Where the Magic Begins: The Nexus of Commercially-Given Narratives, Pretend Play, and Literacy Learning

Sarah Kelley

Vanderbilt University

Abstract

While research has suggested that pretend play can give children invaluable experience in such literary practices as story ideation, creation, and renegotiation, character development, and reading and writing rehearsal, it has yet to investigate the effects of omnipresent and commercially-given preschool media narratives on that potential. Some researchers argue that the integration of commercially-given narratives, pretend play, and literacy learning objectives is natural and rich with potential. Alternatively, critics who are skeptical of this integration argue that children lose narrative agency when commercial narratives take over, that young children are not capable of working through these often fantastical narratives in a meaningful way, and that these narratives are unforgivably problematic in message.

This review analyzes and synthesizes relevant literature to address whether the commercially-given narratives which commonly infiltrate pretend play spaces in academic learning environments compromise the innate ability of those environments to cultivate literacy learning for learners ages three through five. This question is assessed from a dual perspective: 1.) the effects that those narratives have on learners' confidence and motivation to engage in literacy practices and 2.) the effects that they have on the formation of the 'hard,' assessable literacy skills that pretend play has been theorized to cultivate. Ultimately, this review defends the conclusion that commercially-given narratives are not necessarily obstruent to literacy learning in pretend play and, when integrated purposefully, respectfully, and knowledgeably into these spaces, can imbue students with a healthy sense of confidence and belonging in literacy learning environments while helping them to develop lifelong literacy skills. Suggestions for practice are subsequently outlined to support teachers who hope to capitalize upon this potential.

Keywords: *preschool media, literacy, pretend play*

Where the Magic Begins: The Nexus of Commercially-Given Narratives, Pretend Play, and Literacy Learning

In 2013, a study by Common Sense Media produced staggering statistics concerning media use in a large and diverse sample of American children, ages zero through eight. The report showed that the average American child spent approximately 2 hours every day on "screen" technology. While in previous years this term generally referred to the television and computer screens, by 2013 mobile devices were replacing traditional TV and computer usage in many homes. From 2011 to 2013, American children with access to "smart" devices at home jumped from 52% to 75% and the time that children spent using these devices during that three-year period tripled, giving many children the ability to engage in "screen activities" anywhere and at any time (Rideout, 2013).

Though the many apps, virtual games, television shows, and books with which children interact through these devices are diverse and produced by various companies, many of the most popular children's media items are extensions of mega-stories told by a few media powerhouses. As of January 2016, four of the top five apps categorized as appropriate for "kids 5 and under" by the Apple App Store were created by such companies, including two apps by Nickelodeon, one app by Disney, and one app by Sesame Workshop, all featuring characters and extending stories best known through popular television shows (Apple Inc., 2016). Furthermore, children's media and toy companies have ensured that these beloved narratives do not end when the televisions, tablets, and smartphones are put away. Children can continue to interact with these imaginary worlds through their favorite brand's associated toys, posters, action figures, dollhouses, play sets, lunch boxes, pillowcases, band-aids, school supplies, and more (Deuk, 2013; Wohlwend, 2009; Chaloff, 2013). Combined with time spent with these narratives in the

digital space, such associated products create opportunities for children to curate lives of almost uninterrupted immersion into the 'commercialized supersystems' (Clark, 1995, p.8) of *Sesame Street*, *Dora the Explorer*, *Star Wars*, and more.

Changes in children's pretend play are indicative of this simultaneously gradual and dramatic cultural shift. Studies show that these omnipresent commercially-given narratives, hereafter shortened to "CGNs," do not so much trickle as flood into pretend play spaces (Wohlwend, 2009; Deuk, 2013). Although unsurprising, this finding has important implications. Research has suggested, with very little opposition, that pretend play is important for many aspects of child development, not the least of which is early-literacy skill formation (Vygotsky, 1967; Bergen, 2002; Paley, 2005; Wohlwend, 2009; Möller, 2015). However, the current body of research has not fully explored how the introduction of highly commercialized and immersive narratives into children's lives affects the ability of pretend play to cultivate these early-literacy foundations. As pretend play acts as such fertile ground for literacy development, and literacy development has such important implications for school readiness and achievement in future years, the effects of such a dramatic change in pretend play are worthy of serious study.

This essay will synthesize current research and theories concerning this topic and ultimately support the position that CGNs are not necessarily obstacles to literacy learning in pretend play, but can be used consciously and strategically to engage children in early-literacy skill development and incite long-lasting enthusiasm about literary practices by affirming their identities as skilled and capable storytellers. After defending the case for the acceptance of CGNs in school contexts, I will also review practices and instructional strategies to enable educators to capitalize upon this potential.

The Early Childhood Learner and Context

Theoretical Perspective.

Because of its attention to the ways in which individuals and their contexts affect each other and produce learning outcomes together, I will approach this question from the situative perspective of learning (Brown, Collins, Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Bell et al., 2012). This perspective allows for a virtual anthropomorphization of CGNs, thereby affording them the same weight, responsibility, and agency as the learner. Essentially, all agents- CGNs, pretend play, literacy learning, the learner, and the learning environment- are treated equally. This affordance also highlights the tendency of each agent to affect and be affected by other agents in the space. As my guiding question could be reworded as, "How do commercially-given narratives, learners, and pretend play jointly produce literacy learning when they are together in a learning environment?," this function of the situative lens is absolutely essential to a fair review and assessment of the topic.

The Learner.

Although people of all ages can engage in beneficial play behavior, this review focuses exclusively on research and theories surrounding the pretend play and literacy skills of learners ages three through five. This choice reflects the ages at which literature agrees is the "high season" of pretend play (Singer & Singer, 1992, p. 64; Leontiev, 1944; Elkonin, 1971; Elkonin, 1978; Bodrova & Leong, 2011) as well as a critical window for early-literacy skill development (Brown, 2014).

