Pop Culture as a Social Literacy Practice

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Abstract

Literacy instruction has long been a didactic educational practice – with the goal of teaching children how to read and write. In contrast, emergent literacy pedagogies are multifaceted, recognizing the social role of a child's life in shaping their ability to understand and to be understood. Considering the methodologies of emergent literacy, this literature review examines the value of popular culture in facilitating and restricting children's access to play with their peers while contesting children as passive consumers. Additionally, it argues for early childhood educators to examine their own biases towards middle-class pedagogical values while making space for children's popular culture infused texts and narratives in the classroom.

Keywords: literacy, emergent literacy, popular culture, class constructs, early learning, literacy pedagogies, social literacy practice

Introduction

In early learning environments across the world, literacy development has been approached with a predominantly didactic orientation. In preparation for kindergarten and further schooling, early childhood educators tend to implement a myriad of activities to support children in learning how to read and write. From phonics lessons to handwriting practice, children are pushed to achieve specific literacy goals by educators who aim to get them ahead of the curve - to be successful in the elementary years and beyond (Dickinson et al., 2008). Being able to read and write, however, comprises a small portion of what it means to be literate. Modern scholars advocate for literacy as an emergent process, beginning from birth, that results in an ever-increasing ability to interpret texts, to understand their meaning, and to effectively communicate through texts in order to be understood (Campbell, et al., 2014; Rhyner, et al., 2009). A 'text' is not just words on a page but can include everything that can be 'read', understood, and applied to communicate. Body language, clothing, books, movies, tv shows, signs, and packaging function as texts because they are the "words" and "letters" of a context (Freire & Macedo, 1987 as cited in Mackey, 2010). Understanding these multimodal texts, and being able to use them within relationships, allow children to actively participate in social environments (Yamada-Rice, 2014).

In addition to comprehension and communication, emergent literacy recognizes that there must be intrinsic motivation for children to want to engage in reading and eventually learn how to read and write (Erickson, & Wharton-McDonald, 2019). Popular culture is an important aspect of literacy development for young children as it connects to their interests, offering intrinsic motivation for deciphering texts and communicating to others about their meaning. It also saturates a variety of texts and informs children about culturally specific identities in today's world. For example, today the presentation of female characters in children's texts reflects modern Western aspirations for young women to aspire to more than being a housewife (Ivanschkevich, 2009). While many agree that children's popular culture is heavily intertwined with commercialism and capitalistic aims, an analysis of its content and relation to consumptive pedagogical practices, like elementary school book fairs, are outside of the scope of this research. Rather, this paper focuses on the power and capacity of children's popular culture to influence their literacy practices in the early years through the reproduction of stories in dramatic play, singing popular songs together, and even talking about the characters featured on lunch bags while sharing a meal. This literature review aims to highlight the significance of pop culture as a social literacy

practice by looking at the following: popular culture, consumption, and class; the infusion of popular culture across texts; children's application of, and engagement, with popular culture; and the impact of including children's pop culture as a social literacy practice.

Popular Culture, Consumption, and Class

The term *popular culture* originally referenced working-class culture and its associated artefacts that were 'low brow', simple, and/or mass marketed (Alverman & Hagood, 2000). Popular culture, the lens for this literature review, is more generally described as the dominant texts of a particular time and place that are shared and negotiated between groups of people (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015). However, there must be a discussion of the class-divides of popular culture that filter into classroom environments, pedagogy, and learning (Wohlwend, 2017). For example, the types of media children have access to have long aligned with middle-class values that education and family are more valuable than mass marketed cultural artefacts designed to capitalize on childhood (Cook, 2014).

There is a distinction between low culture – television, movies, and video games, and high culture – theatre, opera, and classical music. Marxist theorists problematize this further by analyzing who are the producers of the culture (the people or commercial entities), and in turn questioning the purposes of said cultural artefacts (Fleishman, 2002). If this is applied to children's popular culture, it is possible to identify the mass-marketization of Disney characters and products as 'low brow' and a parent taking a child to a theatrical performance as 'high brow'. Between the two are commercial enterprises marketing products to help families bridge this perceived gap. For example, Baby Einstein, which promoted CDs and videos to parents wanting to expose their children to 'higher' forms of culture like classical music, was falsely purported to increase children's intellectual capabilities (Carlson, 2009). Considering popular culture as one element of class distinction adds complexity to the classroom and pedagogical practices (Wohlwend, 2017), and as discussed later in this paper, plays a valuable role in socially constructed literacy development.

A discussion of children's culture cannot overlook the child's role in creating and evaluating culture for themselves. Children are not blind consumers of culture. Critical media theorists posit that in pedagogically supportive environments, children engage in critical evaluation of the texts they encounter and mediate their meaning through social interaction with their families and peers (Alverman & Hagood, 2000; Ivanschkevich, 2009; Maudlin, & Sandlin, 2015; Shegar & Weninger, 2010; Wholwend, 2017). In this sense,

popular culture can be critically examined during play alongside supportive educators and considered shared culture amongst groups of children.

