Multiple literacies in early childhood

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ABSTRACT

In early childhood settings, current conceptualisation’s of children’s literacy learning generally constitute theoretical models ranging from ‘developmental readiness’ to ‘emergent literacy’ (see Teale & Sulzby; 1986; Heath 1982; Clay 1991). Drawing on recent research into literacy practices of early childhood staff, we argue that early childhood educators need to go beyond developmentalist and constructivist models of literacy which categorise cultural and social difference within fixed boundaries as ‘add on’ inclusions to mainstream views of language and literacy learning. Consequently, children who experience literacy other than the dominant English speaking book based literacy practices often become marginalised in this process.

We argue that early childhood education needs to fully embrace more contemporary frameworks of poststructural and critical theory, which emphasise literacy as social and cultural practice. This will provide meaningful and contextual literacy experiences that fully acknowledge children’s multiple literacies such as bilingual / biliteracy experiences, literacies of popular culture and technologies. Drawing on case studies and recent research, we aim to demonstrate how children’s active participation in constructing literacy based knowledge through everyday literacy events of popular culture, technologies and biliteracy experiences, are crucial starting points from which staff can engage and extend children’s literacy learning. Also, we point to the powerful impact that popular culture has on children’s everyday lived experiences, and we describe the significance of critical literacy in providing opportunities for children to critique, deconstruct and reconstruct a range of contemporary popular culture media texts.
Introduction

Within the last twenty years, the impact of new technologies and globalisation has meant that young children today are immersed in a rich variety of literacy experiences, far beyond traditional book based texts. These experiences range from texts of popular culture represented in media and technologies to literacies other than English. In multicultural fast capitalist societies such as Australia, these literacies take on increasingly powerful meanings to children's everyday experiences. It is essential that early childhood educators are aware of the impact and significance of these literacies. We argue that current approaches to literacy education in early childhood settings are often limited in their ability to provide meaningful and contextual learning experiences for children whose literacy practices differ from those of middle class, monolingual mainstream early childhood literacy. We will explore frameworks of poststructural and critical theories, which provide contextually effective starting points to maximize children's social and cultural capital. Contemporary views of literacy as social practice will be highlighted throughout the discussion to emphasise the significance of popular culture and children's diverse literacy practices. Furthermore, we aim to examine the possibilities that critical literacy can offer in providing opportunities for children to critique, deconstruct and reconstruct the range of contemporary popular culture media texts that give such powerful meanings to their lives.

Established early literacy pedagogies.

Dominant 'developmentalist', 'maturationist' and 'emergent literacy' approaches often inform established early literacy pedagogies in early childhood settings. These approaches are conceptualised in developmentalist and constructivist frameworks of children's learning in general and literacy learning in particular. Alloway (1999), argues that while discourses of developmentalism have in recent years been vigorously contested (see Walkerdine 1997; Kessler & Swadener 1992; Fleer 1995). Legacies of developmentalism are still evident in the evaluation of children's literacy achievements. She argues that developmental continua and individual performance are key indicators of success in literacy.

Developmentalist and constructivist models stem from early childhood's historical preoccupation with psychological understandings of the individual child (Alloway 1999).

Constructivist and developmentalist approaches informed by Piagetian discourses of child development reifies childhood as universal predetermined stages of human development through which all children progress (Viruru, in Sloan Canella 1997). As a result, child-centredness, has become a universal and normative truth for pedagogical practice, which implies that children will naturally learn through self-discovery when they are ready. Discursive pedagogies of developmentalism and constructivism emphasise the early years as an unhurried time and as a result many early childhood educators are "reluctant to focus on literacy in their settings for fear of being accused of "pushing" children beyond their developmental readiness"(Jones Diaz, Arthur, Beecher & McNaught 2000).

