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They're loving it: how preschool children mediated their funds of knowledge into dramatic play

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## **They're lovin' it: how preschool children mediated their funds of knowledge into dramatic play<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The funds of knowledge framework promotes connecting community contexts with curriculum aimed to activate children's prior knowledge. Typically, teachers determine what knowledge sources harmonize best with their existing programming, potentially omitting particular resources that may not align. Young children, on the other hand, can act as agents when integrating knowledge for themselves into play. This article explores how children mediated their cultural knowledge into dramatic play and what factors were key to empowering children to naturally incorporate funds of knowledge across contexts. Grounded in critical sociocultural theory, findings reveal that children use mediation as a form of power and agency to act as experts in their learning experiences and interactions with others. Early childhood educators must design a classroom space that is consistent and promotes social interactions, establish relationships with and amongst children, support the co-construction of new understandings of the world, and recognize and honor all sources of knowledge.

**Keywords:** popular culture; sociodramatic play; mediation; preschool; agency

### **Introduction**

A central tenet of the *fund of knowledge* [FoK] framework in education is for teachers to design learning experiences that draw from children's historical, social, and cultural knowledge. From the earliest writings, scholars linked Vygotsky's theoretical approaches of learning and development to the transformative power of drawing on children's cultural ways of knowing for curriculum planning (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). The emphasis was to understand the rich social and linguistic resources present in all children's daily lives and communities. In early childhood classrooms where play continues to be the center of curriculum, this means providing a context for young children to negotiate and co-construct new understandings that are connected to their cultural resources (Wisneski & Reifel, 2012).

Funds of knowledge methodology places the teacher as a learner in students' lifeworlds with the onus on the teacher to determine what cultural knowledge and content is of value to transfer across contexts. In an attempt to know their students holistically as children rather than just in the context of schooling, teachers can use a number of tools, such as neighborhood observations, home visitations, attending extracurricular events, games, and performances, to move toward an asset-based perspective. Challenges exist as a tendency is to identify daily home practices and skills that best align with the existing curriculum and are positive (Zipin, 2009). In addition to this romanticized view of FoK, teachers must navigate power roles and boundaries with families (Rodríguez, 2013; Whyte & Karabon, 2016) and recognize that their own professional and personal FoK that influences what they improvisationally draw on in play (Graue, Whyte, & Karabon, 2015).

Teachers have responded to these concerns by encouraging students to determine their own FoK and actively design lessons and curriculum around their self-selected resources and skills

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(Thomson & Hall, 2008). Children study and share family traditions, histories, and activities with classmates to further understandings of differing perspectives and unpack biases. More informally, young children incorporate these elements into play. For instance, in the dramatic play area, children reproduce real-life scenarios in their own imaginative way. Given the incredible influence mass media has on their lives, this may mean that young children will opt for FoK based on popular culture (Hedges, 2011). Early educators may grapple with identifying this knowledge as valuable to learning at school because it may not align with the disciplinary focus of the existing curricula.

This article focuses on the dramatic play area of a preschool classroom to examine factors were key to empowering children to naturally incorporate FoK in learning. More specifically, this study focuses on children's recreation of McDonald's™ to learn how children mediate their cultural knowledge across contexts.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Play***

Play remains a cornerstone of curriculum for young children (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2014). It places learning and development within children's social and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Play is an opportunity for children to connect various elements of their lives together to replicate what they know and socially construct new understandings as they engage with others, materials, and the environment. Often referred to as their 'work', when children play they have the opportunity to creatively and imaginatively imitate previous experiences they participated in or observed (Rogoff, 2003).

The dramatic play area is one such space in early childhood settings that lends itself for children to demonstrate culturally and socially learned practices, such as cooking or family interactions. The space typically includes a combination of realistic objects (e.g. phone, utensils, clothes) that direct the play as well as open-ended materials (blocks, boxes) to promote imaginative manipulation. Children make a narrative by sharing knowledge through plot lines of play, character role play, and reenactments (McDonnell, 2000).

A teacher can observe the play for children's FoK and discover their way of life (Riojas-Cortez, 2001). Teachers keen to designing spaces that are culturally responsive provide artifacts that demonstrate a value of children's culture in the classroom. Even further, teachers can join children inside their imaginative play not only to extend the play but also to genuinely learn about children's expertise (Fleer, 2015). However not all socially replicated play is accepted in educative spaces. Labeling children's popular culture interests as rich resources is a challenge (Hedges, 2011).

