Rethinking Sponge Bob and Ninja Turtles:
Popular culture as funds of knowledge for curriculum co-construction

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CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN POPULAR culture was clear in my study of interests-based curriculum. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, it was a contentious site of curriculum co-construction. This article explores this tension. It argues that interpreting popular culture as ‘funds of knowledge’ might assist teachers to consider a different view of this interest and its potential for curriculum experiences. Examples from four-year-old children and their teachers at a sessional public kindergarten are discussed. Changes in teachers’ understandings and practices related to popular culture, that may have transferability to other settings, are described.

Introduction

Building curriculum on children's interests is an established practice in early childhood education. Yet little research has examined the nature of children’s interests and whose and which teachers choose to build curriculum. This paper reports on one aspect of a study of interests-based curriculum in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Hedges, 2007). ‘Funds of knowledge’ (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005a) formed a conceptual framework to explain children's interests. From a sociocultural perspective, I argue in this paper that viewing popular culture as funds of knowledge may be a way for teachers to engage meaningfully with children's interest in media-based culture.

Literature review

Sociocultural perspectives of knowledge

Sociocultural perspectives of knowledge are described as knowledge founded on the social values and history of a culture, and the underpinning beliefs (Case, 1996). Sociocultural theory represents various viewpoints and inspires researchers to extend their methodologies and interpretations (Rogoff, 1998). Sociocultural approaches to research study learners’ participation in activities that involve both the contributions of individuals and those of other people, cultural institutions and artefacts.

Two major branches of sociocultural theory have been identified. The first, commonly known as sociocultural or social-constructivist, emphasises language and forms of understanding embedded in social and cultural contexts, relationships and practices. The second is that of cultural-historical activity theory. This theory emphasises practical activities and cultural practices in shaping learning. Both branches have developed Vygotsky’s seminal ideas by enabling researchers to focus on sociocultural activity as the unit of analysis and emphasising the learning inherent in any context. More recently, Fleer (2010) uses the term ‘cultural-historical theory’ to bring together salient aspects of both theories and the conceptual learning potential of children’s play. Sociocultural/cultural-historical theories accentuate the importance of recognising and building on children’s family and community learning and knowledge.

Further, culturally valued knowledge is commonly defined within knowledge domains such as literacy, numeracy and science. Wood (2009) provides a vignette that illustrates the broad extent of children’s domain knowledge related to fire-fighting gleaned from a television program, Fireman Sam. The prevalence of television programs, movies, computers, advertising, toys and artefacts aimed at children has grown rapidly in the past 20 years (Kincheloe, 2002; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004).
Given that sociocultural perspectives view learning as socially and culturally situated and mediated, popular culture and associated technologies are elements of children’s everyday life experiences (Marsh, 2005; Zevenbergen, 2007) that have become a ‘media-created electronic ZPD’ (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004, p. 14). Research has demonstrated how incorporation of aspects of children’s popular culture experienced at home can be used to motivate and extend children’s literacy learning in the centre setting (Arthur, 2001; Marsh, 2000). Marsh’s study utilised children’s interest in the television program Teletubbies to extend and promote participation in language and literacy experiences.

However, teacher beliefs are well established as an influential construct on approaches to education (Pajares, 1992; Raths, 2001). Teachers’ own experiences of play and their beliefs about popular culture are likely to be influential on how popular culture is engaged with in curriculum. Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2003) found that some teachers perceived their own experiences of play as the ideal and that contemporary play, such as watching television or using computers, was ‘dangerous’ (p. 5). Sandberg and Vuorinen (2008) also established that teachers believed popular culture limited children’s play. Similarly, Zevenbergen (2007) illustrates how young children’s experiences with technology-related popular culture are vastly different from those of their teachers, recommending that early childhood pedagogical practices be re-thought to take account of these changes.