Emergent literacy approaches emphasise the importance of providing children with print rich environments through which children actively engage in meaningful and purposeful experiences with literacy. While emergent literacy approaches acknowledge everyday functional literacies, such as environmental print, pedagogical practice is largely informed by continua of literacy development based on 'ages and stages' (see Teale & Sulzby...
In addition, discourses of emergent literacy assume that all children learn in universal ways of self-discovery and interaction with environmental print and books. Often conventional English book-based discursive practices are emphasised, such as "correct" book handling, understandings of directionality of print, posture, and "correct" literacy habits. Subsequently, children whose literacy experiences differ from standard English print and text-based literacy practices are often undervalued. As a result, deficit discourses of literacy are applied to these children.

Traditional developmentalist and constructivist models which inform much of early literacy education work in pedagogical ways to privilege children whose literacy practices are congruent with the literacies of dominant monolingual, monocultural, middle class urban communities. Recent Australian studies investigating home, community and prior-to-school literacy practices have revealed that there are many disparities between children's literacy experiences at home and in their communities, and their literacy experiences at the setting. (see Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland, Reid 1998; Makin, Arthur, Beecher, Hayden, Holland, Jones-Diaz & McNaught 1999). In one study, Makin et al (1999), dominant standard English literacy practices based around the use of books, were frequently privileged at the expense of other literacy practices such as those of popular culture, literacies other than English, everyday community literacies and literacies of technology. This research questions the extent to which models of traditional literacy are able to fully embrace cultural and social variations in literacy learning without marginalising children from diverse sociocultural communities (Jones Diaz, Arthur, Beecher & McNaught 2000).

Literacy as social and cultural practice

While conceptualisations of how children learn literacy are located within discourses of developmentalism and constructivism, within recent years, there have been significant reconceptualisations about what constitutes literacy. The works of Cook-Gumperz (1986); Lankshear & Lawler (1987); Gee (1990); Luke (1993) and Muspratt, Luke and Freebody (1997), have been influential here in reframing and broadening our understandings about literacy. Literacy as social practice situates literacy directly in our social worlds, embedded in daily social and cultural practice. It therefore implies that literacy broadly encompasses listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, visual literacies and critical literacies. Literacy is a social tool highly connected to broader social functions, processes and practices. In this way, literacy is not a neutral, independent variable, disconnected from social agendas and social relations (Lankshear & Lawler 1987). It is a social construction used for a variety of sociopolitical and sociocultural objectives, constituted in discourse, social institutions and power relations. "Literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constitute part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values and beliefs" (Gee 1990: 43).

There are many types of literacies available to us, ranging from the literacies of new technologies of internet, email, computer, telecommunications etc to everyday functional community literacies involving maps, timetables, signs and forms. New technologies appear almost every day, often bringing with them new and different social practices and social relations. Everyday functional literacies are often taken for granted because they are highly embedded in daily activities.

It is not surprising then, that children's experiences with these literacies situate them in a variety of social practices that are constantly shifting depending on the social identities and...
power relations within which these literacies operate. Young children's emerging expertise with literacies of technology such as game-boys and computer games, brings them into direct contact with narratives of popular culture which often present gendered and racialised identities. The narratives of popular culture and literacies of technology have a powerful impact on children's material and social relations with peers, teachers and family members. Indeed, their consumption of popular culture fueled by the many hours with TV and video games mediates their understandings about the world. Throughout childhood, "children are immersed in the texts popular culture and their understanding of narrative, of good versus evil, of heroes and heroines, gender, race, and social power, is learned from those texts" (C.Luke 1997: 29).

In multicultural and multilingual communities within Australia, literacies other English are not only functional and everyday, but are also take on increased significance in cultural and linguistic transmission, as well as ethnolinguistic and economic viability. Local economies in diverse linguistic communities are highly productive where economic sustainability and growth is dependent on the use of particular languages other than English.

Bilingual children growing up in bilingual and multilingual communities engage in a variety of literacy practices, which mediate the social relations of everyday life. Learning a minority language and negotiating its use against a back drop of dominant English speaking contexts, has a significant impact on their bilingual identity. Hence, growing up bilingual brings about complex negotiations of social and cultural identity, which involves a process that has profound implications on children's attitudes to their own language and learning of the majority group's language (McNamara 1997).