### ***Mediation***

A key principle of the socio-cultural perspective places value on building from children's prior knowledge to co-construct new understandings. Children benefit from the integration of cultural resources into learning experiences through cultural mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). In cultural mediation, the individual uses representational (e.g. computers, maps), semiotic (e.g. language), or mental (e.g. memory strategies) tools to problem solve, inform actions and make meaning in various contexts (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). The cyclical notion of mediation situates knowledge in historical and cultural contexts in order to carry out existing cultural activities, interactions with the social world, and in the construction of new knowledge.

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Teachers can enhance a social, cultural, and historical perspective by incorporating students' social and cultural histories and ways of knowing into learning experiences (Souto-Manning, 2013). Educators use cultural mediation in an attempt to link everyday traditions, behaviors, and communication styles (outside of school) with more scientific knowledge (in school). From a Vygotskian (1978) perspective, the teacher's role is to assist within children's zone of proximal development to contextualize resources and connect interests. This plays a crucial role in the development of deeper understanding. Through adult guidance or collaboration with peers, young children can advance their abilities beyond their individual capabilities.

Drawing from the same principles, the FoK framework engages teachers in fostering the mediation of students' cultural ways of knowing between the structures of home and school and attributing a value to their cultural resources (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). This is not to be understood as a direct transfer of information. Instead, it is a continuous, context-based reorganization of information. Adults play a vital role in assisting young children in mediating their cultural and historical connections by designing curriculum and learning experiences that build on children's resources and expertise. The ownership of curriculum transformation then lies with the teacher (Zipin, 2009). What is troublesome in early education is that what is prioritized or deemed 'appropriate' for play may not be the same for children and adults (Henward, 2015).

### ***Popular culture***

Children are situated in a world of commercial cultural influences that begins as early as gestation (Kincheloe, 2002). It makes sense that as children age and develop understandings of the world that their interests and activities would reflect social and cultural impacts. Early childhood literature about popular culture in play often is focused on media forms, such as T.V. shows (Hedges, 2011), characters (Henward, 2015), or music (Axelrod, 2014), and how children take up roles as actors in an attempt to recreate what they have heard and/or seen.

Whilst the term popular culture is commonly associated with media forms, it is important to not overlook cultural institutions (e.g. fast food restaurants, big box companies). People mutually engage with these social places and influence the practices and traditions of these community institutions. It may be easier to recognize the ways adults participate in cultural institutions however young children are active participants too. Take for example McDonald's™, a globally visible and prominent entity. Like other fast food chains, it's intention is to produce food for consumption, yet as Kincheloe (2002) writes the symbol of McDonald's is marketed in such a feverish way that it has become an experience and an anecdote of Western lifestyle. Aside from physically visiting McDonald's, children are constantly inundated with subliminal messages through cross-promoted marketing, leaving a cultural influence from toys, food products, and promotional offers. It is only natural for these observations and their participation at this franchise to have an influence in shaping their interests, curiosities, and identities.

Naturally, one would expect to see these influences present in children's play scenarios in home and schooling contexts. However, as early childhood curriculum continues to be dominated by notions of standardization (Sleeter, 2005), accountability (Brown, 2009), child development (Hatch, 2010), planning for educative experiences tend to exclude popular and commercial culture trends. But academic content does not have to be given up in lieu of interest-based activities. In fact, research focused on content knowledge, such as science, suggests value in engaging children's multiple resources (including popular culture interests) can support academic achievement while honoring students' voices (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2009).

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Bringing these two together offers the chance for young children to possess power in their learning and incorporate interests that are important to them to connect their lifeworlds to schooling.

A dominant discourse in early childhood curriculum literature is of popular culture being a 'problem' or 'inappropriate' for school most notably because the content knowledge within popular culture play may not be obvious to teachers (Edwards, et al., 2016). Popular culture items in play are considered a distraction from more typically accepted early childhood items such as playdough or blocks. Teachers may be concerned with the hegemonic narratives associated with popular culture media products (Henward, 2015) and the over-marketization to young children (Linn, 2004). In response early educators may limit commercial products in preschool classrooms, however children "learn how to navigate, negotiate, and subvert teachers' expectations about cultural objects and texts" (Henward, 2015, p. 221). As young children do so, they learn ways to mediate their cultural interests into play and curriculum.

For children, popular culture interest "is one of the few places where they can speak for themselves, produce alternative public spheres, and represent their own interests" (Giroux, 2000, p.13). In Simmons' (2014) study of how elementary-aged children shared popular culture knowledge during drama, she concludes that "popular culture and drama allows children a momentary power balance within a realm, the school curriculum, where they are predominantly positioned as powerless" (p. 281). Children utilized their shared knowledge of popular culture to construct sophisticated, mature play scenarios, deepen social interactions, extend language use, and strengthen their identities through developing peer cultural understandings. With even younger children, the same behaviors and acts are present in their free play and learning (Edwards, et al., 2016; Hedges, 2011).