The Infusion of Popular Culture Across Texts

Transmedia intertextuality (Kinder, 1991) describes the permeation of genres or iconography across multiple texts and media. Characters from children's popular culture are pervasive along multiple modes of literacy: printed texts, moving image texts (tv and movies), multimodal texts, toys, and artefacts (Marsh, 2005). The wealth of interactions many children have with the same characters and ideas allows popular culture to become 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al., 2005 as cited in Hedges, 2011) for young children. Funds of knowledge are the collection of a person's life experiences formed through interactions within their families, cultures, and communities that create the social capital that facilitates their social relationships. (Chesworth, 2016). Many scholars agree that funds of knowledge drawn from popular culture are productive: giving children common ground and space to explore, make sense of, and understand the world (Chesworth, 2016; Hedges, 2011; Hesterman, 2011; Marsh, 2005; Shegar & Weninger, 2010; Wholwend, 2017).

Many early learning centres are trying to be 'commercial-free' and restrict or ban children from bringing popular culture items from home in favour of natural or uncommercialized materials (Wholwend, 2017), even though toys from popular culture can enable children to engage in collective narratives that span across various media (Pahl, 2003, as cited in Marsh, 2005). Shegar & Weninger (2010) found that home literacy practices engage readily with popular culture through a variety of texts, and across media, because many everyday household items and toys are saturated with popular icons.

This continued exposure to popular culture such as clothing, television programming, toys, and packaging generates a wealth of knowledge for young children. However, children's attempts to use their funds of knowledge in the classroom are often met with resistance. Educators habitually ignore children's popular culture altogether if it does not support, or directly relate to, the daily curricular plan (Wholwend, 2017). The literature shows that pop culture permeates most aspects of children's lives yet facilitates a large discrepancy between home and school literacy practices.

Children's Application of, and Engagement with, Popular Culture

When used as cultural capital during children's play, popular culture becomes "a 'printless' literacy that creates action texts" (Wholwend, 2017, p. 66) and provides "a unique way for children to transform participation in activities" (Hedges, 2011, p. 27). Through the inclusion of popular culture in classrooms, children can collaborate, tell stories, create new media, design, model-build, converse, make films, draw, write scripts, build Lego structures, write, and act (Hesterman, 2011; Wholwend, 2017). Hedges (2011) argues that the content of popular culture is not as significant as the shared funds of knowledge that compel children to communicate, engage in dramatic play, mediate social situations, and share interests, values, and behaviours. If children lack access to the 'popular' funds of knowledge that their peers are saturated by, then this has implications for the children's social standing in their peer group. In a study on four and five-year-old's dramatic play (which was collectively negotiated through their shared funds of knowledge) Chesworth (2016) found that if a child did not have access to the mutual knowledge, they only had access to lower status positions in play. Further, access to this knowledge base is limited for students who are learning a new language (Shegar & Weninger, 2010), putting them on the fringes of social interaction, and potentially excluding them from engagement.

Popular culture has the capacity to shape and form social groups of inclusion and exclusion based on shared interests (Wholwend, 2017). However, children do not access popular culture passively, but rather actively seek to understand, know, and critique it (Ivanschkevich, 2009; Shegar & Weninger, 2010). They are "multiliterate 'readers of the world'" (Hesterman, 2011, p. 86) capable of collaborating and making meaning of a variety of texts and media when supported by peers and educators using a critical media lens. The literature shows that children actively engage with popular culture through all aspects of their lives and use it generatively during play. For example, when children have access to popular culture narratives, their collective play creates "opportunities to learn about such things as physical and emotional wellbeing, identity and making sense of the world and people" (Hedges, 2011, p. 28). It becomes a resource for children to draw upon socially and intellectually as it shapes identities and facilitates an understanding of the world at large.

The Impacts of Including Children's Pop Culture as a Social Literacy Practice

Before exploring this section, it is important to return to what it means to be literate and what the purposes of literacy are. As mentioned in the introduction, to be literate is to have the ability to interpret texts to understand their meaning and to also communicate through texts effectively. Cairney and Rouge (1998) outline the purposes of literacy in the home as:

(1) to establish or maintain relationships;

(2) to access or display information;

(3) for self pleasure and/or self-expression; and

(4) for skills development (p. 192). (as cited in Marsh, 2005)

Marsh (2005) identifies a fifth area: "communicative practices for identity construction and performance" (p. 192).

This wide-ranging list stands in juxtaposition to the generally held belief that the purpose of literacy development in schools is to produce readers and writers (Diaz, 2007). Our understanding of, and ability to communicate with the world is embedded within social constructs, contexts, and culture, and is continually mediated, changed, and performed through socially negotiated interactions (Diaz, 2007).