Early Childhood Pretend Play. Peter Gray (2015) defines play as that which is self chosen, and self directed, intrinsically motivated, guided by rules, imaginative, and conducted in an active, alert, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind. The overwhelming majority of play literature argues for the importance of regular play. Recent studies have proposed that, through

play, children can form the foundations of linguistic, mathematical, social, and scientific understandings (Eberle, 2011), build, challenge, negotiate, and re-negotiate their identities (Mears, 2005; Henricks, 2014; Gray, 2011), develop coping capabilities (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Gray 2011) engage in language study and practice (Weisberg et al., 2013) become more adaptable to changing and challenging circumstances (Pellis, Pellis, & Himmler, 2014), experiment with cultural norms (Wohlwend, 2009), develop the capacity for cohesive storytelling (Nicolopoulou et al., 2009), and engage in perspective taking, early-abstract thought, high-level cognition, self-regulation and complex social interactions (Bergen, 2002).

Pretend play, defined as “the subset of play activities characterized by an ‘as-if’ stance…. (in which) a ‘pretense’ is layered over reality,” (Lillard et al., 2013, p. 2) specifically offers a flexible, low-risk, and simultaneously challenging space for young children to form these vital skills. They must not only balance the many and delicate relational components of pretend play, but at the same time engage in new and demanding developmental tasks, such as representational thought and causal reasoning. That young children engage in this multifaceted and demanding environment with such enthusiasm, frequency, and success is truly noteworthy.

Early Childhood Literacy. Research shows that children ages three through five are constantly involved in important literary work as they deconstruct, reconstruct, analyze, and make sense of the processes involved in working with written and oral texts (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) Consequentially, children who engage in literacy-rich experiences in early childhood are more likely to develop robust literary skills later in life and those who do not have the opportunity to develop these skills in early years are more likely to struggle academically in later years (Barnett, 1995; Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Kalmer, 2008). These findings imply that, although the bulk of overt literacy curriculum may take place

in the early elementary years, early childhood years are absolutely vital for the foundational literacy skills on which later understandings are built.

With this in mind, research has recommended familiarizing children with written text through classroom labels that are on their eye level (Nitecki & Chung, 2013), providing opportunities for students to play with language in interdisciplinary and sensory ways (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004), and purposefully designing pretend play areas to encourage the rehearsal of oral and written communication (Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Nueman & Roskos, 1992; Morrow, 2005). Each of these tasks focuses on the most basic building blocks of literacy: the 'whats,' 'whys,' and 'hows' of interacting with text.

The Play-Literacy Connection. Many of the skills commonly developed through pretend play are foundational literacy skills. For example, pretend play experiences such as using a block as a teacup or a stick as a magic wand develop the symbolic understanding that is essential for reading and understanding written text. To successfully use a stick as a magic wand, a child needs to understand what constitutes a stick, what constitutes a wand, and that the stick is *not* a wand. Then, she must suspend that reality and impose a pretense in which the stick *is* a wand, all while storing the stick's true identity as "not a wand" in a back, accessible yet currently out-of-the-way, part of her mind. Later, when this child has had experience with this process and encounters the written word "tree," she is ready to understand that the combination of letters is not really a tree, but that it stands in for a tree in the same way that her stick stood in for a magic wand (White, 2012; Hanline, Milton & Phelps, 2010; Yawkey, 1983).

Furthermore, pretend play acts as a space to experiment with plot construction, the innovation of story elements, the production of various responsive and creative texts, peer-editing, communication skills, and character development (Paley, 2005; Wohlwend, 2009;

Nueman & Roskos, 1992). Children also explore literary procedures, such as the situations in which people need to read and write, how to hold books correctly, how to open a book, and the direction to trace their fingers across a page while reading, in pretend play.

The Learning Environment.

School settings will act as the physical context for this analysis. This choice is reflective of the finding that dramatic play objects, time, and playmates of similar developmental stages are most commonly and consistently available for 21st century children in these contexts (Bodrova & Leong, 2011). Additionally, as children enrolled in early childhood programs spend a large portion of their waking hours in the classroom and research has supported play as vital to development, schools present an important area for play research (Miller and Almon, 2009).

As this review specifically investigates the interaction of literacy learning objectives and CGNs within pretend play, pretend play will act as an equally important learning environment. This context is particularly unique because it is child-created and -directed and, therefore, as uncontrollable and unpredictable as the child's imagination. As previously detailed, this context has the potential to cultivate innumerable skills in multiple domains, both academic and non-academic.

The interaction between these two learning environments is tense. Antiquated ideas about pretend play and the lack of a unifying theory detailing its importance have led to the decline of sanctioned playtime in classroom settings (Gopnik & Walker, 2013; Pompe, 1996). Many caregivers and educators are worried that if children are "only playing," they are wasting precious time they could be spending on more valued academic and developmental learning tasks (Elkind, 1981). This is especially true in Title 1 classrooms, where pretend play is often considered a luxury and more rigid skills, such as the ability to adhere to classroom rules and 'do

school,' are paramount (Farran & Son-Yarborough, 2001). This declining regard for play in academic settings adds complexity and importance to the topic of this paper.

Literature Review

This review considers a possible nexus, or "intersection where practices link and strengthen each other," (Wohlwend, 2009, p.30) within the early childhood experience. The first practice is play, "a great organizer of contemporary childhoods" (Deuk, 2013, p. 121). The second is early literacy learning, which acts as a curricular and developmental focus for children in early childhood learning contexts. The third is the CGNs that are delivered through contemporary early childhood media. For this review, I have chosen to investigate the effects of popular children's media on the potential for pretend play, as a learning environment, to incite literacy learning as evaluated by two measures: 1.) learners' enthusiasm and confidence in their own literacy through the cultivation of a storyteller identity and 2.) learners' specific early literacy skill development. This choice reflects the theorized importance of both literacy identity formation as well as assessable literacy skills in early literacy curricula (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Barnett, 1995; Campbell & Ramey, 1995; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Kalmer, 2008).

Incite Enthusiasm and Confidence in Literacy.

