Everything is Awesome;

Bridging Youth Culture and Literacy Curricula through the use of LEGO®

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Problem Statement

Literacy education needs more research, information, and data on the out-of-school practices that children, youth, and adolescents engage in, in order for teachers to plan and implement a curriculum where home and school literacy activities are effectively integrated (Moje, et al., 2004, p. 41). Brandt and Tyler (2011) suggest that "we know that things once learned are usually forgotten unless there are continuing opportunities to use them. So one criterion for retaining a goal is that students will have opportunities in and out of school to think, feel, and act as expected" (p.16). Literacy educators must address youth culture in order to create students that are literate today.

McLean et al. (2014) argue that there is a "conflict of old and new world, spaces, knowledge and literacies. That heavy value is placed on traditional practices, vales, and norms that resist popular culture" (p. 169). It can also be argued that with the pressure to teach the written curriculum for testing of academic achievement, educators struggle to find time and space to plan and incorporate youth culture in literacy studies (Hull, 2003, 233). Furthermore, "When literacy policies are made or funding proposals advances, youth culture and literacy almost always remain invisible" (Moje, 2002, p. 98).

While there are educational struggles with incorporating youth culture into literacy practices, many educators are excited about the possibilities this opens up in regards to fostering identity, creating new modes of representation, and integrating world literacy. With that excitement however, there is "much confusion and anxiety among urban educators" (Morell, 2002, p. 73).

Research Questions

What are the possible ways to engage youth culture in literacy curriculum to address the "mismatches between how they communicate and learn for fun, and what they experience in school" (Tallerico, 2012, p. 13)?

How can educators create home and school literacy integration in order for students to have continuous opportunities to make use of their command of language and texts while producing, transforming, and interpreting a variety of modes?

Introduction

In the 21st century, educators must magnify their definition of literacy, and develop an understanding of what being literate today means. Teachers need to reformulate the concept of text to include the multimodalities that are afforded to society through technology, and other modes. Educational researchers (Hull, 2003; McLean, Rowsell, & Lapp, 2014; Morell, 2002; Wortham, 2010) suggest that incorporating multiple modes of representation augments students' capacities to become critical thinkers, engage in literacy, and build on prior knowledge and experience.

One way that teachers can assist in aiding students to become literate in new times is through reshaping the literacy curriculum to be receptive to the cultural lives of youths in the 21st century (Petrone, 2013, p. 256). Moje, et al. (2004), suggest that "the many discourses to which students have access or with which they are confronted can be viewed as resources or helping students develop stronger understandings of the natural world, both in content area classrooms and their everyday lives" (p.43). Educators need to develop ways to influence students' literacy at school in ways that are applicable to their home literacy practices, where they can effectively use and transform their knowledge into contexts appropriate to their youth culture (McLean, Rowsell, & Lapp, 2014, p. 170).

The study of literacy practices of youth culture illustrates the many experienced functions that youth use and engage with literacy. These functions can, and should be integrated into classroom practices (Moje, 2002, p. 118). McLean et al. (2014) suggest that youth culture "should be an integral part of the schooling experience for young people. (p. 160). Educators need to bridge the wealth of knowledge that youth culture provides with the educational standards of the curriculum. Petrone (2013) argues that "students need to see their lives and worlds reflected in school curricula and that literacy curricula must function to help students meet the increasingly complex demands of the world" (261).

The following action plan sets out to address the need for integration of youth culture and curriculum pedagogy. It will be exploring 1) The methods of creativity, skill, and transformation that youth engage in outside of a traditional school literacy environment (Wortham, 2010, p. 2). 2) The value of representation of self and others in a familiar context (Hull, 2003, p. 230). 3) How new literacies presents students with an outlet to be "multimodal knowledge producers and consumers" (McLean, Rowsell, & Lapp, 2014, p. 169). 4) How to provide connections between school culture and youth culture.

Current Practices and Existent Literature

Incorporating Student Identity and Representation

Youth culture and literacy research concentrates on the ways that youth use literacies to "navigate, synthesize and hybridize multiple spaces" (Moje, 2002, p. 115). It teaches educators and students about the variety of different ways that literacy praxis grow and change in different contexts. (Moje, 2002, p. 120). Researchers (Petrone, 2013; Morell, 2002) suggests that educators need to develop a curriculum that affords students opportunities to build on their current cultural

structures as an outlet to approach school based literacies. This in turn, assists students to become

more motivated to achieve, use and discover new modes of representation (Petrone, 2013, p. 250).