The literature demonstrates that when literacy is conceptualized as a social practice, popular culture works as a tool for facilitating a shared construction and understanding of the world by creating communal narratives around which children can gather to test their theories of personhood as they practice being powerful, 'baddies', 'goodies', nurses, doctors, teachers, and parents (Hedges, 2011). By accepting and utilising children's pop culture knowledge in the classroom, educators can "work with, rather than against, peer cultures" (Wholwend, 2017, p. 67), opening opportunities for democratic and socially constructed play and learning. When children are able to draw on their funds of knowledge, which they have already developed through being immersed in popular culture, they are able to think critically and expand on a variety of skills (Hedges, 2011; Hesterman, 2011; Marsh, 2005). Nevertheless, this comes with the caveat that if children do not have access and consequently have no interest in these elements of popular culture – they can experience marginalization; however, some research suggests that children share and transmit narratives willingly to their peers in order to sustain play (Marsh, 2014).

Continued engagement with literacy practices across the home *and* school favours

the reading of various texts.   In early learning environments, access to text is largely print based, whereas in the home, children typically have access to multimodal forms of text like books, television, the internet, and videogames (Shegar & Weninger, 2010).   Shegar and Weninger (2010) found that popular culture spans the home-school divide and narrows the differences between home and school literacy practices by:

> allowing students to make connections to texts they are familiar with seems especially significant for young learners who often grapple with the task of having to separate the different social and discursive domains, such as school and home, in their lives. (p. 434)

When children's pop culture interests are recognized, rather than marginalized, by the field of early childhood education, the purposes of literacy in the classroom align more closely with literacy experiences at home (Marsh, 2005).   Popular culture can nurture children's literacy development.   When teachers examine and explore children's pop culture references, they are able to create curricula that respond to children's interests (Shegar & Weninger, 2010; Hedges, 2011).   This attitude towards education and learning is democratic: negotiated between educator, context, and child(ren), and reflects the reconceptualist goals of the schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy (Edwards et al., 2012) and more locally the British Columbia Early Learning Framework (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2019).   It also provides a wider lens for literacy development that moves beyond monomodal reading and writing to multimodal understandings of, and expression through, various media (Wessel-Powell et al., 2018).

The capacity for popular culture to bring children together holds significant potential for the classroom.   If literacy practices align closely between home and school, children have less work to do in mitigating the differences between two social contexts as children's artefacts of popular culture can be a site of interaction for children who are familiar with the characters and actions that enliven their play.   However, the evaluation and restriction of various media like television and video games is more likely in families of middle and higher classes (Grieshaber et al., 2011), so when educators restrict or ban popular culture from early learning environments, they run the risk of further marginalizing children whose families do not ascribe to 'middle-class' tastes (Wholwend, 2017). Neoliberal politics have created a divide between those who have and those who have not, and in between are educational policies designed to fill children with facts and information that will put them on an equal playing field (Moss & Petrie, 2002).   In theory this sounds equitable, but in practice, children who are white, and who live in better neighbourhoods,

with wealthier and more educated parents, generally score higher on standardized tests[1] than children of lower socio-economic groups (von Stumm, & Plomin, 2015).

This divide between 'high culture' and 'popular culture' runs along class segregation lines and affords more power to those of greater socio-economic status (Shegar & Weninger, 2010). Because pedagogical frameworks are frequently aligned with "middle-class tastes and nostalgia for more agrarian times that disdain mass market products and advanced technologies" (Wohlwend, 2017, p. 65), children's experiences at home might not align with classroom practices. However, when popular culture is incorporated into the learning environment it allows children on the social fringes of their classroom to utilise their knowledge of pop culture as literary resources to gain access to peer play and story-telling situations (Wholwend, 2017). Additionally, research shows that children in working-class households are exposed to more forms of text and therefore have more funds of knowledge to draw upon in the classroom (Grieshaber et al., 2011). Through social interaction, children also engage in "critical discussion of texts" (Shegar & Weninger, 2010, p. 441), which counters the popular perspective that children are passive consumers of pop culture. Through this peer-mediated process of understanding popular culture, children generate a collective and social understanding of what it means to be a person in their classroom, family, and in their wider community.

Conclusion

Much of the research that specifically examines the complex relationships between popular culture and literacy development was conducted prior to 2005, suggesting a need for more current research which might reflect an even more commercialised and digitally infused world. There is a public perception of commercialised icons causing harm to young children by stifling their imaginations or exposing them to violent narratives and stunting their growth and development by molding them into passive consumers. Yet, there is value in the inclusion of children's pop culture interests in the classroom as they may facilitate meeting sites between the home-school divide by drawing on children's varied experiences

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[1] While there is much debate about the value of standardized testing in literacy development, it falls outside of the scope of this literature review.

as scripts for critically engaging with various texts. This inclusion fosters social literacy practices as children play, discuss, write, read, create, and construct meaning about the (highly commercialised) world in which they live.

Through examining the infusion of popular culture across texts, children's application of, and engagement with popular culture, and the impact of including children's pop culture as a social literacy practice, the literature proposes that there is value to the often-dismissed texts of popular culture in the classroom. Popular culture is already alive in classrooms, and this literature review shows that early childhood educators must work to identify their own biases and harness this stream of common knowledge as a tool for supporting children in understanding, interpreting, and communicating with people and the world around them.

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