The importance of enthusiasm and confidence in reading cannot be understated. One of the most difficult and important tasks of literacy learning is the formation of a storyteller identity, or the deep and personal belief that one is 'good at' storytelling (Seban & Tavsanli, 2015). Even at this age, "literacy narratives," or the experiences behind different learners' literacy attitudes and habits, are diverse and sometimes problematic (Corkery, 2005). For example, a child could hear a parent describe reading as "boring" or "hard" and subsequently

decide that she does not want to read or will not be a skillful reader. This becomes part of her literacy narrative and may partially determine her willingness to struggle through challenging texts later on, even into adulthood. Curricular decisions that aid children in constructing positive literacy narratives could disrupt this path and have lasting effects on a child's lifelong literacy (Corkery, 2005).

Whether because of love for their favorite characters, a desire to fit into peer culture, or excitement to share their expertise about the topic, the integration of beloved CGNs in classroom literacy activities have shown to positively impact students' attitudes towards literacy (Marsh, 2000; Wohlwend, 2012). Jackie Marsh found this in her 2000 study on the role of popular culture in early literacy learning, "Teletubby Tales: Popular Culture in the Early Years Language and Literacy Curriculum." Knowing that her students had a particular love for the PBS Kids television series *Teletubbies,* Marsh created a set of literacy learning activities themed to the show. In one activity, learners made the teletubbies' favorite food, 'tubby custard,' and were then invited to write their own recipes for tubby custard on a card. According to Marsh, the activity had an "electrifying effect" (Marsh, 2000, p. 123) on learners, who immediately toppled over each other with eagerness to begin making and writing recipes for tubby custard. Every teacher she interviewed noted that the learners were unusually excited about the project and that a few children who did not normally want to participate in classroom activities were just as eager to partake in the fun.

However, many teachers remain uneasy and unconvinced of this potential, often citing problematic aspects of these narratives and doubting that they are worthy of learners' excitement (Marsh, 2000, 2006; Green, Reid, & Bigum, 1998). Disney Princess stories, for example, have been notoriously accused of reducing their supposed heroines to dependent, passive and

sexualized “homemakers in waiting” (Wohlwend, 2009, p.8). Nickelodeon’s *Dora the Explorer* exclusively addresses problems that can be solved in three easy steps, giving little example of perseverance or complexity. Disney Junior’s *Handy Manny* portrays a simplistic and misleading characterization of the experiences of many Mexican American immigrants (Deuk, 2013). Deuk (2013) emphasizes the significance of this point, proposing that children engaged in pretend play commonly reproduce what they consume through media. If her assertion is true, then the implications are indeed worthy of serious consideration. How can encouraging something so commercial, controversial, and potentially confusing possibly bring out any positive outcome? Even if young learners *can* learn to craft pretend play narratives using examples given by popular media, how can we celebrate their enthusiasm for such problematic texts, regardless of potential literacy learning?

Firstly, it should be noted that the popular canon of early childhood literature is not as perfect as literary purists might propose, especially in its almost exclusive attention to the experiences of the white, middle- and upper-class. For example, the main character of *Goodnight Moon*, a hallmark of American early childhood canonical literature, falls asleep in large, stately room with a cozy fire and a tiger-skin rug every night (Brown, 1947). The children of *The Cat in the Hat* by Dr. Suess have time to be bored and their mother has time to spend a day “out” (Geisel, 1957). Hardly any time-honored American children’s texts use non-white English dialects, such as African American Vernacular English or Spanglish, or give positive examples of alternative home cultures. While CGNs can fall into these same ethno- and class-centric leanings, they are slowly increasing in diversity and should not be considered inferior to older stories simply because of their youth (Ryan, 2010; Callahan, 2016; Grain, 2012).

Furthermore, it is possible that popular culture should be encouraged in pretend play spaces for the exact reason that it is problematic. Carrington (2003) argues for this perspective, proposing that society's idealistic view of childhood, that it is innocent and needs to be protected from reality, ultimately harms children in that it neglects to equip them with true literacy, or the skills to be "an able navigator and manipulator of intertextual signs and the currents of power, knowledge and access that make up our increasingly glocalized society" (Carrington, 2003, p. 97). If learners are to be "literate" in this sense of the word, they must not be indiscriminately shielded from any and all popular texts so much as equipped with developmentally appropriate skills to consider, evaluate, and potentially challenge them. Text comprehension and critical thinking, both highly valuable literacy skills, are notoriously challenging to cultivate (Terenzini, Springer, & Pascarella, 1993; Cornoldi & Oakhill, 1996), but Carrington's proposal could give learners a scaffolded and developmentally appropriate introduction to these skills years before they are formally assessed. Wohlwend (2009) echoes this opinion, encouraging teachers to work with and through CGNs in the classroom, especially in play environments, rather than allow them to operate without mediation. It is possible that this learning objective is truly addressed best through play. When children put themselves in problematic roles in pretend play, it is easier for them to understand, question, and negotiate those norms in a low-risk setting. (Wohlwend, 2012).

To engage learners in early-literacy skill development.

Arguments against the incorporation of CGNs in pretend play contexts also address the perceived inabilities of young children to interact meaningfully with fantasy texts and the possibility that CGNs rob learners of the opportunity to exercise true literary creativity in the pretend play space.

Child Development and Fantasy. Those who argue against the developmental appropriateness of CGNs in early childhood learning environments typically propose that these children are only ready to interact with realistic, purposeful, and culturally local narratives. They warn that stories based on fantasy, including so many CGNs, are necessarily confusing for this age group because many of these children are just beginning to discern between reality and fantasy, especially as communicated through screen technology (Rubin, 2011; Shortridge, 2015). Furthermore, incorrectly sorting which aspects of fantasy stories are applicable to real life or becoming confused by the attempt can cause young learners to virtually 'quarantine' concepts learned in fantasy stories, thus disqualifying those concepts from the possibility of future transfer (Richert & Smith, 2011). For example, a child may watch the 2013 Disney film *Frozen* religiously until she can repeat the entire script verbatim, but this practice is less likely to directly transfer into an internalization and transfer of the film's values of adventurousness and sisterly love than if she interacted with a similar, yet realistic, narrative that did not involve such confusing elements as trolls, talking snowmen, and magical powers. This is not a measure of her personal preference or engagement, but of the cognitive load required to both sort out fantasy from reality and to transfer the elements she has deemed realistic onto other situations. Essentially, these critics do not believe that typical early childhood CGNs have the capacity to encourage pre-literacy skill development in any context because they often involve unrealistic story elements, which young learners often struggle to deconstruct, reconstruct, and transfer in a meaningful way.

