

Do you know me? Do teacher attitudes towards gaming influence learning?

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“Sooner or later, those who grew up without video games will have to understand the gamers” (Carstens, A & Beck, J., 2005, p. 22).

Do we create an environment where the use of ICTs is controlled in ways that are meaningful to teachers but is limiting for children? I wondered why I was drawn to write about ‘gaming’ for young children as there has already been so much written over recent years, but I have been intrigued because it is still such an emotive subject. Within early childhood, people have strong and emotive views about the values of gaming. Many teachers see little value in gaming or else make sure the games fit into what they see as appropriate learning. Many games have prescribed or narrow outcomes around problem solving, such as focussing on colours, numbers or shapes.

What intrigues me is the sort of gaming for young children that has unclear outcomes, games where children compete against themselves to go to a higher level. Games that are usually played by older children but are now played by children as young as four.

Te Whāriki is a socio-cultural document and gaming offers opportunities for learners to take turns at being leaders and to build relationships. To be literate and to think are primarily social and cultural achievements. We can learn so much from children who play games but we must take them and their games seriously.

This common interest that gamers have draws them together socially and we are reminded that human learning is fully embedded in a social and cultural world. Socio-cultural literacy theorists acknowledge the powerful role that technologies play in everyday life. We are reminded by Joce Nuttall that ‘empowerment’ as written in Te Whāriki, views learning as an “active co-construction between children and adults” (Nuttall, 2003, p.181). Instead of positioning the adults as ‘knowers’ and

the children as receptors of power and knowledge, gaming is one domain where children are the leaders, especially the boys in early childhood. They bring funds of knowledge with them from home, and for many of them gaming is a big part of their home life.

Guy Claxton (2004) writes that growing intelligence is not just a matter of learning a few techniques, it’s as much to do with attitudes, beliefs, emotional tolerance and values. He suggests that teachers have to give up old beliefs about having the right answers and allow children to see them learn. That this is instrumental in helping children to become better learners. Is gaming being denied because of our lack of understanding? Or is it only available as a reward as opposed to the child who can practise for long periods at an early age? Often time for gaming is confined to certain times of the day or regulated by a timer, ‘to be fair’ to others. Or children are only allowed to play games that teachers deem to be appropriate, which can leave children, and in particular boys, only able to access games that are not interesting to them. And some children need longer than the limited amounts of time that they are allowed at ‘gaming’. How would we feel if we had to abandon something we were passionate about if ‘time was up’?

Print literacy is not enough in the modern world

Video gaming is multimodal literacy. In our 21st century, children are becoming literate in many ways and gaming is one way to think about learning and knowing. Designers of good video games know that learning for human beings requires ‘practice’ and often we lose what we have learnt from school because we no longer practice when we leave. Gaming allows children to enter at some level where they can achieve enough initial success to keep practicing and getting better. There is a low cost for failure and a high reward for success. Children can save the game and re-enter

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where they failed. Good video games don't allow players to become complacent and react to problems in the same well practised way. They will recognise these behaviours and disreward them so they need new strategies. Gladwell puts it like this, "Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that makes you good" (2008, p. 42).

There are four-year-olds able to 'clock' adult games such as Batman. This game takes 20-30 hours, you can leave it and return when you are ready. Watching Max, a four-year-old re-enact this game through his pretend world, which is how young children make sense of their real world, I was intrigued to see him take on the role as Batman and act out the words he had 'read' while playing the computer game. He leapt, he crouched, he grappled, he lunged as he explored his ideas and images at taking on the role of Batman and a new learner identity. Do we foster this knowledge and build on it or does it get ignored in favour of other forms of learning? To play is to learn and gaming for children is another way to foster imaginations and creativity to enhance their pretend play. There are many games without the guns and gore and we can look to games in other genres that will have the same outcomes.

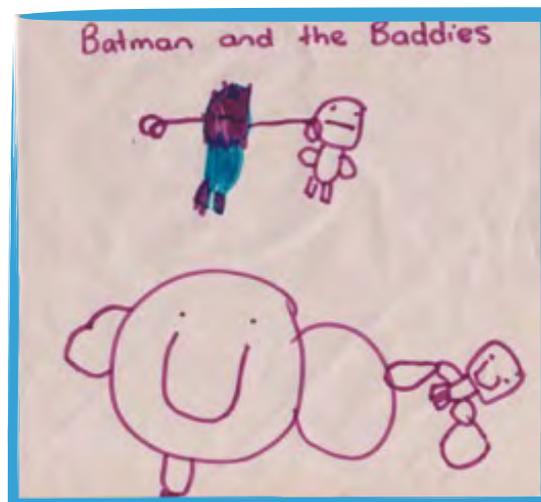
Building on strengths and interests is a major role of working within our socio-cultural curriculum. "The expectation of adults are powerful influences on children's lives. If adults are to make informed observations of children, they should recognise their own beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes and the influence these will have on the children." (Ministry of Education, 1996 p. 30). Popular culture is a major source of literacy learning for many children (Fox 2001). It plays an important role in children's play and identity construction. If we are teaching intuitively and wisely we will be aware of games that may not be suitable for young children and when and where children may need to be encouraged to try new ventures for health reasons, exercise, posture etc.

McGonigal (2011) writes about the research that has shown that gamers are doing exceedingly well in the business world. They have business acumen, great work ethic and competitive drive. They are able to overcome the challenges that the business world puts in front of them. Many of the dispositions

needed for these 21st century citizens are fostered in early childhood. Let's allow children to work to their strengths and build literacy knowledge through gaming and thus strengthen learning outcomes.

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