The belief that popular culture has a negative impact on children’s learning and behaviour appears to have become widely accepted within early childhood education. Children sense this from teachers and parents. Consequently children may become secretive in carrying on play influenced by popular culture, while teachers struggle to consider how best to respond (Giugni, 2006). Marsh (2005) notes that causal claims, such as that playing violent computer games leads to violent play and behaviours, are yet to be supported by research evidence. She further argues that such discourse requires challenging as teachers consider how popular culture affects children’s lives. A rethinking of popular culture is therefore proposed in this paper.

**Popular culture as ‘funds of knowledge’**

González and colleagues (2005a) developed from Vygotskian and sociocultural theoretical perspectives a positive view of the diverse everyday knowledge and experiences found in families in their concept of ‘funds of knowledge’.

The concept of funds of knowledge … is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge (González et al., 2005b, pp. ix, emphasis in original).

González et al. define funds of knowledge as the bodies of knowledge, including information, skills and strategies, which underlie household functioning, development and wellbeing. These may include information, ways of thinking and learning, approaches to learning, and practical skills. Examples include shopping, meal preparation, socialising with wider family and community members, and participation in sports, music and art activities. Moll (2005) makes an important proviso relevant to this paper. He notes that the concept is dynamic, as it changes and evolves with new circumstances and cultures. Popular culture was justified as funds of knowledge in my study and re-thought as a site of curriculum co-construction.

**Methodology**

My study of interests-based curriculum included exploration of the following questions:

1. In what ways do teachers recognise and engage with children’s interests in relation to children’s experiences and funds of knowledge?
2. How do teachers choose whose and which interests will be engaged with in building a sociocultural curriculum during both planned and spontaneous teaching and learning interactions?

I used qualitative, interpretivist approaches (Flick, 2006). The main data generation technique was participant observation in children’s natural learning settings for an extended period. Field notes recorded evidence of children’s interests and inquiries and how children’s interests were enacted, recognised and engaged with by teachers. Interviews, facilitated inquiry sessions with teachers, and curriculum documentation were further sources of data. Children’s and parents’ perspectives were incorporated through interviews undertaken in family homes. Ethical principles according to the criteria of the approving university guided the conduct of the study, alongside attention to the complexities of engaging with human participants, particularly children aged less than five years.

Children’s references to popular culture were the most numerous in my data. At first, I simply analysed popular culture as one of children’s interests. However, a closer examination revealed that children’s interest in popular culture was not often about popular culture characters, scripts or games per se. Interpreting the data from a sociocultural perspective enabled me to recognise that popular culture represented something that influenced children’s language, play, relationships and behaviour in ways consistent with the concept of funds of knowledge. Findings in relation to popular culture at one of the case settings, Takapuna Kindergarten, are reported in this paper. Takapuna Kindergarten was a sessional (half-day attendance) public kindergarten.
for three- and four-year-olds. Three teachers and 45 four-year-old children attended the morning session I participated in each week for one year.

Findings

Children’s interest in popular culture

Children often brought items to the kindergarten that represented their interests, such as books, toys and photos. This was an established way in which teachers recognised and acted on children’s interests. However, sometimes items brought from home were not acknowledged in any depth, particularly if they represented popular culture; for example, a toy from a current movie. Such items were brought out at group times but commonly returned to children’s bags afterwards rather than utilised as part of the curriculum.

In play and conversations, children revealed the sources of popular culture interests as including television programs, movies, technology-based games and fast-food restaurants. Popular culture provided a unique way for children to transform participation in activities. Specific examples related to boys’ dramatic play as superheroes and the physical exuberances and skills involved. Their knowledge of characters, roles, vehicles, clothing and the rules of these games were consistent.

Showing evidence of the power of merchandising, many children brought drink bottles with characters such as SpongeBob Squarepants (SBSP) printed on them. Originally containing sugary drinks, these were sold at cafés and supermarkets and were a good size for re-use as water bottles. Continuing with the example of SBSP:

Tom’s friend proudly shows me a sticker he has on his tee-shirt of SBSP. He tells me he had to go to the doctor to get some eye drops and he got this for being brave.