However, a large body of research disagrees, proposing that these children are actually quite skilled at distinguishing fantasy from reality (Flavell, Flavell, & Green, 1987; Morison & Gardner, 1978; Skolnick and Bloom, 2006; Woolley & Cox, 2007; Woolley & Ghossainy, 2013;

Gopnick & Walter, 2013), that fantastical thinking is a healthy part of early childhood cognitive development (Harris, 2000; Lillard, 2001; Nichols & Stitch, 2000; Taylor, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978; Woolley, 1997), and that children who have more experience with fantasy texts are typically more skilled at distinguishing fantasy from reality (Richert et al., 2009; Sharon & Woolley, 2004). Furthermore, the tendency to quarantine elements of fantasy texts is only undesirable when it is indiscriminate or poorly discriminate. The ability to accurately quarantine fantasy from reality is a sign of maturity, and, like most skills, requires some level of trial-and-error in order to develop (Richert & Smith, 2011). One might argue that a low-risk pretend play environment is the ideal space for literary experimentation with these concepts. Within the pretend play space, a child can safely fluctuate between non-fictional and fictional plots, consulting with peers and constructing communal knowledge about what is realistic and what is unrealistic.

The Effect on Literacy Skill Development in Play. Research has shown that pretend play offers many, low-risk, and engaging opportunities for early-literacy learning (Paley, 2005; Wohlwend, 2009). Acknowledging this potential, one might react protectively, concerned that learners necessarily lose opportunities for creativity and agency when a setting, character, or plot is simply given to them. Whereas in less commercial days, children were tasked with creating entire worlds organically for their pretend play, contemporary media outlets now spoon-feed them those worlds and the rules for interacting with them.

However, research proposes that these pre-constructed narratives can act more as literary scaffolds, giving young storytellers a context in which to situate their many ideas (West, 2010; Wohlwend, 2009). Proponents of this perspective cite the considerable and often hidden cognitive load inherent to pretend play. Vivian Paley (2005), recalling her attempt at

unsupported and unscaffolded pretend play as an adult, described the pretend play process as surprisingly challenging:

> "In time, we discovered that (pretend) play was indeed work. First there was the business of deciding who to be and who the others must be and what the environment is to look like and when it is time to change the scene. Then there was the even bigger problem of getting others to listen to *you* and accept *your* point of view while keeping the integrity of the make-believe, the commitment of the other players, and perhaps the loyalty of a best friend. Oddly enough, the hardest part of the play for us to reproduce or invent were the fantasies themselves." (Paley, 2005, p. 2)

While these are certainly not unsurmountable tasks and children have been successfully working through them for centuries, the lightening of this load has definite benefits. Had Paley been given the basic parameters of a world in which to situate her pretend play, she may have been able to to begin interacting with and challenging this world more quickly and decisively, and research continues to support that children do, in fact, challenge the worlds that they create and re-create from popular media (Wohlwend, 2009; MacGallivray & Martinez, 1998).

Wohlwend (2009) discovered this in studying a group of three-year-old girls and their navigation of Disney Princess texts. She found that commercial characters come with "anticipated identities," (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 6) or character attributes as infused by movies and associated products. However, she also found that children quickly acknowledged those identities and began boldly trespassing on them, using them more as a starting point for character creation than absolute doctrine. Research supports her view, complicating and problematizing the notion that children are "media victims and cultural dupes" (Wohlwend, 2009, p.8) rather than empowered storytellers and media manipulators (Dyson, 1997, 2003; Marsh, 2006).

Having this starting point and deciding to work within a context that all players know, such as a popular movie, app, or TV show, can add invaluable stability to the play environment, outfitting it with the potential for more complex literary activity (Luke, Carrington, & Kapitzke, 2003).

Take, for example, a group of pretend players who decide, after reading J. M. Barrie's book and watching a movie retelling of his story, to use *Peter Pan's* Neverland as a context for their play. After pooling together their collective impressions of and experiences with Neverland, they will most likely come to operate under the assumption that they have landed on a generally warm, tropical island with beaches, lagoons, forests, lost boys, pirates, fairies, mermaids, tunnels, and buried treasure. They will have a list of basic characters to approve or improve. They will have all of the legendary adventures of the pirates and lost boys described by authors stored away as historical context for their characters. They can choose to throw out or alter any details they know about Neverland, but every detail they can keep or add increases the complexity and believability of those worlds. We know this as adults- the wildly popular *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series and associated media are lauded specifically because they are so saturated with such contextual details, which collectively create completely immersive and believable worlds. Furthermore, these contextually rich narratives are commonly adopted and adapted for fan fiction, which can be considered an adult form of literary pretend play (Thomas, 2006; Hills, 2002). Having these pre-made details available for use helps to fill-out our imagined worlds, allowing us to enter more and more deeply into these completely immersive play experiences.

In fact, Nelson and Seidman (2010) propose that fantastical commercial worlds, filled with pirates, aliens, wookies, and warlocks, necessarily challenge learners to be even more creative than local narratives and everyday experiences. Children who do not interact with stories

outside of their communities will most likely rehearse exactly what they know and how their community operates in their pretend play. However, children at play within typically fantastical commercial worlds must transport themselves into unknown territory and empathize with the experiences of characters there. Learners may not know what it is like to live in Neverland, but the attempt to find out and recreate it is rich with literary possibility. In deciding what to do when they meet a pirate, where to sleep, how to talk to fairies, and how to build a ship, and what to do when an alien pizza monster shows up on the island, they are storytelling in a way that goes beyond practicing the known. In this way, they commandeer Neverland from J. M. Barrie and subject it to their own rules and narrative whimsy.