**Poststructural and critical theories as applied to early literacy**

Poststructural and critical theories are significant to our understandings of literacy as social practice. The interconnections between language and literacy as social meaning systems constructed across a range of social and cultural contexts means that language is never value free. For Bourdieu language is value-laden and culturally expressive according to standards of legitimacy. Standards of legitimacy may vary depending on particular social institutions and social practices. Due to this, he claims that language should be examined in view of the relationships from which it is generated, and within the power relations through which is operates (Grenfell 1998). In contrast, Foucault's work in discourse and subjectivity provides a framework for understanding the relationships between language, social practices and social institutions. Poststructuralist theory emphasises the social constructedness of knowledge and power constituted in discourse (Foucault 1977). Both these theoretical frameworks are useful starting points which effectively inform early literacy pedagogy.

**Discourse and literacy**

Discourses are socially constructed ideologies, values and beliefs systems. Because they are inherently ideological, individuals take up certain positions or locations in discourses which influence the way people think, act and speak. Discourses emphasise the social practices and processes, which are historically and contextually constructed over time to provide a set of meanings about the world. Therefore discourses produce social processes meanings systems which are constituted in language. It is precisely the relationship
between discourse and language, which is of significance here. Meaning systems, beliefs, statements and ways of thinking which express social values are constructed in discourse. Consequently, thought is not only constrained by but also produced through discourse (Ball 1990).

In contemporary society, discourses of literacy are linked directly to social, cultural and historical constructions and uses of literacy. Due to this, it is crucial that early childhood educators are able to understand the broader sociological and historical influences that implicate the use of literacy. Discourses around literacy influence and shape our understandings about the ways in which children learn literacy. Therefore, dominant discourses of literacy produced in Western urbanised print saturated societies rely on common sense and taken-for-granted definitions of literacy as reading and writing. As Cook-Gumperz (1987:17) argues "our conception of literacy is inseparable from the specific circumstance of our historical context". It is not surprising, then, that dominant discourses of literacy are often representative of particular historical, political and economical circumstances.

It is essential that early childhood educators develop insights into the social constructedness of literacy, which situates children's experiences of literacy far beyond traditional frameworks of developmentalist, constructivist and emergent literacy approaches. Children's literacy practices do not occur in isolation, but rather are inextricably bound to broader social practices and discourses important to their families and communities.

**Bourdieu's theory of practice**

Bourdieu 's critical perspectives of language and the ways in which it operates in education have much to offer early childhood education. He proposes a theory of practice, which explains how educational practices reproduce social and cultural power to privilege some groups and marginalise others. Bourdieu uses concepts such as field and capital as metaphors for an 'economic system'. This provides a way of understanding social practice as an exchange and conversion of social, political and economic power depending on the validity and legitimacy of an individual's social and cultural power in any given field.

In the social field of early childhood education there are certain practices and ideologies about children and learning that are valued and upheld as 'truths'. Traditional constructivist and developmentalist theories assume that all children bring to settings certain levels of knowledge and linguistic resources that have been carefully 'nurtured' in children's homes. These linguistic resources used to communicate thoughts, feelings, opinions is what Bourdieu calls cultural / linguistic capital. However, educational settings tend to operate as if all children have equal access to these resources and as a result "reproduce arrangements that are favourable to some and unfavourable to other groups, by placing their assessments of success on children's possession of this cultural capital, although it is unequally available" (Corson 1998:9).

The cultural and linguistic capital constituted in book based English speaking literacy practices is often valorised. The literacy practices of early childhood settings most often represent those from dominant Anglo-middle class monolingual families giving meaning and voice to their experiences and silences to other experiences. This was evident in recent research conducted in NSW prior-to-school setting in which many staff tended to
evaluate children with successful literacy practices as those practices congruent with their own (Makin et al 1999). 'Other' literacy practices (or linguistic capital), such as children's knowledge of literacies other than English and the literacies of technology and popular culture were regularly dismissed by staff as not relevant or detrimental to children's literacy learning (Jones Diaz et al 2000).