A student teacher left a gift after her practicum—a SBSP memory game. Children often chatted together about television programs or DVDs of SBSP they had watched recently. Children’s conversations about planned birthday celebrations frequently involved fast-food restaurants or themed parties or cakes—Tom planned a SBSP one.

Sewing capes became a long-term project at the kindergarten. This was initiated by Ben, who wanted to have a cape similar to those worn by two other boys at the centre. The teachers took pains to tell me that Ben’s motivation was about becoming friends with these boys, not to acquire a superhero identity. However, much of the subsequent play enacted by children who made capes utilised scripts and themes from popular culture.

Several families mentioned children’s watching television and videos at home. For example, during the family interview, Leah and Greta’s mother spoke about the influence of television on the children’s play and language, including their use of American accents. Leah and Greta’s imaginative, dramatic play at kindergarten often reflected popular culture characters and themes, and understanding of family roles and responsibilities, testing out fears and risk-taking dispositions.

Popular culture: A contentious site of curriculum co-construction

Despite its popularity with children as an interest, popular culture was a contentious site of curriculum co-construction between children and teachers. It has long been recognised that as young children process the wide range of information and experiences they are exposed to they often transform them in ways adults view as inappropriate (Corsaro, 1985).

Children’s play and conversation influenced by popular culture was often deflected or diverted by both children and teachers. Children then waited until the teacher had left to resume their play.

Tom and two friends are playing with Mobilo. Trevor tells me they are playing Ninja Turtles and building planes that will shoot boomers out of the sky at baddies. Christine approaches and asks about their construction. She talks to them about transformers that change capability. Gary tells her they are boomers.

Christine asks what it booms out and Gary responds: Poo.
Christine: That’d be pretty messy; who’s going to clean it up?
Gary: The robot.
Christine: Couldn’t it boom out something more interesting, like chocolate? She leaves.
After a small period of silence, Gary says: Guess what I’m making, Thomas?
Tom: What?
Gary: A transformer.

The only occasion I noted in which teachers used popular culture positively in their interactions was as motivation for locating particular fish species during an excursion. This example relates to the movie Finding Nemo.

Outside is an aquarium, and Christine has asked the children to spot Nemo and Dory. Shannon spots Dory and points her out to me; a friend helps him find Nemo at the other end.

Closer examination of the data suggested that children’s interest in popular culture was not always about popular culture per se, but about the funds of knowledge-related actions, behaviours and values gleaned from...
popular culture and represented in their play, learning and relationships. In relation to learning the knowledge and skills of family and community, wellbeing and functioning, the following were commonly enacted through the use of popular culture as an element of play: communicating and testing information and understandings about adult roles, and acceptability of social norms/rules, values and behaviours. These included friendship, risk taking, danger, good, evil, and helping others. There were also elements of humour and playfulness as children engaged in exploration of gender roles and identity. Popular culture in the form of varying artefacts therefore provided opportunities to learn about such things as physical and emotional wellbeing, identity and making sense of the world and people. These findings are also consistent with Giugni (2006) and Marsh (2005), who demonstrated that children use popular culture and media at home to form social relationships, for identity construction, development of language and literacy skills and knowledge, to access information, and for enjoyment.

**Teachers’ changes to practices related to popular culture**

Popular culture appeared, in essence, to be undermined as a powerful source of co-constructing curriculum that reflected children’s interest in developing knowledge about human responsibilities and behaviours. As part of the study, teachers were provided with copies of my field notes. During data analysis, teachers reflected on their challenging popular culture as an interest.

In this case, teachers recognised popular culture as a strong interest of children that they were not appreciating or acting on, more often querying or redirecting instead. Thus, they began to change their thinking and responses, and began to consider its potential for building curriculum. Aspects of teaching practice were subsequently altered.