Thus, while CGNs affect pretend play as a workshop for the development of hard literacy skills, they do not necessarily compromise it and can possibly enhance it (Paley, 2005; Wohlwend, 2009; Nueman & Roskos, 1992). Learners who situate their pretend play within CGNs have ample opportunity to innovate and experiment with literary practices. Among these are:

- Inventing new adventures for characters (i.e. When Angry Birds land on a planet made of broccoli)
- Merging worlds (i.e. When Dora the Explorer takes her friend, Boots, to Doc McStuffins for a check-up)
- Plot innovation using concepts relevant to their realities (i.e. When the Power Rangers go to the dentist)
- Inventing new characters within a commonly known and stable context (i.e. When Big Bird meets a mermaid on Sesame Street)
- Trespassing on character identities and experimenting with the repercussions (i.e.

When Cinderella makes a touchdown to win the Super Bowl)

- Modeling literacy (i.e. When Squidward reads SpongeBob's diary)
- Story Revision (i.e. What if Scooby Doo was the bad guy?)
- Easily accessible ideas for creative text production (i.e. J.M. Barrie wrote everybody's Neverland is a little bit different- what does *your* Neverland look like?)

By lightening the cognitive load required to create and engaging and cohesive pretend play scenario and establishing an agreed-upon and universally known context, CGNs can allow learners to focus more quickly and confidently on these and more complex literary tasks.

Practical Implications

Play offers a myriad of literacy learning opportunities, and teachers can help to cultivate confidence in and enthusiasm for literacy learning by purposefully integrating student-valued CGNs into pretend play spaces. This integration requires that educators prepare themselves, the physical environment, and the curriculum to enrich learners' interactions with CGNs.

Preparing Ourselves.

Gloria Ladson-Billings promotes the idea of culturally-responsive teaching, or responding to the diverse "local, national, racial, cultural, and global identities" within each classroom (Ladson Billings, 1995, p. 25). She argues that teachers absolutely cannot address the needs of students if they see knowledge as static doctrine to be imparted without compromise onto the necessarily unlearned. Instead, culturally-responsive teachers view each student as an able contributor to communal knowledge, bringing with her unique perspectives and experiences for sharing. If the cultural experiences of students are valued in this way, power shifts from teachers, previously gatekeepers of knowledge, to students, now co-constructors of knowledge.

Popular early childhood culture is a true culture, and in our urgency to ensure that our students are literate in the ways that *we* value as educators, we must not forget to become literate in they ways that *they* value. I use the word “literate” here intentionally, recalling Carrington’s (2003) broad and dynamic definition: the ability to act as an “able navigator and manipulator of intertextual signs and the currents of power, knowledge, and access” (Carrington, 2003, p. 97). Being an ‘able navigator’ of popular preschool CGNs goes beyond knowing the name of a popular TV show or character. It means developing cultural fluency and treating its artifacts with validity and respect, even if its most dedicated participants are too small to demand this treatment.

Teachers who pursue true literacy in early childhood peer culture not only equip themselves with the tools to interact meaningfully with CGNs in their classroom, but also to interact with their students. Early childhood learners, like anyone else, are steeped in culture and often respond best to those who value that culture. When a teacher who openly values early childhood culture says that reading is fun, her opinion comes from a trusted source. These teachers also communicate to students that each of them has important and unique funds of knowledge to share. To have valued expertise and be invited to share that expertise with peers in the school context is an extremely powerful experience that shifts power from teacher to student. Possible exercises for becoming more literate in early childhood culture include:

- Watching the movie, watching few episodes of the TV series, or playing the game that students currently value with an open mind,
- Staying up to date on beloved CGNs and being able to discuss them fluently,

- Accessing beloved CGNs from multiple entry points (i.e. Watching a few modern episodes of *Sesame Street*, playing a few of the online games, exploring the app, and reading an e-book),
- Engaging in this media with an eye for opportunities to integrate student expertise into the curriculum,
- And asking students, the true experts, about their favorite characters and CGNs.

Preparing the Physical Environment.

As all play must be free (Huizinga, 1955; Rubin et al., 1983; Gray, 2015), possibly the simplest way to encourage literacy learning and involve popular culture in pretend play is in the design of the play environment. This could involve providing pretend play objects that encourage literacy-rich play, such as paper, books, pencils, and clipboards, and that are responsive to valued CGNs.

Carefully designed and themed play spaces that attend to student peer culture can be incredible tools for motivating literacy learning in pretend play. For example, learners who value the *Doc McStuffins* CGN may benefit from a hospital-themed play space outfitted with pencils, notepads, and clipboards. The CGN offers stability, confidence, and motivation to engage in this possibly challenging play space and the play objects scaffold the tasks of filling out forms, taking notes on symptoms, and communicating with each other about health (Nitecki & Chung, 2013; Nueman & Roskos, 1992; Morrow, 2005). Teachers are encouraged to further scaffold these experiences with questions and prompts, such as asking “Why don’t you look in my file to see what sicknesses I have had this year?” or “Can you write down the medicine I need so that I don’t forget?” Research suggests that access to these literacy materials and experiences

encourages learners to incorporate literacy themes into their pretend play and can accelerate literacy learning (Christie, 1991; Christie & Enz, 1992).

However, designing play environments that value peer culture firstly requires allowing valued CGNs to enter. Research has suggested that children sort through their experiences in pretend play in order to understand the world, its culture, and their place in it (Fein, 1981; Mears, 2005; Marks-Tarlow, 2010; Paley, 2005). Therefore, if CGNs present a new or interesting concept to a child, it will most likely reappear in her pretend play. Allowing this to happen without disparaging remarks, rebukes, or attempts at redirection is a simple way to value early childhood culture and allow her to work through her experiences, unhindered by self-consciousness or doubt.

Preparing the Curriculum.