The distribution of linguistic capital is connected in a variety of ways to the distribution of other forms of capital such as economic, social and symbolic, which give individuals a location in any given social field (Thompson in Bourdieu 1991). The location of an individual in a social field depends on exchange value. Bourdieu uses the notion of social fields to argue that certain kinds of capital have relative exchange value. Young children move across a number of social fields, such as day care, playgroup, church, extended family etc, accumulating different types of capital. However some of these social fields, such as day care or preschool do not give currency to the primary linguistic habitus of children from diverse sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds, resulting in an exchange for other forms of linguistic capital. For example for bilingual children, the home language represents a useful commodity of exchange for English, often at the expense of the home language.

Children's knowledge about and expertise in the narratives of popular culture texts are good examples of cultural capital. The cultural capital generated in knowing the narratives of popular culture becomes 'situated expertise' or 'funds of knowledge'. Children make use of this capital to readily construct their own meanings of Spiderman, Batman or Barbie etc. Nevertheless, many early childhood staff ignore children's high levels of engagement in popular culture, although families do appear to know about and understand the significance of these experiences (Makin et al 1999).

Social capital is having access to social institutions, social relations and networks as a result of group membership. It provides resources that enable individuals or groups access to a network of social and institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). For example, the social and cultural capital generated through Pokémon can promote children's social networks as they engage in complex talk about the different moves, battles and characteristics applicable to the 150 or so different types of Pokémon. Entry into these social networks is easier for children if they have some social knowledge or social capital in popular culture areas. For instance, the child who knows the Pokémon cast of many characters has useful and desired information when joining the play of others where this particular popular culture theme has currency.

However, children don't necessarily need to be in possession of the actual cards to have this knowledge. The social practices which Pokémon produces become exchange value in social fields where it is given relative value. The social field of a child care setting may undervalue or even dismiss children's knowledge of Pokémon as having any significance in making friends or extending to literacy. In contrast, in the social field of children's birthday parties Pokémon cards are often the favoured birthday gift and hence the dominant topic of conversation. The social networks that children develop as a result of trading and talking about Pokémon are significant. Consequently, the cultural and social capital derived from children's expertise in texts of popular culture will hold little value in social fields (such as early childhood setting) which disallow or ban children's use of these texts.
Adult's appropriation of children's popular culture is often deemed unworthy and illegitimate by those in positions of power and authority. Many educators, academics and sometimes family members devalue or scorn popular culture that has become part of children's social practices and play. Early childhood settings seldom extend on children's strong interests in texts of popular culture (Makin et al. 1999). These particular popular culture interests are regarded as children's 'other' interests and subsequently are not usually seen as part of the validated curriculum. For example, children's awareness of adults' disapproval of Pokémon cards has meant that many children take to keeping the action toys and trading cards hidden in their pockets. Hence, a type of 'underground' social practice is taken up to avoid disapproval and marginalisation from adults.

**Significance of popular culture**

Popular culture relates to the meanings and social practices that people construct from the world they live in. Popular culture is more than a single phenomenon; rather there are many differences in popular culture practices amongst people in part related to their gender, class, 'race', ethnicity, and regional locations. The popular culture practices are lived experiences of people. People encounter and respond differently to their life experiences, as individuals and groups. People socially construct and regulate their knowledge and desire as well as their individual and group identities based on these experiences (Giroux & Simon 1989).

In popular culture, there are many mass produced and mass distributed products (toys, videos, films, books, television programs, cartoons, logos for clothing and other items, etc) that impact on our daily lives. These products depend on fast capitalist globalized economies of production, consumption and distribution to make profit. However, these items in themselves are not popular culture practice. What people, both adults and children, construct with them actually constitutes the popular culture practices, i.e. patterns and images of social activity as well as forming individual and group identities. Therefore there is no singular popular culture, rather many popular cultural practices demonstrated by individuals and groups.