If young children are considered active agents in understanding their world and their learning (Hedges, 2014), then adults must recognize rather than be in competition with their perspectives (Nicholson, Kurnik, Jevgjavikj, & Ufoegbune, 2015). Children being viewed as experts when it comes to their own lives can shift by whom, how, and what is mediated across contexts. This article aims to examine the question: What happens when children are given a space for their voice and interests to influence the direction of learning?

### **The Study**

This article is based on part of a larger investigation into how early childhood educators take up and enact the FoK framework. The broader research design involved two in-depth case studies that examined how prekindergarten teachers conceptualized the FoK framework within three contexts: a professional development (PD) setting, in students' homes, and in the classroom. Early educators (n=23) studied the framework in a two year PD program focused on developmentally and culturally responsive mathematics. Over four graduate level courses, teachers met weekly to (re)think about the learning opportunities, delivery of instruction, and resources available for young children and to reconstruct them bearing in mind children's cultural experiences and resources from outside of school. The PD program wove in discussions of what high quality mathematics looked like in early childhood.

The PD was offered concurrently with the Summerville<sup>2</sup> School District's first year of a state-funded, tuition-free, play-based preschool program. This initiative provided over 2,000

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<sup>2</sup> All names including city and school site have been changed to protect the identities of teachers, staff, children, and families in this study.

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four-year-olds access to public prekindergarten programs that are play-based, developmentally appropriate, and align with state early learning standards. To serve the large racially, ethnically, and economically diverse community, Summerville housed four-year-old kindergarten classes in elementary schools and early child care and education sites. This preserved the already established prekindergarten programs present in the Summerville community.

Two case study participants were purposefully selected from this PD program who demonstrated understandings of children's cultural resources through pedagogical decisions, specifically environment design, curriculum, and verbal interactions. Participants were identified based on their Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, & Hamre, 2009) classroom quality scores, specifically looking at Instructional Support<sup>3</sup> scores which assess concept development, quality of feedback, and language modeling. The intention was to study teachers who demonstrated social learning pedagogy and practices.

Sadie, the focal teacher for this article, was teaching a publicly funded prekindergarten class at London Bridges Child Care Center located in a working class area of Summerville. The center offered a 3-hour morning session 4 days per week with optional wrap-around care, a fee-based service for families before and/or after prekindergarten, for enrolled students. For the 2012-2013 school year, 19 students were enrolled. Sadie and Sylvia, the educational assistant, were present daily in the classroom.

This study drew on ethnographic foundations to learn about the social phenomenon of how children incorporate popular culture interests or FoK into play and importantly, how this is honored and supported by adults in the early childhood setting. In many ways, Sadie and her class at London Bridges serve as an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) to understand what happens in instances when children's resources and interests clash with hegemonic cultures of schooling. 4- and 5-year old children at London Bridges were often observed discussing video games and television shows, singing hip hop songs, and brought popular culture toys for show and tell. Sadie welcomed these references to their lifeworlds and in most cases expanded on them.

### **Method and Analysis**

Examining children's cultural knowledge in play meant that research had to include multiple methods and points of analysis to understand the role of the physical space and the social interactions. In spring of 2013, a total of 36 hours was spent as a participant observer in Sadie's classroom. I wrote detailed ethnographic field notes including dialogue and context, took photographs, and wrote post-observation reflections. As an unfamiliar adult and observer, I recognize that my presence may have affected the behaviors of the children and the classroom setting (Patton, 2002). Additionally, I conducted neighborhood observations within a two-mile radius of the site taking photographs of areas, such as parks, homes, businesses, and restaurants to enrich my understanding of the community and residents' cultural patterns. To understand pedagogical decisions and classroom design, I conducted open-ended interviews with Sadie asking her about her personal and professional learning experiences, the curriculum, and the application of FoK and early math into her practice.

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<sup>3</sup> The three main domains of focus in CLASS are emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Each of these domains includes multiple dimensions, rated on a 1-7 scale, that are later used to calculate a quality rating score. See Pianta & Hamre (2009) for detailed information about the scoring system.