Teachers, and especially pre-service teachers, can become easily overwhelmed at the idea of harnessing popular culture for mediated integration into academic curricula and pretend play spaces (Marsh, 2006). This anxiety is often augmented by the lack of research detailing classrooms that successfully implement this practice. However, designing for literacy-rich and playful experiences that value peer culture need not be overwhelming. In fact, the small yet valuable body of relevant research seems to suggest that this implementation requires more a loosening of grip than a tightening.

Karen Wohlwend and colleagues (2013), who have conducted multiple studies on the nexus of popular culture, pretend play, and literacy, promotes the institution of a “literacy playshop,” in which young learners are tasked with the integrated text production of a story that they value. This project consists of representing a favorite or relevant story through books, artwork, dramatic works, movies, pretend play and more, giving learners the freedom to

approach the same narrative from a variety of access points. Wohlwend and colleagues (2013) believe that this approach broadens and enriches their understanding of their chosen narrative as well as the structure of narrative literature in general, all while giving them a sense of agency and expertise. For example, creating a storyboard of events allows learners to visualize the progression of time in their story and directing a movie rendition of their story helps them to identify and rectify problems in the plot.

Marsh's (2000) "tubby custard" activity is another example of successful integration of playful literacy activities and CGNs. In re-designing and re-theming traditional literacy activities to invoke student expertise, the teachers in Marsh's study gave learners the confidence and motivation to tackle challenging tasks such as approximating spellings (Marsh, 2000; Wohlwend, 2011).

Teachers can also assist students in reclaiming popular and sometimes problematic CGNs from their companies that produce them. Carrington's (2003) analysis of the highly gendered Diva Starz dolls that were popular in the early 2000s lends itself to this task. The dolls come with recordings focusing mostly on being "bored" the desire to "go shopping." However, when it is time to visit the playground, the educator might ask learners if the dolls want to play, if they have on good shoes for running and playing outside, and if the children could find or design better shoes for her. She might invite the children to show off their talents and hobbies to an audience of dolls so that they can all learn about new activities they might want to try. She might temporarily replace classroom centers focused on shopping with pretend play centers that focus on other activities or settings, subtly encouraging learners to broaden their ideas about what their dolls can do.

Again, allowing children to play with minimal intervention, bringing in whatever themes they so choose, is often just as or more beneficial than even the most purposeful mediation (Sutton-Smith & Sutton-Smith, 1974). For example, the teacher in Logue's and Detour's (2011) study changed her classroom rules to allow villain play and observed remarkable complexity in their moral negotiations. Although uncomfortable with this theme at first, she recognized through her experiment that the children in her classroom were actually seeking a space to work through the concept of morality. All they required from her was permission to play.

Future Research.

A major limitation of this review is the scarcity of research considering the specific nexus of pretend play, literacy learning, and CGNs within early childhood academic learning environments. This means that the conclusions of this review are mostly drawn logically from the findings of multiple, distantly-related studies.

Thus, the first task of research in this area is to further investigate the proposals made here. Teachers would also greatly benefit from the broadening of research on this topic. The decision to stray from canonical texts, time-tested practices, and the treatment of popular culture as absolutely taboo is not an easy one, nor is it easily defended. Teachers who take on this challenge need support and research to back up their seemingly radical decisions.

Subsequently, research could investigate which features of CGNs lend themselves most strongly to literacy learning, the challenges and results of incorporating particularly problematic CGNs, and how learners who work through literacy concepts in play with CGNs compare to their peers in literacy skills later in life.

Conclusions

This review has argued the case for integration of CGNs into the literacy-rich space of pretend play, and has highlighted three specific proposals:

- CGNs can act as a scaffold for story creation, analysis, and negotiation, especially in young learners for whom the task of completely organic story creation may be particularly overwhelming. In providing the basic formula for narrative story writing, a world in which to situate pretend play, and optional details for concretizing that world, CGNs lighten the cognitive load inherent to story creation and springboard players into a space where they can engage more critically, and perhaps more meaningfully, with their play, story creation, and CGNs.
- Allowing beloved and familiar CGNs into literacy activities, including pretend play, gives learners the confidence to engage in those sometimes intimidating tasks with confidence, expertise, and a confident storyteller identity. This integration can disrupt negative literacy narratives which may already be at work on a child's confidence and motivation. By giving learners experiences of indisputable success with literary practices, these activities can create a firewall against negative events in their lifelong literacy narrative.
- Many arguments against the incorporation of CGNs in the classroom, which claim that children are mindless media victims or incapable of sorting fantasy from reality, are countered by modern media and child development research. Moralist claims that CGNs should be banned simply because they are problematic have been similarly countered. As Wohlwend (2009) has noted, ignoring, rejecting, and condemning CGNs does not eliminate them. It only takes us out of the conversation.

Through purposeful and mediated integration of CGNs in pretend play and literacy spaces, teachers can communicate to students that they and their interests belong in literary practices, positively affect motivation and confidence in literacy activities, scaffold and enrich pretend play environments to host experiences that challenge and grow students' zone of proximal development, and remain a relevant and trusted resource for their students. Fear of straying from canon or working with problematic texts should not keep these texts, rich with possibilities for student confidence- and skill-development, from the classroom.

References

Apple Inc. (2016). App Store. [Mobile Application Software]. Retrieved from http://itunes.apple.com.

Barnett, W. S. (1995). Long-term effects of early childhood programs on cognitive and school outcomes. *The Future of Children, 5*(3), 25–50.

Bell, P., Tzou, C., Bricker, L., & Baines, A.D. (2012). Learning in diversities of structures of social practice: Accounting for how, why, and where people learn science. *Human Development, 55*, 269-284.

Bergen, D. (2002). The role of pretend play in children's cognitive development. *Early Childhood Research and Practice, 4*(1).

Biancarosa, G., & Snow, C. (2004). *Reading next: A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy.* New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York and Alliance for Excellent Education.

Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. I. (2011). Revisiting Vygotskian perspectives on play and pedagogy. In S. Rogers (Ed.), *Rethinking play and pedagogy in early childhood education: Concepts, contexts and cultures* (pp. 60-73). New York: Routledge.