**Popular culture and young children**

For children, play means pleasure and fun and so popular culture and play are closely linked. Popular culture offers many potential contexts, ideas, characters and narratives for children to utilise and innovate in their own play as they construct their own popular culture practices. It is likely that within popular culture play children experience strong empowerment and engagement. Popular culture offers children a major source of knowledge to authorise their voices. They retell narratives and events or utilise characters and language of popular culture texts as they use these funds of knowledge to give authority to their own voices. They often reinvent the narratives based on the knowledge they have acquired from sites of popular culture with the others in their social groupings.

Popular culture has become part of daily life. It is a powerful and highly regular event in the lives of children. There are often many representations of popular culture in their homes and communities, since the mass production and distribution of popular culture products to children and families is of huge proportions and often transmitted electronically. Young children have become profitable marketing targets and consumers by advertisers and
manufacturers. The range of linked items include toys, videos, CD ROMS, DVDs, books, films as well as logos and symbols on clothing, other toys, food and so on.

**Accessibility of popular culture texts**

Children's and adults' participation in globalised media events occur daily due to "today's mass social educator" and our engagement with the "public pedagogies of media lessons" (C. Luke 1997: 25 -26). TV frames much of our social reality and more so than books "TV knowledge cuts across the boundaries of class, gender, race, nationality and geography" (Lull 1990, cited in Luke 1997:25). The extent to which children participate in these 'public pedagogies' is highlighted in Luke's research (1990b) in which she claims that children watch on average between 18 - 30 hours of TV a week. By the age of 18, children have spent 14,000 hours watching TV, compared to 12,000 in the classroom.

Since a great deal of popular culture texts and images come from TV, children's access to the narratives of popular culture is readily available despite the financial costs involved in purchasing expensive and strongly marketed items. While popular culture may come free to air, the linked products, are far from cheap. For example, Teletubbies items of magazines, mugs, plates, blankets, towels, t-shirts, dolls and so on range from $7.95 dollars to $89.90 dollars. The pressure on children and families to know about popular culture items, because everyone's talking about it, often compels parents to purchase items in order to find out. "These everyday consumer and social practices constitute the lived reality and material relations between parents and children" (C. Luke 1992: 29).

Despite the fact that children are efficient 'readers' of popular culture with an opinion about it, adults who find it objectionable or politically suspect may deny children's access to these narratives through either banning the programs or not purchasing popular culture items. However, the fact that children are alert and focused readers of popular culture enables them to learn from their peers about characters, actions, feelings and narratives etc. Minimal engagement is often sufficient enough to participate with others as they talk about it or incorporate it into their play.

**Critical literacy and popular culture**

Texts of popular culture and the media have a significant and powerful influence in our daily life. TV is a clear example of how normative and dominant discourses of social realities are represented. Luke (1997) claims that domestic pets appear on screen more frequently than people of colour and that Indigenous Australians are almost always absent. "Apparently they do not eat, drive cars, or live in any of our neighbourhoods. As one senior advertising executive said, 'if we showed Aborigines eating...biscuits, nobody would buy them'" (Luke 1997:26). Evidently, according to our TV screens, Australians from diverse sociocultural groups sing whilst eating pizza or noodles, they don't buy cars, or have important jobs, or solve complex political and social problems.

Clearly, the meanings in popular culture, most readily accessible via TV, constitute gendered and racialized meanings which give shape to children's emerging sociocultural identities. Normative discourses of femininity, masculinity and the nuclear family are regularly presented in the narratives of Disney-land, Land Before Time, Macdonald's, Simpson's etc, while privilege and voice is often appropriated to dominant cultural groups, silencing minority sociocultural identities. Furthermore gendered discourses produced
through *Barbie*, *Baby-Born*, *Action Man*, *Beast Wars* etc, socially construct normative ways of being a man or woman, at the expense of multiple social realities and identities.

Educators can not ignore the influence of these texts by taking the high moral ground in banning children from bringing the toys, videos and computer games to the setting, or disregarding children's knowledge as valid and worthy of discussion and critique. The material relations (ie purchasing, packaging, consumption, mass production) and economic implications and social relations produced through children's consumption and absorption of popular culture should be of major concern to early childhood educators as they work closely with families and communities.

