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PRACTICAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONAL PRACTICES: GLOBALIZATION, POSTMODERNISM, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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THE AMORPHOUS PRETEND PLAY CURRICULUM: THEORIZING EMBODIED SYNTHETIC MULTICULTURAL PROPS

Richard Johnson

ABSTRACT

Early childhood education is a visual field. Much of our work begins with observing and documenting children's talk and actions. The knowledge gleaned from looking is then used to plan curriculum, much of which involves the creation of materials-rich environments to engage children's learning. Yet, quite often we do not question what we see. This chapter uses visual cultural theory to examine the multicultural props used in dramatic play with young children. By examining these images for what is both seen and not seen, I illustrate how these props create a specific discourse in early childhood education.

The historical and current work of many early childhood educators is grounded in visual culture (Devereaux, 1995). Much of our training begins with learning how to look at and observe children's learning as the basis for planning responsive curriculum. As the field has expanded, teachers have

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learned to observe and study children even more meticulously. We systematically observe much earlier in the life cycle (e.g., *in utero* via ultrasound technologies and at the moment of birth via standardized APGAR tests), and we look much more intensely, all the time (Billman & Sherman, 2003). Moreover, with the latest electronic technologies we can now access and use observation systems online (e.g., Work Sampling System, 2003) that make documenting children's learning more efficient and easier to administrate.

The knowledge about children produced through these observational technologies informs the ways in which educational environments are structured and curriculum experiences are enacted. Just as the methods and systems of observing children have become more refined over time, so have the materials and the physical environments in which children learn. Now, teachers can choose from a myriad of commercially available materials, and many classrooms house numerous learning centers where children can explore subject matter from early numeracy and literacy concepts to social skills. Thus, the educational environments that are based on our ever-increasing knowledge of young children's learning also encourage children to engage with the visual.

The improved ability to look and the pedagogies promised by these new observation systems, however, also enhance the ready consumption and further reproduction of traditional ways of knowing children (Gandhi, 1998; Johnson, 2005). While systematic study using new technologies may produce more accurate knowledge of children's learning and therefore contribute to improving classroom materials and environments, it also makes it more difficult to question what is problematic about such systems and what they enable us to see.

In the very recent past, I have become enthralled by visual culture theory and critiqued my long-held interests in video, in learning technologies, in the environment, in the current and historical study of children and childhood (Jenks, 1995), and in my recent work on touch/no touch (Johnson, 2000) and how this work is visually perceived and received (Banks, 1998). Visual culture theory helps with further understanding the extent to which the cultural formations we inhabit have become increasingly saturated by visual images entailing a multiplicity of purposes and intended effects. As Britzman (2000) notes,

> Looking is an act of choice. Through looking we negotiate social relationships and meanings. Looking is a practice much like speaking, writing, or signing. Looking involves learning to interpret and, like other practices, looking involves relationships of power. To willfully look or not is to exercise choice and influence (p. 10).

Using visual culture theory has pushed me to search beyond normative analyses and to begin to understand what the field of early education chooses to see and not see. This focus on the visual is what pushed me to analyze play and early childhood curriculum materials and their links to multicultural education – which is what the remainder of this chapter critiques.

VISUAL CULTURE AND EARLY EDUCATION

Many years ago, I was conducting a longitudinal study of several preschools in Hawaii and the primary assessment instrumentation included the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* (ECERS) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2004). While initially finding this tool useful as an overall observation instrument and talking point for post-observation reviews with the center staff, what I found to be especially helpful was the item "Cultural awareness" on the ECERS. This particular study was being conducted at a time when multicultural studies were gaining widespread acceptance. I found that the usage of the Likert-type scaled terms which ranged from "Inadequate" ("No attempt to include ethnic and racial variety in dolls, book illustrations, or pictorial bulletin boards") to "Excellent" ("Cultural awareness evidenced by liberal inclusion of multiracial and nonsexist materials plus cultural awareness is part of the curriculum") was invaluable for the staff to consider how their physical environment and the explicit curriculum responded to cultural issues in early education.