Brown, C. S. (2014). Language and literacy development in the early years: Foundational skills that support emergent readers. *Language and Literacy Development in the Early Years, 24*, 35-49.

Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher*, *18*(1), 32.

Brown, M. W. (1947). *Goodnight moon*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.

Callahan, Y. (2016). After 45 years, 'Sesame Street' continues to teach black kids to love the

skin they're in. *The Root.* Retrieved from http://www.theroot.com/blog/after_45_years_sesame_street_continues_to_teach_black_kids_to_love_the_skin/

Campbell, F. A., & Ramey, C. T. (1994). Effects of early intervention on intellectual and academic achievement: A follow-up study of children from low-income families. *Child Development*, *65,* 684–698.

Carrington, V. (2003). 'I'm in a bad mood. Let's go shopping': Interactive dolls, consumer culture and a 'glocalized' model of literacy. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 3*(1), 83-98.

Chaloff, A. (director) (2013). Disney *Junior Finds Ratings Success.* [video]. United States: The New York Times. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/video/business/100000002145737/disney-junior-finds-ratings-success.html?action=click>ype=vhs&version=vhs-heading&module=vhs®ion=title-area

Christie, J. (1991). *Play and early literacy development.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Christie, J., & Enz, B. J. (1992). The effects of literacy play interventions on preschoolers' play patterns and literacy development. *Early Education and Development*, *3*, 205-220.

Clark, E. (1995). Popular culture: images of gender as reflected through young children's story, paper presented at the Annual Joint Meeting of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, Philadelphia. ERIC document no: ED 388966.

Corkery, C. (2005). Literacy narratives and confidence building in the writing classroom. *Journal of Basic Writing, 24*(1), 48-67.

Cornoldi, C. & Oakhill, J. (1996). *Reading comprehension difficulties: Processes and intervention.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (2001). What reading does for the mind. *Journal Of Direct Instruction, 1*(2).

Deuk, C. (2013). Media, children, and play: New practices in a new (and complex) Ecosystem. *Communication Management Quarterly*, *8*(29).

Dyson, A. H. (1997). *Writing superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Dyson, A.H. (2003). *The brothers and sisters learn to write: Popular literacies in childhood and school cultures.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Eberle, S. G. (2011). Playing with multiple intelligences: How play helps them grow. *American Journal of Play, 4*(1), 19-51.

Elkind, D. (1981) *The hurried child.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Elkonin, D. B. (1971). Toward the problem of stages in the mental development of the child. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, *10*(3), 225-251.

Elkonin, D. B. (1978). *Psychology of play.* Moscow: Pedagogika.

Farran, D. C., & Son-Yarbrough, W. (2001). Title I funded preschools as a developmental context for children's play and verbal behaviors. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *16*(2), 245-262.

Fein, G. G. (1981). Pretend play in childhood: An integrative review. *Child Development*, *52*, 1095–1118.

Fiorelli, J. A., & Russ, S. W. (2012). Pretend Play, coping, and subjective well-being in children: A follow-up study. *American Journal of Play, 5*(1), 81-103.

Flavell, J. H., Flavell, E. R., & Green, F. L. (1987). Young children's knowledge about the apparent-real and pretend-real distinctions. *Developmental Psychology*, *23*, 816–22.

Geisel, T. (1957). *The cat in the hat*. New York, NY: Random House.

Gopnik, A., & Walker, C. (2013). Considering counterfactuals: The relationship between causal learning and pretend play. *American Journal of Play, 6*(1), 15-28.

Grain, M. (2012). Inspiring black girls to become doctors. *Essence, 43*(8), 66.

Gray, P. (2011). The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Play, 3*(4), 443-463.

Gray, P. (2015). Studying play without calling it that: Humanistic and positive psychology. In Johnaon, J. E., Eberle, S. G., Henricks, T. S., & Kuschner, D. *The handbook of the study of play.* (121-136). London: Rowman & Littlefild.

Green, G., Reid, J., & Bigum, C. (1998). Teaching the Nintendo generation? Children, computer culture and popular technology. In S. Howard (Ed.) *Wired-up: Young people and the electronic media.* (pp. 19-41). London: UCL Press.

Hanline, M. F., Milton, S., & Phelps, P. C. (2010). The relationship between preschool block play and reading and maths abilities in early elementary school: A longitudinal study of children with and without disabilities. *Early Childhood Development and Care, 180*(8), 1005-1017.

Harris, P. L. (2000). *The work of the imagination*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Henricks, T. (2014). Play as self-realization: Toward a general theory of play. *American Journal of Play, 6*(2), 190-213.

Hills, M. (2002). *Fan cultures.* New York: Routledge.

Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Kalmer, K. (2008). Let's give children something to talk about: Oral language and preschool literacy. *Young Children, 63*(1), 88-92.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Towards a theory of culturally-relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*, 465-491.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leontiev, A. N. (1944). The psychological principles of preschool play. In M. Cole (Ed.), *Selected works of Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontiev* (pp. 341-354) Ashland: Marxist Archives, Bookmasters.

Lillard, A. S. (2001). Pretend play as Twin Earth: A social-cognitive analysis. *Developmental Review*, *21*, 495–531.

Lillard, A. S., Lerner, M. D., Hopkins, E. J., Dore, R. A., Smith, E. D., & Palmquist, C. M. (2013). The impact of pretend play on children's development: A review of the evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, *139*(1), 1-34.

Logue, M. E., & Detour, A. (2011). "You be the bad guy": A new role for teachers in supporting children's dramatic play, *ECRP, 13*(1).

Luke, A., Carrington, V., & Kapitzke, C. (2003). Textbooks and early childhood literacy. In N. Hall, J. Larson, & J. Marsh (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood literacy* (pp. 249–257). London: Sage.

MacGallivray, L., & Martinez, A. M. (1998). Princesses who commit suicide: Primary children writing within and against gender stereotypes. *Journal of Literacy Research*, *30*(1), 53–84.

Marks-Tarlow, T. (2010). The fractal self at play. *American Journal of Play*, *3*, 31–62.

Marsh, J. (2000). Teletubby tales: Popular culture in the early years language and literacy curriculum. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 1*(2), 119-133.

Marsh, J. (2006). Popular culture in the literacy curriculum: A Bourdieuan analysis. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *41*(2), 160–174.

Mears, R. (2005). *The metaphor of play: Origin and breakdown of personal being*, 3rd ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Miller, E., & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school.* College Park, MD: Alliance for Childhood.

Möller, S. J. (2015). Imagination, playfulness, and creativity in children's play with different toys. *American Journal of Play, 7*(3).

Morison, P., & Gardner, H. (1978). Dragons and dinosaurs: The child's capacity to differentiate fantasy from reality. *Child Development, 49*, 642–48.

Morrow, L. M. (2005). Language and literacy in preschools: Current issues and concerns. *Literacy Teaching and Learning,* 9(1), 7-19.

Nueman, S. B., & Roskos, K. (1992). Literacy objects as cultural tools: Effects on children's literacy behaviors in play. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 27, 203–225.

Nelson, K., & Seidman, S. (1984). Playing with Scripts. in Inge Bretherton (Ed.), *Symbolic Play: The Development of Social Understanding*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Nichols, S., & Stitch, S. (2000). A cognitive theory of pretense. *Cognition*, *74*, 115–147.

Nicolopoulou, A., Barbosa de Sá, A., Ilgaz, H., & Brockmeyer, C. (2009). Using the transformative power of play to educate hearts and minds: From Vygotsky to Vivian Paley and beyond. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, *17*(1), 42-58.

Nitecki, E., & Chung, M. (2013). What is not covered by the standards: How to support emergent literacy in preschool classrooms. *The Language and Literacy Spectrum, 23*, 46-56.

Paley, V. G. (2005) *A child's work: The importance of fantasy play*. Chicago; University of Chicago Press.

Pellis, S., Pellis, V., & Himmler, B. T. (2014). How play makes for a more adaptable brain: A comparative and neural perspective. *American Journal of Play, 7*(1), 73-91.

Pompe, C. (1996). But they're pink!- who cares!: Popular culture in the primary years. In M. Hilton (Ed.), *Potent fictions: Children's literacy and the challenge of popular culture*. London: Routledge.

Richert, R. A., Shawber, A. B., Hoffman, R. E., & Taylor, M. (2009). Learning from fantasy and real characters in preschool and kindergarten. *Journal of Cognition and Development*, *10*, 41–66.

Richert, R. A., & Smith, E. I. (2011). Preschoolers' quarantining of fantasy stories. *Child Development*. 82(4). 1106-1119.

Rideout, V. (2013). Zero to eight: Children's media use in America in 2013. *Common Sense Media*.

Rubin, J. L. (2011). No more junk toys: Rethinking children's gifts. *Mothering. 121*. Retrieved from http://www.mothering.com/articles/no-more-junk-toys-rethinking-childrens-gifts/

Rubin, K. H., Fein, G. G., & Vandenberg, B. (1983). Play. In P. H. Mussen & E. M.

Hetherington (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology*, Vol. 4. 693-774. New York: Wiley.

Ryan, E. L. (2010). Dora the Explorer: Empowering preschoolers, girls, and Latinas. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, *54*(1).

Seban, 2015

Singer, D., & Singer, J. (1992). *The house of make-believe: Children's play and the developing imagination.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Sharon, T., & Woolley, J. D. (2004). Do monsters dream?: Young children's understanding of the fantasy⁄reality distinction. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *22*, 293–310.

Shortridge, P. D. (2015). A different view of the ice. *Montessori Life*. *27*(1).

Skolnick, D., & Bloom, P. (2006). What does Batman think about SpongeBob?: Children's understanding of the fantasy/fantasy distinction. *Cognition*, *101*, B9–B18.

Snow, C. E., Burns, S. M., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Sutton-Smith, B., & Sutton-Smith, S. (1974). *How to Play with Your Child (and When not to).* New York: Hawthorne.

(Terenzini, Springer, & Pascarella, 1993)

Taylor, M. (1999). *Imaginary companions and the children who create them*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press

Thomas, A. (2006). Fan fiction online: Engagement, critical response, and affective play through writing, *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. *29*(3), 226-239.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1967). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Soviet Psychology*, *5*(6–18).

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weisberg, D. S., Zosh, J. M., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2013). Talking it up: Play, language development, and the role of adult support. *American Journal of Play, 6*(1), 39-54.

West, M. I. (2010). Mark Twain, Walt Disney, and the playful response to pirate stories. *American Journal of Play*, *2*(4).

White, R. E. (2012). *The power of play: A research summary on play and learning*. St. Paul: Minnesota Children's Museum.

Wohlwend, K. (2009). Damsels in discourse: Girls consuming and producing identity texts through Disney princess play. *Reading Research Quarterly,* 44(1).

Wohlwend, K. E. (2011). *Playing their way into litearcies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Wohlwend, K. (2012). Are you guys girls?: Boys, identity texts, and Disney Princess play. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 12*(1), 3-23.

Wohlwend, K. E., Buchholz, B. A., Wessel-Powell, C., Coggin, L. S., & Husbye, N. E. (2013). *Literacy playshop: New literacies, popular media, and play in the early childhood classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Wolfe, P., & Nevills, P. (2004). *Building the reading brain: PreK-3*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Woolley, J. D. (1997). Thinking about fantasy: Are children fundamentally different thinkers and believers from adults? *Child Development*, *68*, 991–1011.

Woolley, J. D., & Cox, V. (2007). Development of beliefs about storybook reality. *Developmental Science, 10*, 681–93.s

Woolley, J. D., & Ghossainy, M. E. (2013). Revisiting the fantasy-reality distinction: Children as

naïve skeptics. *Child Development.*

Yawkey, T. D. (1983). Pretend play and language growth in young children. *US Department of Education.*