The challenge for early childhood educators is to find ways of valorising the social and cultural capital from which children's expertise with popular culture is produced, while simultaneously extending this to literacy. Critical literacy provides a pedagogy of critique through which children are given opportunities to "approach meanings represented in texts more critically, rather than benignly taking them for granted" (Jones Diaz et al 2000). Critical literacy encourages children to critique, deconstruct and reconstruct sanctioned and popular texts and their cultural and social contexts (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody 1997). It involves deconstructing the ideological dimensions of texts in order to reveal whose interests are being served (Hall 1998). However in order for this to occur, adults working with children need to adopt a critical disposition or critical eye that interrogates the social, cultural and power relations that structure the everyday social practices and identities in young children's lives.

**Research findings from the Early Literacy and Social Justice Project**

The University of Western Sydney, University of Newcastle and Macquarrie University are involved in a joint research project entitled *Early Literacy and Social Justice*. This project commenced in 1998 and is funded by the Departments of Community Services and Education and Training in N.S.W. Stage 1 involved research into literacy practices in early childhood settings situated in predominantly low socio-economic areas. The findings from Stage 1 led to an early literacy professional development initiative that was piloted in Stage 2 of the project. Currently a professional development package *Literacies, Communities and Under 5s* is in production.

**Findings from Stage 1**

Stage 1 of the *Early Literacy and Social Justice Project* included focus group discussions with parents, interviews with staff working with the 4-5 year old children and observations of the literacy environments in early childhood settings. One of the key findings was the wide divergence between parents’ and early childhood staff’s views on what constitutes literacy and the role of technology and popular culture in young children's literacy learning. Staff generally focused on book based literacy in English, ignoring and often devaluing multiple literacies of technology, popular culture and in languages other than English. These findings are reported in full in *Mapping literacy practices in early childhood services*, Makin et al 1999.

In focus group discussions parents were clearly able to identify the multiple ways in which children engaged in everyday literacy events in their home language and English. Examples included reading and viewing street, shop and advertising signs; writing on
greeting cards; and reading and viewing maps, magazines and newspapers. Parents were also aware of the role of popular culture and technology in young children's literacy learning, and noted the speed at which children were learning literacy with the assistance of technologies such as television, videos, computer games and game-boys. Bilingual parents appreciated the role that technologies such as computers, television, videos and game-boys played in children's development of English. One parent stated

_I get K. to play on some of the computer games...from there he learned how to pronounce it (English) right._

While parents' views of literacy focused on literacy as social practice, the early childhood staff interviewed tended to hold more traditional and narrow views of literacy as reading and writing. Interviews and observations indicated that staff generally valorised literacy practices in English and with books. Judgements of children's literacy expertise were often based around children's familiarity with and ability to "handle" books in English, with linguistic capital in languages other than English, or involving popular culture or technology, being dismissed or devalued. One staff member commented

_Mum makes a big deal and 'oh, he can write his name', but it turns out to be on the computer. When he comes in to do it here he has no idea. He might write an M._

Observations of early childhood settings found that staff did not acknowledge or extend on children's interest in and expertise with environmental print, popular culture or technology, thus limiting opportunities for children to display their cultural, social and linguistic capital in these areas. Early childhood environments generally provided few opportunities for children to engage in literacy as social practice. For example literacy artifacts such as food packages, recipes, notebooks and pens were not generally added to dramatic play contexts or if they were in 78% of cases staff did not join in literacy interactions with children (Makin et al 1999). Literacy was also not generally incorporated into routines. Few settings paid attention to environmental print at meal and snack time, or engaged children in the process of writing notes to parents about their experiences during the day. A number of early childhood staff banned popular culture artifacts and dramatic play based around characters such as Power Rangers and Batman and made deliberate choices not to incorporate technology into the program. 29% of settings did not utilise technology, including television, video and computers and where technology was available staff did not consider it to be a literacy learning tool (Makin et al 1999). Many settings did not have a computer, with a number of staff stating that they did not see that computers had a place in early childhood programs.