Christine: … I have become very aware of how important that pop culture is and it came through the discussion I had about the castle and then about the dragon, and as I listened to the children talking about how to kill a dragon, I could relate it to all the movies I’ve seen on how to kill a dragon. So, yes, you have to go and see Madagascar; we need to. When I’m sick I try to watch the children’s programs so I can see what’s coming through in their play, because to understand their play one has to have knowledge of their play.

As noted earlier, teacher beliefs are well established as a powerful basis of teacher decision making and action. One belief related to children’s interests was that they were used to encourage perceived ‘gaps’, or extend learning into other culturally valued areas, rather than extend or encourage the interest per se.

Theresia: … we’ll say okay for this child because we know them so well, here is the big grey area … so for me then, using the child’s centre of interest to build the curriculum for them is I’m going to use what you’re interested in to build this whole [child], …The interest is the vehicle then to make the learning happen.

In this way, and in keeping with previous studies (Arthur, 2001; Marsh, 2000), Tom’s and Gary’s interest in Ninja Turtles was used to extend them in literacy.

Theresia tells me they made a book last week; they drew lots of Ninja Turtles pictures, told a story which they wrote, and spiral-bound it. They each took it home to read with their parents.

**Discussion and implications for practice**

**Using popular culture in curriculum**

Corsaro (1985) pointed out that adults often dismiss as unimportant what they do not agree with or understand about children’s behaviour and interests. The process of challenging teacher beliefs about popular culture may, as in this instance, best come from teachers reflecting on evidence of their own practice. Teachers might be encouraged to analyse children’s interest in popular culture in a more meaningful way in order to engage with children’s underlying inquiry into what characteristics and qualities make a well-rounded, contributing member of a family, community, culture and society. Teachers can use popular culture to develop children’s funds of knowledge in the centre setting.

Moreover, perhaps teachers might be helped to realise that their own childhood experiences are very different from those of the children they teach. Sandberg and Pramling Samuelson’s (2003) study is evidence that some teachers may need to confront and re-examine their idealised beliefs about play. Basing their beliefs and values on negative views of technology, or interpreting children’s interest in popular culture disapprovingly, ignores the reality of children’s lives that teachers purport to seek to engage with.

Advertisers and marketers have connected children to the power of popular culture; it is up to adults to use this productively to assist children’s opportunities to learn. Alongside evidence of extending children in knowledge domains such as literacy, children learn about physical and emotional wellbeing, identity and making sense of the world and its people. Teachers might then also be able to engage in discussions with children about issues related to identity, fairness and justice on which popular culture may encourage a focus, such as gender and gendered roles and expectations, ethnicity and equity, using critical theory (MacNaughton, 2009). Later in children’s schooling, discussions about notions of
democracy, citizenship, corporatization, globalisation, consumerism, resources and power could be related to their early experiences with popular culture.

Conclusion

Sociocultural perspectives view learning as socially and culturally situated and mediated. Active participation in learning experiences enables children to participate increasingly effectively in their communities. Reflecting on data generated by a researcher, teachers in this study of children’s interests gained a different insight into the concepts of popular culture and funds of knowledge that altered their teaching practices. Thomson (2002) provides two hypothetical cases of children about to start school, detailing their ‘virtual school bag full of things they have already learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live’ (p. 1). Thomson shows how the culture of the school determines whether or not the child gets to open the bag and make use of its contents. I have argued that early childhood teachers may need to examine their beliefs and practices in relation to popular culture in light of contemporary childhood experiences. Viewing popular culture as funds of knowledge from a sociocultural perspective might enable early childhood teachers to engage productively with children’s technology-based interests. If teachers overlook children’s interest in popular culture, they may be ignoring a rich source with which to engage and overlook children’s interest in popular culture, they may need to examine their beliefs and practices in relation to popular culture in light of contemporary childhood experiences. Viewing popular culture as funds of knowledge from a sociocultural perspective might enable early childhood teachers to engage productively with children’s technology-based interests. If teachers overlook children’s interest in popular culture, they may be ignoring a rich source with which to engage and extend children’s knowledge and understandings.

References:


