interplay of tensions across gender roles, imagined communities, and lived communities in a Vietnamese-Canadian five-year-old girl's pretend play.

> Her narrativized stories convey the idea that multiple elements of her world relate to one another in the form of a story or drama (Holland et al., 1998). In this way, play affords a particular 'gaze' on Leticia's subject matter; it reveals her personal interpretation about events in her social and cultural world and her participation in those events. For instance, by scripting and dramatizing her ideas of romance, motherhood, family relationships and possibilities for her future, Leticia communicates her understanding of what it means to be a woman in her particular family and culture. (Kendrick, 2005, p. 22)

Play enables reversals of power relations as children play into their expertise and imagine identities as more proficient literacy users. Players are on equal footing, with adults learning alongside children. In Edmiston's (2007) case study on mythic play with his son, learning was reciprocal and co-constructed as the adult followed the child's lead through fluid scenarios. As a parent, Edmiston encountered difficult dilemmas about how much violence to allow and whether to enter into war play, dilemmas that opened opportunities to imagine and play ethical selves. Drawing upon Vygotsky and Bakhtin, Edmiston theorized these productive moments as a "workshop of life" that allowed parent and child to collaboratively confront issues of identity within the safety of pretense.

Playing to "Produse" in Consumer Cultures

An expanded definition of literacy that recognizes play as an embodied literacy must also acknowledge the importance of toys as texts; this recognition implicates consumer identities as well as player identities. For example, Carrington (2003) argued that Diva Starz fashion dolls are identity texts with anime-like features pre-recorded snippets that voice "cool girl" scripts and position doll players as shoppers and fashionistas.

> The texts of consumer culture provide displays of available identities and lives. These texts are built around displays of style and taste, and children are being trained in particular patterns and knowledges around consumption. These texts are what they reflect – they are unashamedly commodities to be purchased and consumed, linked to the assumption of particular consumer identities. (Carrington, 2003, p.94)

Dolls without pre-recorded messages also "talk" and convey identity texts but through their accompanying film narratives as in Disney Princesses (Wohlwend, 2009) or book series such as American Girls (Sekeres, 2009; Marshall, 2011). These films and books provide foundational narratives that anchor multi-billion dollar product franchises for multinational companies with global distribution.

> In the 20th century, the concentration of publishing for children into a small number of megacorporations, the development of synergistic marketing of multiple products of one brand, and the technological advances of the late-20th century contributed to what can be called "branded fiction," a genre that includes books that are one product among many that are all sold under one brand name. Within the context of branded fiction, the reader constructs the imaginary characters of the fiction through the multiple experiences of buying and living with the multiple products of a brand. (Sekeres, 2009, p. 399)

As children play, read, and live as the intertexts of branded fiction, children not only consume but also produce their own meanings; they construct their own notions of characters, whether Samantha of American Girls or Hannah Montana on the Disney cable network.

This kind of active meaning making is not limited to toys associated with books or other media. Children live, play, and mean in consumer cultures that flow into every aspect of everyday life. Cook (2008) points out that people do not choose to be consumers; rather we are born into "regimes of consumption" in commercialized societies where opting out of consumption is impossible. Young children are not only targets but also participants in markets where they are key actors in shaping demand and corporate response for a range of products in franchises that include clothing, household goods, school supplies, films, video games, toys (Seiter, 1993) and even fast food toys.

> Yet, it is not a stretch to argue that there would be no McDonald's as we know it and perhaps no McDonaldization without children – that is, without living, breathing youngsters who visit there and enter into the imaginative domain created by the brand (Kincheloe, 2002). Children serve as the audience for the McDonaldland characters, the market for the Happy Meals and cross promotions, the consumers of Big Macs, the users of the Playlands and a key impetus for adult patronage of the stores. (Cook, 2008, p. 226)

Research tends to clump in two dichotomous perspectives on young children's participation in global media and toy markets. On one side, children are perceived as unknowing innocents who are easily exploited by marketing tactics of multinational conglomerates that determine their consumption habits (e.g., Steinberg & Kinchloe, 1999). Children are susceptible and imitative in this view, simply replaying the scripts and copying the stereotypes in their favorite films or video games (Linn, 2004). The opposing position finds more agency and power in young consumers' buying and media understanding (Buckingham, 2000), arguing that young children remix media narratives for their own purposes and produce their own counter texts while taking pleasure in playing with media toys. However, an exploited/empowered dichotomy relies on an individuated view of the child, operating in isolation and insulated from commercial influence.