When staff were asked what they knew about children's home and community experiences with literacy 30% indicated that they did not know what happens at home. Other staff believed that they did know what happens, but they often based their assumptions on observations of children rather than conversations with parents. A total of 19% of staff held deficit assumptions about children's home experiences, and made statements such as "not much is happening at home with literacy". Not reading to children was highlighted by 12% of staff as a concern. These staff members believed that the role of the early childhood setting and school was to compensate for the deficiencies of the home environment. Typical comments included
“Not much is going on in the home, usually just watching TV - this (early childhood setting) is the place for literacy development. It's here or nowhere.”

Parents may not model appropriate reading skills themselves to the children, they wouldn't be aware that it was a good thing to show the children how to read the books.

Maybe a handful of the kids in my class ... might be read to every night or not at all. And usually what they get here is all what they get.

When they come to us (at the preschool at four years of age) they are four years behind.

When asked their opinion about children's maintenance of the home language many staff expressed the view that this is important, although most staff saw it as the role of the family. There were few links between bilingual children's experiences with language and literacy at home and in their communities and those experiences provided in early childhood settings. Observations of playrooms indicated that oral and written texts in community languages other than English were not included in 77% of early childhood settings, even when the majority of children came from bilingual backgrounds (Makin et al 1999).

A number of staff had limited understandings of the role of first language in second language learning and some expressed negative views about children's bilingualism. Contrary to research findings, some staff believed that learning a language other than English was detrimental to children's English language development. Typical comments included

A lot of the kids go to (home language) schools as well as here. And I think that could be confusing for them, because we have a lot of problems with them writing back to front.

The children may have problems in English then (when they start school) because they have done so much with their home language.

We don't encourage them (NESB parents) to do a lot with their children at home because their pronunciation of English words is not clear.

Findings from Stage 2

As a result of the findings from Stage 1 of the Early Literacy and Social Justice Project, five Core Principles for early literacy, underpinned by the notion of literacy as social practice, were developed. These principles are

1. Exchanging information with families
2. Building on information

3. Planning for individual literacies

4. Integrating literacy experiences throughout the day

5. Scaffolding literacy understandings

A pilot professional development program based on these principles was implemented with a group of sixteen settings from Stage 1 over two terms at the end of 1999. The emphasis was on setting staff, parents and university consultants working collaboratively to develop contextually relevant approaches in relation to each principle. The findings from Stage 2 are reported in McNaught, Clugston, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz, Ashton, Hayden and Makin 2000.

As a result of participation in the pilot early literacy professional development program, the majority of staff broadened their understandings of literacy to encompass the notion of literacy as social practice. As a result staff incorporated everyday functional literacy artifacts and experiences, such as toy catalogues, train tickets, recipe books, food packages and street signs, into the program throughout the day.

While staff generally embraced the notion of literacy as social practice, attitudes, knowledge and practices in relation to the inclusion of popular culture, technology and languages other than English were not as easy to change. In a number of settings there was resistance from staff to the inclusion of popular culture, and to a lesser extent technology, in the program. In other cases staff’s attitudes and practices were beginning to change. In some settings staff invited parents to bring in resources that reflected their home language and were overwhelmed with the response. These resources, including food packaging, newspapers and magazines, were incorporated into children’s play experiences and enabled children to make many connections between their homes and communities and the early childhood setting.

A number of staff commented that they had begun to rethink their attitudes to the role of television, video and popular culture texts in the early childhood curriculum.

Things like the use of equipment like videos and televisions which I kind of tend to think is ‘Oh no no no no, we shouldn't have that’. I started to rethink the use of that. I've started to think may be there's a place and maybe we should do a bit more of those sort of things.

The kids in my room are really interested in reading and looking through toy catalogues.

I'm not so much a snob about good literature (now).