Moje (2002) argues that by incorporating youth culture in literacy education, educators can

learn how youths reinvent and "use literacy as a tool to navigate complex technologies and

fragmented social worlds" (p.99). She (Moje, 2002) also suggests that observing these practices will

give educators a window to observe how learning occurs outside of a contemporary school context

(p.99). Expressing identity is a corner stone of youth literacy. Eisner (2002) suggests that literacy

instructors need to incorporate the concept of reconceptualism in their teaching pedagogy in order

for students to feel a deeper "respect for personal purpose, lived experiences, and the life of

imagination" (p.77). By incorporating youth culture into classroom literacy pedagogy, a link is

created between literacy and identity formation (Moje, 2002, p. 117). Petrone (2013) argues that

"by adopting an ethnographic stance toward popular culture, literacy educators get to know their

students differently that they might otherwise" (p.249). By incorporating these different areas of

knowledge from youth culture, youths are better able to engage in a variety of texts, interconnecting

their in-and-out-of-school literacies. (Moje, et al., 2004, p. 67)

It is also clear that today's literacy practices are multimodal and pictorial (Hull, 2003, p.

230). As society is becoming rapidly mediated by popular visual culture, we need to afford students

the opportunity to represent themselves through the text and literacies in their lives. To navigate in

today's global culture, student need to be well situated in cognitive pluralism, where educators revel

in students' multiple intelligences and allow them to represent themselves through a variety of

modalities (Eisner, 2002, pp. 79-82). He (Eisner, 2002) suggests that "one of the human being's

distinctive features is the capacity to create and manipulate symbols. These symbols are powerful

cultural resources" (Eisner, 2002, p. 79). By incorporating youth culture into school curricula,

students can use their symbols from other contexts to produce, create and transform their knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

Through the incorporation of students' youth culture of interacting with LEGO® blocks and The LEGO Movie outside of school, I intend to fully integrate students' at-home-literacy with the American Common Core Standards.

After examining the literature, it was evident that incorporating youth culture into my literacy program is necessary in order to provide my students with relevant connections in order to be literate in today's society, and navigate through multiple modes of representation. As a result of this, I sent home a questionnaire to my first grade families to fill out together about the literacies that they engage with at home. One of the literacies that surfaced time and again across both genders was the use or consumption of LEGO® products. Students engaged in LEGO® videogames, books, videogames, parks, blocks and discovery centres. I was amazed by the vast amount of different ways that students could engage with this product. I decided to create an action plan in which I could incorporate these products into my literacy curriculum fully, not as just dispensable add-ons, but at the core of my literacy practices (Hull, 2003, p.233).

Phase One

After collecting data, I produced a two-fold action plan to incorporate the youth culture tool of LEGO® into my upcoming 'Storytelling' unit of inquiry. Phase one of the unit will involve students engaging in purposeful play with the LEGO® bricks, and observing the links to literacy skills, while promoting the value of "open-ended and often cooperative play, while encouraging spatial, sequential problem solving skills" (Pendergast, 2012, p. 20). Students will also read, and be

read the LEGO® based book collections. By providing students with the time and resources to play with the LEGO® blocks and home and school, I am hoping to see the link between literacy skills. I expect to see a connection between characters and themes in the books, and students' narratives with the blocks. Students will also be given the opportunity to write and record their narratives from play in their LEGO journals. Fu et al. (2003) suggest that "using children's writing leads us to see how children, in their narrative or action styles, merge popular culture, friendship groups, humor, and their love of sports with school literacy" (p.156).

Following the American Common Core, students will also be asked to complete activities related to characters, settings, problems and solutions (Vize, 2014, p.17).

While all of this is happening, I am going to examine the different ways that my students engage with the texts in different areas (Moje, et al., 2004, p. 67) and make anecdotal notes, assessing their learning. At the end of phase one, I will email parents a survey to see if and how students were engaging with this literacy outside of school. Students will also assist in assessing the action plan through their own reflections on the unit so far.

Phase Two

Phase two of the action plan will use considerations from phase one to plan phase two. Phase two will focus on Digital storytelling, and gamification. I will use the film and the video games "as a vehicle through which to begin teaching children about the creation of movies" (Vize, 2014, p.16) and digital stories.

Students will "explore how scenes and characters are created with purpose" (Vize, 2014, p.16). They will then begin to plan their own digital LEGO® stories. Students will create backdrops, use figures, write narratives, and create digital scenes. They will be encouraged to

explore a variety of digital storytelling tools such as iMovie, Kid Pix 3D, or LEGO Digital Designer. They will be mentored from older students on how to use these tools on their iPads. Students will learn how their texts can be read and understood in a variety of ways (Vize, 2016, p.16). They will reflect on the choices that they have made through using music, sound, speech, and text to see what type of effect they have had on their audience. This project-based learning environment will give students the chance to inquire about the tools they are using, and be guided in many different directions (Vize, 2014, p. 19). "By combining popular film with canonical texts, the students were able to hone their critical and analytical skills and use them in interpretations. There were also able to understand the connection between literature, popular culture, and their everyday lives" (Morell, 2002, p. 77).

Students will aid in the assessment of the effectiveness of this action plan by working as autobiographers, documenting their use of LEGO® at home both digitally and through play. Note that no photos of student's faces will be published. Parents will also be surveyed throughout the phases of the action plan.

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