> Hence, it is important for scholars to be cognizant of the often unexamined assumption that posits children as somehow outside the realm of economic life who are then brought into it either by caring adults, like parents or teachers, or dragged in by media and marketers. That line which divides 'in' from 'out' fades every day as structures of capital help structure the imagining of the worlds into which a child enters well before its post-partum existence. (Cook, 2008, p. 236)

Clearly, children are anticipated to become active economic subjects from an early age. In converged consumer, home, and peer cultures, young children exercise power in shaping adult purchases of franchised goods as parents support their passion for particular media narratives characters such as Thomas the Tank Engine. Marsh's (2005) studies involving working class families of 2-, 3-, and 4-year old children showed that parents purchased consumer goods associated with children's favorite media. These media characters, texts, and materials form a narrative web which children use as semiotic resources for performing literate identities. For example, one child's narrative web for Disney's *Winnie the Pooh* franchise included stuffed toys, Duplo playsets, pajamas, lunchboxes, comics, and so on. The products in narrative webs enabled parent-child rituals tied to emotional security as well as literacy and identity development. Pugh's (2009) ethnographic research with 5-to 9-year-old children and their families and teachers traces the complicated classed, raced, and emotional meanings attached to use of popular media when consumption is interpreted as care, when good parenting is equated with limiting children's access to media, and when "fitting in" with peers requires media-savvy displays. The complicated negotiations of "economies of dignity" that merged material goods, emotions, and identities show that much more is at stake than simply buying a particular product. Parents and children across communities were equally concerned with children's consumption and desires as issues of belonging in local peer cultures and coping with the "ratcheting up" of consumer culture. In my three-year ethnographic study of play in classrooms, kindergartners played, wrote, and rewrote familiar Disney Princess narratives for their own films where for example, Sleeping Beauty revived herself and fought off the dragon (Wohlwend, 2011). Drawing upon de Certeau's (1984) productive consumption, I conceptualized these kindergarten players as *produsers* (Bruns, 2008) who used microtactics to repurpose and twist the meanings of the media they consumed. Similarly, Lee (2009) found that young Korean girls twisted Disney Princess media narratives into personal texts that could reflect their own cultural and transnational experiences in the US. These kinds of micro-interactions, negotiations, and remakings pool in the

marketplace, driving popularity and producing global trends and fads (e.g., Pokémon, Tobin, 2004; Vasquez, 2005) that make and break companies.

Playing to Connect in Digital Cultures

Connectivity is the hallmark of play and literacy in online contexts. For example, playing, in video games across massive networks involves reading, writing, responding, and participating in collaborations and competitions with unknown others. Online interactions produce "thick play" and "slippery texts" (Mackey, 2009) with layered meanings that enable multiple interpretations. Researchers have followed children into digital space to understand whether children's play with e-books, video games, virtual worlds, and smart phones offers opportunities for more complex production and participation than available in face-to-face spaces. While there are many new technologies and apps for children to use, there are few digital cultures where children can participate in an online environment and interact with other children. Virtual worlds are a notable exception.

We know little about literacy practices in virtual worlds for young children, although the popularity of these sites continues to grow. In early 2011, Webkinz had 16 million accounts, Club Penguin 63 million, and barbiegirls 23 million (Kzero, 2011). The studies that have been published to date suggest that the literacies that children engage in virtual worlds are severely constrained by corporate gatekeeping, Internet safety concerns, and consumer privacy policies, in Club Penguin (Marsh 2011), in Webkinz (Black, 2010; Wohlwend, Vander Zanden, Husbye, & Kuby, 2011), and in barbiegirls (Grimes, 2010; Wohlwend & Peppler, in press). Online worlds for young children converge home, school, consumer, and digital cultures in ways that restrict children's access to meaningful play. Black's (2010) content analysis of Webkinz, a world populated with virtual pets, reveals "a designed culture with limitations on learning and a constrained set of literacies and social messages…[such as] restrictions on the site's messaging systems that seriously hinder young young players' ability to use in-game communication as a scaffold for their expressive literacy development" (p.21). In a study in an afterschool program, my colleagues and I found 5- to 7-year old children often ignored print-dense pop-up help and navigation screens intended to help guide them through the Webkinz world. Instead they relied on their knowledge of intuitive gaming conventions but this was not enough to overcome the security barriers to online interaction (Wohlwend, Vander Zanden, Husbye, & Kuby, 2011). Grimes (2010) conceptualizes children's virtual worlds as "sites of struggle, in which children are in constant negotiation with the games' formal and informal "rule systems," which include industry trends, design choices, game rules, and government policy" (p. 203). Through her analysis of End User Licensing Agreements (EULAs) and digital ethnographic study while playing as an avatar in six virtual worlds, Grimes found that a foregrounded concern for children's online safety in these sites justifies restrictions on child expression and peer interaction. Absent is a concern for critical interrogation of the backgrounded and abundant marketing and branding strategies endemic in these commercially sponsored worlds.

Children's playful literacies in online spaces remain important means for social interactions and meaning production, although they differ remarkably from the kinds of collaborative and negotiated play that occurs in offline spaces. Marsh's (2010, 2011) analyses of Club Penguin

indicate that despite seemingly random and chaotic interactions, children used literacy practices as a "social glue" to form a coherent social order. These practices afforded a certain agency "as the children decided when, where, and how to use ritualistic discourse to build communities and demonstrated choice and control over their communicative practices, albeit within the constraints imposed by the producers of the virtual worlds" (2011, p. 131). The emergence of virtual worlds as key sites for children's digital cultures suggests the need to help children interrogate online play sites and to work toward creating and sustaining digital spaces with opportunities for creative production.

Directions for Teaching and Research

Play is messy, situated in overlapping and conflicting contexts, and slippery, with shifts that happen moment-to-moment. But because play depends upon cooperation and shared recognition among players, there is a need to negotiate and improvise, causing the tensions between overlapping cultures to become visible and audible as players work through ambiguities in pretend identities and shared meanings. Through play, children

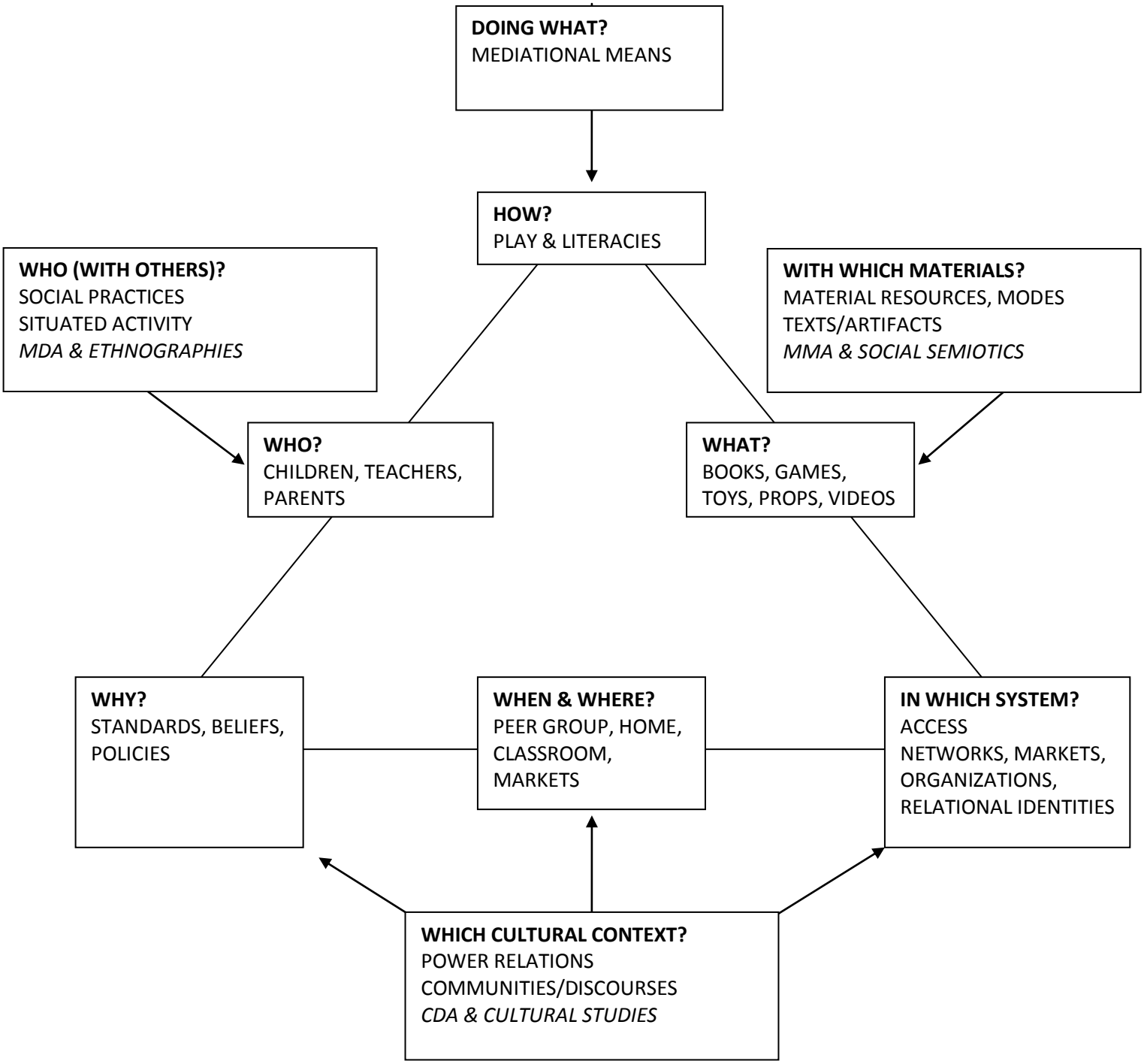
- Participate to take up valued roles in literate communities
- Explore literacy practices and identities in a safe "not-real" space
- Imagine themselves and identify as literacy users
- Reflect, replay, and record their lived experiences
- Negotiate and collaborate to create shared narratives
- Access and appropriate familiar cultural resources to use with literacies
- Use literacies to create cohesive social groups
- Interpret, produse, improvise, and resemiotize a range of texts and artifacts
- Wield texts in ways that reconfigure their relative social positioning
- Connect with others around meaningful texts