We use our computer a lot more now, we probably use it everyday now, where we only used it every couple of days before. They can get in and out of it because they have had more practice because I thought of it as more of a benefit to their literacy.
Staff who had begun to find out about the popular culture and technology that were important in children's everyday lives were more likely to find a place for them in the program and to see their literacy learning potential. At other settings staff did not express an interest in finding out more about popular culture. One staff member commented "I don't have time to tune into them (Pokémon and Tarzan were given as examples) and it's very difficult to click into an understanding of what is out there". Another staff member expressed the view that the use of popular culture would never be considered a valid early childhood practice. One staff member commented

*Power Rangers is definitely out. We don't talk about Power Rangers in our preschool!* 

Some staff members saw the potential of computers as a tool for literacy and incorporated them into the program while others expressed concerns about the use of computers in early childhood settings. In these programs computers were one of the many experiences provided for children where children were able to interact in small groups and scaffold each other's learning. Staff members who were reluctant to incorporate computers into the program expressed concerns that children's play time would be lost and that computer experiences isolated children from their peers.

*I think that valuable time would be lost if we actually installed a computer. I feel that the social skills that are lost in that time frame are far too important in early childhood to have some child sitting in front of a computer.*

**Case study - B. LDC**

The centre is situated in a low socio-economic area of Sydney that has a high percentage of children from bilingual backgrounds. The staff have strong partnerships with families and staff view bilingualism as an advantage.

At the end of the professional development pilot the teacher and assistant working with 4-5 year olds had incorporated a range of multiple literacies into the program, including literacies in languages other than English, popular culture texts and artefacts and were beginning to incorporate aspects of critical literacy.

Staff promoted the use of children's home and community languages within the program and as a result of the professional development extended on the use of resources that reflected children's home and community languages. This included children's books and videos as well as bilingual newspapers and magazines. The dramatic play area was set up as a restaurant and incorporated resources such as menus and food packages brought from home and available in the local community. When families were approached to contribute resources to the program they responded enthusiastically. A staff member commented

*when I actually said to them (families) 'you know you can bring in stuff from home that's actually got Chinese writing on them or Arabic writing', and like we just had this loads of stuff all coming through which was good and they*
were really happy to bring it in and then that got the kids involved as well

because they’d say 'oh we had this for dinner last night'.

Other practices reflecting changed attitudes of this kind included using staff members as resources and planned use of bilingual staff to speak with children when playing at a group time. This staff member explained her strategies which often lead to co-operative team planning and professional development.

I will get the Chinese speaking children together and get a staff member who speaks Chinese to take a group with them.

I was getting her (Chinese-speaking staff member) to bring things from home, explain to me actually different signs, we'd put up around the setting in different languages exactly the way the different scripts went and explaining the characters to me but I was actually getting her to do them within a group with children as well.

Previous attitudes to popular culture and the changes in practice which were slowly beginning to emerge as a result of new knowledge and changing attitudes.

The Pokémon cards have been arriving everyday and rather than go, 'Oh God those fighting things', I just sit down with them and they tell me all about these attack skills. I think that maybe I'm going to have to be a bit more integrating of that in the activities.

The popular culture stuff that we actually did was always such a 'no, no' and a taboo subject around long day care centres and now I've actually found ways of using it in a really, really healthy way... like they're learning out of it (sic) as well.

The staff recognised the learning potential of popular culture in in one case assisted the children make links between Pokémon characters and facts of natural science. Popular culture texts such as Star Wars and Bart Simpson were added to the reading area and Pokémon artifacts incorporated in a number of curriculum areas. For example, Pokémon figurines were added to the play-dough area. The children responded enthusiastically to this experience and engaged in extended play, where there was a great deal of verbal interaction. The children acted out stories where they were able to draw on their cultural and linguistic capital in the area of Pokémon.

Conclusion

The role of popular culture in children's literacy learning and its potential to engage children in aspects of critical literacy is an area that needs further research. Literacy experiences that draw on children's home and community experiences provide opportunities for all children to engage in sustained interactions with literacy that build on their social, cultural and linguistic capital. The challenge for early childhood educators is to find out about children's multiple literacies and integrate these into the program.
References


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