While, the "Cultural awareness" item drew our attention to cultural issues in the environments where we worked (Clark, DeWolf, & Clark, 1992), a more retrospective read helps me now to see that it probably did not assist us in looking much beyond the physical environment itself to consider more critically, issues of culture, racial identity, ethnicity, and gender (Narayan & Harding, 2000). By assuming that the inclusion of diverse images of people through the use of multicultural toys and books (see Figs. 1 and 2) will socialize children about difference, we did not go any further in examining the meanings that were being conveyed to children by our daily talk and teaching actions (Johnson, 2004). Thinking back to that study in light of recent research on visual culture and representation (Fischman, 2001; Jenks, 1995; Metz, 1982), it is easy now to see the inherent danger of imposing simplistic, additive structures (i.e., more racially "correct" dolls and puzzles equals attendance to multicultural education; see Figs. 1 and 2) into action research and professional development models.

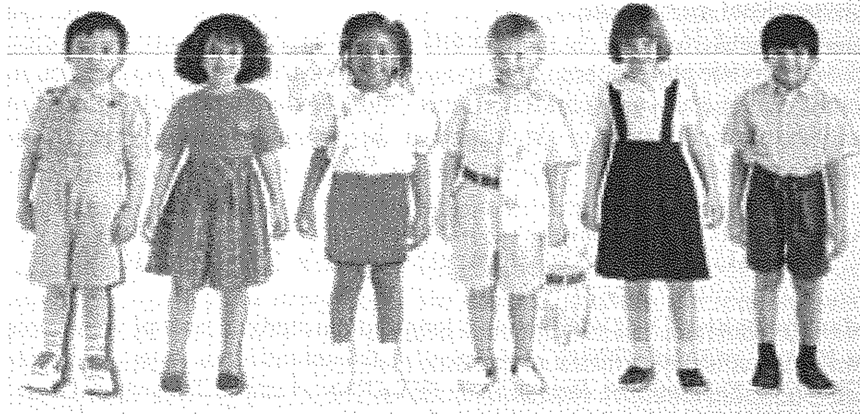

Fig. 1. Multi-Cultural Children Puzzle.

This additive practice is similar to the use of tourist curricula (Au, 2001; Richards, 1993) in an attempt, honest or otherwise, to honor multicultural education. Only recently did schooling include a wider diversity of experiences of racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Hidalgo, 1993), and responding to that push, Marsh (1992) has commented that too many teachers, in their politically correct zeal to teach multiculturally, fell into the trap of teaching a tourist curriculum that uses a less authentic approach. "Tourist curriculum" is the term used to define the teaching of cultures through the use of "food, traditional clothing, and household implements" (Derman-Sparks, 1989, p. 7). Like others, Marsh stated that through a tourist curriculum "multicultural activities become isolated or contained in one unit rather than being infused into the daily curriculum. Students are misled into thinking that various cultures are based on holidays and celebrations rather than being a part of everyday life" (1992, p. 270). Clark et al. (1992) addressed parallel issues when they reviewed "Play kit" approaches to multicultural education, in which,

> Students brought out material elements of culture, such as tepees or war dances, for a few days, rather than the essence of a people's beliefs and way of life. They told a story, sang a song, or constructed an art project, and then got back to the 'regular' curriculum, without ever having touched on important issues and ideas. Near thanksgiving we still visited school after school where headbanded children threatened to scalp us (Clark et al., 1992, p. 5).

Quite often, multicultural props and manipulatives are used as a kind of tourist approach to address diversity issues. By adding these materials to the

Fig. 2. Multi-cultural Children Doll.

dramatic play area, it is assumed that children will be socialized into understanding that there are many different kinds of people all of whom are equal. Visual culture theory urges teachers to look carefully at these props and manipulatives (see Figs. 3–7), and to examine these images beyond the pointed advertising slogans or comments that support the use of these products as part of a multicultural curriculum (e.g., other captions report that the use of these particular toys: "Foster[s] a positive awareness and inclusive attitude towards individuals with physical challenges even during block play;" "Role playing is made easy with these 7 occupational hats;" and "These 8 wonderful play hats let kids assume so many imaginative roles;" Constructive Playthings, 2003, p. 15). The next section illustrates how visual culture theory can be used by teachers to consider both the explicit and hidden meanings associated with various multicultural props.

Fig. 3. House, Furniture and Black Family.

(RE)READING PRETEND PLAY IMAGES THROUGH VISUAL CULTURAL LENSES

In her acclaimed critical work on British paintings, Beth Tobin (1999) suggests that "one way to recover subaltern subjectivity from an elite text is to read the imperial text symptomatically – that is, reading what is not there but is implied and called into existence by a series of oppositions" (1999, p. 12). She goes on to discuss how she reads a set of particular 18th century

Fig. 4. Posable Asian Family.

paintings as colonial discourse "for they participate in specific practices and ideologies that circulated" (p. 12) in and about that period. Much like Tobin's work, here I am interested in a particular set of images, how they represent a field of study, and how they too speak to a dominant discourse in early childhood education. I recognize that as a poststructuralist reading, "words and images do not merely reflect the world, but mediate, even create, what we believe to be reality" (Tobin, 1999, pp. 13–14).

The focus here is to incorporate multiple interactional analyses to assist in the critique of multicultural pretend play props. In doing so, I consider some of Lather's (1998) critical work that encourages a "multiplicity of readings by demonstrating how we cannot exhaust the meaning of the text, how a text can participate in multiple meanings without being reduced to any one, and how our different positionalities affect our reading of it" (p. 125). By looking at and analyzing both the visual images (i.e., photographs) that these ethnic families represent (e.g., the Hispanic, Asian, African-American, and White pretend play family from the Constructive Playthings catalogue and website) and the physical props themselves, I provide alternative interpretations of the multicultural curricula aids that are meant to help teachers and children navigate and consider an increasingly diverse world (Jameson, 1990; Mirzoeff, 1999).

Fig. 5. House with Furniture/Asian Family.

The aim of the analysis of these photographs and depictions of multicultural toys and props is to look, and look again and again at these images and what they represent (Tonkiss, 1998). That is, by incorporating visual cultural analytical techniques into this critique of multicultural play objects, one is able to look well beyond the static nature of these plastic toys as they are advertised and typically added into classroom activity settings (Cohen, 1998). Visual culture theoretical and analytical techniques assist in envisioning these images in deeper ways (Rose, 2001), understanding further how these curriculum tools, as presented, and typically critiqued, add very little to a revitalized multicultural movement.

The following pictorial samples (see Figs. 3–7), like the example presented earlier (see Fig. 1) include several typical catalog pictures or images, images which in their familiarity represent the early childhood education field. The

Fig. 6. Pliable White Family.

following analyses offer a way of exploring how the images present and construct particular ways of seeing the world. This particular type of discourse analysis critiques "how images construct accounts of the social world ... paying careful attention to images, and to their social production and effect" (Rose, 2001, pp. 140–141). To understand what discourses are at play in these images, I employ Cowling's (1989) methodologies of looking for textual and visual commonalities.

In this regard these images or artifacts can be seen as constitutive because they speak to the notions of the natural child, the romantic, unthreatened, enlightened being who appears very much at one-with-nature (Buckingham, 2000; James & Prout, 1997). Children depicted in these curriculum content catalogues constitute the normative child who is doing what the field of early education demands s/he do – learning by doing/hands-on learning, actively involved in discovery-based learning, at one with nature, peaceful, joyful, and pure. All that even while these multicultural props and toys represent so many people(s) who have witnessed and experienced so much pain, oppression, suffering, humiliation, death, and betrayal by the very persons addressing and playing with them in the catalog, the colonizer him/herself.

Fig. 7. Pretend Play Family/Hispanic Family.

Looking across the images depicted in Figs. 2–6 it is possible to see common themes that counter the intent of the props as conveyers of multicultural meanings (Davey, 1999; Hayes, 2002). The first theme is that of happiness as every image, whether a real-life character holding a plastic or cloth doll or the doll(s) itself, to a character (and there were close to 40 in these few pictures) are all depicted with happy expressions which are readily visible on their faces. Similarly in each image, the characters are surrounded by an abundance of family members; and all seem to have afforded the confines of middle- to upper-class type housing (i.e., two and three story structures with a lot of furniture). Moreover, many of the children depicted in the images are being tended to and cared for by adults – there is always a

mother and a father present, seen holding hands and seeming to watch over and care for the younger characters. What is also apparent is how easily the characters are depicted in certain natural positions. The family size of seven people is deemed *natural*, despite the ethnic or cultural background, as family size and composition are statically portrayed – all families shown have the same number of members. Living in a large house with a wide range of identical furniture seems equally likely, no matter your family size and/or ethnic background. Together, these images negate the wide range of diverse circumstances of the many children who live in quite different situations (e.g., homeless, more than one family sharing living space, different socio-economic circumstances), and belong to an array of family structures (e.g., single parent, step, interracial, gay families). In this global era (Trouillot, 2002) all apparently belong to one and in that collapse and act of containment, in that normative translation, they lose particular unique aspects of their identity (Young, 2002). In a similar manner, they also locate Asian, Hispanic, and African-American families in identical contexts such as two and three storied houses (and associated furnishings) that are connected with white middle- and upper-class families, whilst potential African-Americans and Hispanic homeowners are denied bank mortgages based on their ethnic identity (Mohanty, 1995).

Another related issue is how highly *interchangeable* these respective multicultural characters appear to be. In terms of gender, everyone is well-matched. For every girl present exists a boy; for every family of one ethnic group (e.g., Asian) there was an identical variation of a family of another ethnic group (e.g., Hispanic or African-American). Alongside the displays of houses available, there is a choice from a wide array of interchangeable characters. As well, the materials themselves (hardplastic or soft cloth) can be physically manipulated as they are "pliable" or "posable".

In short, these renditions of family are not only stereotypical, but the stereotypes are static and essentialized across ethnicity, race, and socio-economic circumstances. Every family depicted consists of equal number of children and there is ALWAYS a mother and father present, and usually grandparents as well. Family size is consistent across ethnic lines, from Asian to White, and all families are housed similarly.

Representation and Fetishism

The few images from popular early education catalogs that have been traced here, interpolate the classic child(ren) of early childhood education – that

romantic, natural child, the unthreatened, enlightened being who is portrayed unproblematically in the larger field of early education. Children – regardless of race, socio-economic circumstances, culture, and gender, and whether a prop or the child manipulating the materials – are always portrayed as naturally happy, safe, and members of stereotypical families (Johnson & Sumsion, 2004). The normative figures visualized in these images – the 'multicultural' dolls, puzzles, and curriculum props are doing precisely what the field demands they do – offering themselves as potential materials, which can assist the dramatic play process while embedded in a context said to reflect "real life." As such, these props do what is demanded by the field of early childhood education in that they facilitate learning by doing, and stimulate discovery-based learning about multicultural issues which are visualized as peaceful, joyful, intentional, and pure.

Like so many other disciplines, culture has become an instrumental part of the early education field. The additive nature of how culture and diversity are addressed as evidenced in these images continues to be a repetitive, atheoretical, fetishistic operation (Hight & Sampson, 2002; O'Loughlin, 1992). Additive "neutral" pedagogical processes, like the placement of Asian dolls or a Black or "posable" White family into the dramatic play curriculum without further critical interrogation, indicate a "present without depth" (Eco, 1986, p. 53), and remain problematic because of the lack of accompanying histories of colonization, slavery, and other humanitarian circumstances. Hight and Sampson (2002) suggest that the very present danger in these types of simplistic actions is that they "perpetuate myths ... and in the process are consigned to a condition of relative invisibility" (p. 7). The ongoing lack of recognition and the pretense that happiness, safety, and interchangeability are normative aspects of childhood continues to marginalize alternative understandings of children and their many lived circumstances (Burman, 1994; Jenks, 1996; Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 1992), early childhood theoretical positions (Canella & Viruru, 2004; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Tobin, 1997, 2001), and restricts the field from advancing intellectually.

Rather than seeing these images and the products they support and wish to sell as helpful, easily added and integrated into a dramatic play and a multicultural curriculum to enhance interactions and understanding of the world, an alternative read, or a "supplemental" interpretation, notes the restrictive, confining manner in which these very props operate. While they are meant to "Foster a positive awareness" and "assume so many imaginative roles," a more interrogative, critical, oppositional look suggests that they are in fact nothing more than "controlled imaging aimed at controlling controlled imaginations" (Hunt & Frankenberg, 1997, p. 118).

"LOOKING" FORWARD

Over the past decade or so, the field has strived to make inclusive changes (Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Tobin, 1992), so much so that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) added culture to their Developmentally Appropriate Practices (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) framework. Similar adjustments were made in the popular curriculum products available, so that curriculum vendors now have a multicultural index designation as part of each catalog.

However, as this analysis illustrates the multicultural materials we use represent multiple and interwoven layers of control of imaging and imaginations (Hunt & Frankenberg, 1997). Challenging the dominance of the essentialized and romanticized images of children and childhood that constrain teachers to additive approaches in addressing issues of diversity in the classroom requires that we all learn to look critically as we actively make sense of the world. This looking is "about constructing particular versions of truth, questioning how regimes of truth become neutralized as knowledge ... thus pushing the sensibilities of [teachers] in new directions" (Britzman, 2000, p. 38). Had I not looked hard here, with intentionality(s) and through alternative critical lenses of visual culture, I would have failed to see so much, as I have failed so many times before, and continued to visualize these particular photographs and objects with rapt purpose as a fervent spectator.

If we envision our collective theoretician/practitioner selves and the greater field from a critical, action-oriented research perspective (Gruenewald, 2003), then we have to self-consciously and collectively incorporate resistant methods of studying (Mohanty, 1995), interpreting and further understanding the various disciplines, materials, and methods we encounter in our individual and collective work. These potentially emancipatory methods could assist us in moving past the simple replaying of typical ways of seeing early childhood practices and assist us in reworking (Loomba, 1998) and renegotiating the past and the present (Tompkins, 1995). These research methods can actively assist us in our respective discipline(s) as we seek to "open [up], disinterring the repressed and troubling questions ... that loosen the ties that bind" (Pajaczkowska, 2001, p. 4). Visual culture theory offers early childhood educators tremendous opportunities for rewriting culture.

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IMPLEMENTING *TE WHÀRIKI* AS POSTMODERNIST PRACTICE: A PERSPECTIVE FROM AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

Since 1998 New Zealand early childhood educators have been required to implement programs consistent with Te Whàriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), a bicultural early childhood curriculum that validates and enacts kaupapa Màori (a Màori theoretical paradigm reflected through the medium of the Màori language). This curriculum document affirms and validates the status of Màori, the indigenous people of this country so that Pàkehà (New Zealanders of European descent) early childhood educators now need to reposition themselves alongside Màori whànau (families) and colleagues who remain the repositories of Màori knowledge. This means a decentering of the "mainstream" curriculum to develop models that parallel Màori language and content inclusively alongside western knowledges in all facets of the early childhood curriculum. This chapter utilizes data from a recent study to illustrate some ways in which the bicultural requirements of Te Whàriki, are being understood and experienced by early childhood teachers, teacher educators, and professional

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