The rich playful learning summarized here from the studies in this chapter clearly indicates the literate potential of play, potential that is overlooked and unrealized in many schools. Educational policies need to recognize that by removing play from school, we are ceding instructional space for this powerful semiotic tool to corporations that by necessity focus on bottom lines, brands, and market share rather than educational goals and outcomes.

Early childhood teachers who make room for play in their classrooms should be prepared to mediate the social and cultural tensions that come with cultural convergence. Play produces complicated mixes of tactics and desires with potential to advantage some children and marginalize others. Players' collective imaginings converge cultures in ways that align with their personal goals, family histories, media passions, and school and peer expectations: a video game storyline with a popular character might be integrated into children's play for its ability to sustain a play scenario, for one fan's personal satisfaction, to improve one child's social positioning in peer culture, to align with prevailing cultural models of masculinity or femininity, and so on.

Researchers who study play need syncretic research designs able to capture the multidirectional relationships and flows of play across cultures. I use an activity model design to illustrate how multiple lenses combine to tease out the relationships among so many overlapping cultures and potentially conflicting practices, texts, and identities. Expanded applications of cultural-historical activity theory (Engestrom, 1987; Vygotsky, 1935/1978; Leont'ev, 1977) explain the complex web of relationships in the situated semiotic activity of children's play across cultures. Each culture can be conceptualized as at least one activity system with social actors wielding cultural tools to transform objects into texts, using accepted practices that fit the rules and roles of a particular community. Figure 1 shows a diagram of an expanded activity model that illustrates the relationships in a culture. Each box indicates an aspect of activity that can serve as a perspective on the activity system; however all parts must be considered as influencing the activity. For example, each activity system generates a set of questions to be answered:

- who (acting with others)
    - who
- doing what
    - how
- with what materials
    - what
- which cultural context
    - why
    - when and where
    - in what system
-



- Figure 1. An activity model of play in a childhood culture

Each side of the activity model triangle offers a different orientation for research. The question "who doing what?" focuses on social practices, uncovered through ethnographic studies such as Pugh's (2009) study in which she lived and worked among parents and children in three communities to understand how and why they engage consumer culture. Some research designs combine ethnographic data with additional methods of analysis. For example, mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001) employs an ethnographic within a research design that merges activity theory with practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977) to filter social practices of importance to a culture, locating key transformational moments for microanalysis that traces actions that produce social positioning and identity work. The question "with what materials?" focuses on the design of material resources such as the content analysis of the commercial design of virtual worlds (Black, 2010, 2011). Another approach from a material orientation examines modes, which are material resources shaped and made available by cultures such as multimodal analysis of the toys that children make for themselves (Wohlwend, 2011) that draws upon social semiotic theories (Kress, 2010) and multimodal interactional discourse studies (Norris, 2004, 2006). The third question "which cultural context?" draws upon cultural studies, current and historical geopolitical events and markets, and critical discourse theories and analysis (Gee, 1999) to situate activity and identity building within particular discourses circulating in and around a culture.

Finally, the malleable nature of play makes it a powerful socializing tool that functions as both a means of enculturation of children and a means of cultural mediation by children as they produse played texts to make sense of increasingly complex cultural spaces. Like autonomous views of literacy (Street, 1995), the acceptance of play as an ideologically neutral practice in early childhood settings ignores its facility for social organization and cultural reproduction, focusing instead upon its surface appeal that makes schoolwork more enjoyable, its amorphous nature that fabricates a simulated reality within the classroom, and its facility for producing imaginative storylines. This adult-centric view fails to consider its usefulness to children: not only as a pleasurable pastime but also as a powerful literacy for reading and writing selves and the world.

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