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Data was analyzed in order to understand what factors and how children are empowered to mediate their own FoK across contexts. Initial analysis included open coding yet was structured with external codes that drew from socio-cultural- historical theory, specifically the concept of mediation, to look for themes and explanations in the data. The dramatic play area was of particular interest because it was a space where children consistently incorporating popular culture references and cultural knowledge (e.g. playing Spiderman™, Frozen™, or singing radio hit songs). Patterns in popular culture play, such as cultural congruence, were pulled apart and recombined to develop a more robust description of the how children mediated knowledge with others across contexts. The interviews were coded for teacher pedagogical beliefs and for confirming and disconfirming evidence of what was observed. Analytic tools in the NVivo software were utilized to run queries and matrices of the data.

### Findings

The results discussed below shed light Sadie and the classroom space supported young children in mediating their knowledge of McDonald's across contexts and with one another. The construct of funds of knowledge was well-suited to make sense and appreciate the extensive understanding these children have of the rules and roles of this cultural institution. As the play scenario was negotiated and carried out, three themes were consistent in the data: (1) the designed classroom environment, (2) establish relationships with and amongst children, and (3) interactions amongst children play significant roles in empowerment of young children's voices in learning experiences.

#### *Consistent materials and promotion of social interactions*

As young children engaged in free play, they socially co-construct meaning with others and the classroom environment (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). Often, they drew on their social and cultural knowledge to replicate what they observe and experience in life. What began as one child's idea evolved into sophisticated and reoccurring play. At the beginning of April in Sadie's classroom, Omar decided to use large wooden blocks to build a McDonald's Drive thru. He recruited other children in the area to help him construct the structure.



Figure 1

Within minutes there are blocks set up. Omar is sitting in the middle of the blocks and Oscar is behind him playing with blocks on the shelf. Mike is at a Lego table with a red bin tipped on its side and a long Lincoln log. On the block structure, a hollow box is the cash register and beanbags are used as Happy Meal toys.

Chris: We are **busy** on Friday.

Omar: One hundred million bucks.



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Sylvia:       What are you doing?  
Omar:         Making McDonald's!

Mike goes over to the red bin and sits behind it. He picks up the Lincoln Log. He is talking into it about toys.

Omar:         I need more toys!  
Oscar:        I need more food!

Mike holds up a block to his eye. He is looking at something.

Mike:         (yells) The toys are coming! The toys are coming!

Mike goes over to the shelf with bins. He spends some time looking at the bins. He takes a bin of plastic animals and dumps it behind Oscar. Oscar is holding up a long rectangular block.

Oscar:        You guys! Customers are coming!  
Omar:         Talk to the customers.  
Oscar:        I can't I am looking through the binoculars. I can't talk on the phone.  
Omar talks into a block.  
Omar:         I need more toys and chicken nuggets.

Across the room, Sadie is filling up water at the sink for the sensory table. Mike, Omar and Chris go over to her.

Mike:         I am the boss of McDonald's.  
Sadie:        Oh you're the manager.

The children in this play experience used a variety of materials in imaginative play to represent real life objects from McDonald's. All of the items (wooden blocks, bean bags, toy cars and animals) used in this play were consistent classroom materials that were available everyday. Not only did children use these familiar items in mature play to represent real things (Bodrova, 2008), such as a block to be a phone to see customers, they also demonstrated their social and cultural experiences and resources from their lifeworlds. At some point, these children must have, in some way, observed staff at McDonald's perform the actions of taking orders and know the significance of toys.

Verbal interactions were also used in addition to the resources in the classroom to contribute to children mediating their FoK. In the scene above, the communication between the children in the block area was seamless and quick. They all appeared to have background knowledge of observing staff at a McDonald's restaurant and knew there were multiple roles to getting an order to a customer. The children shared their play with Sadie, who at that time was facilitating a small group activity, and she provided them with vocabulary to extend their knowledge.

The combination of symbolic representation while taking on and sustaining specific roles are characteristics of what Bodrova (2008) describes as mature play. In this particular scenario, children were able to mediate their knowledge into the dramatic, make-believe play with little adult interaction. Though Sadie was only directly involved when the children shared their play with her, her pedagogical decisions were indirectly present in the scene. She made decisions

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about classroom environment design and to have consistent materials available that supported social engagement amongst student peers.

Cultural connections occurred at other times than just free play. Established routines also allowed for moments in which children demonstrated historically and culturally accumulated knowledge. When children could anticipate what would happen next, they were able to draw connections between the current experience and prior lifeworld knowledge (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Sometimes the connections were obvious and other times the teacher asked furthering questions to uncover how the child was making the associations.

### ***Establish relationships with and amongst children***

The emphasis of the FoK framework is on understanding the rich social and linguistic resources present in all children's daily lives and communities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). In many ways, Sadie modeled a desire to accept all knowledge and experiences as valuable. Other adults and children in Sadie's classroom also demonstrated this disposition by welcoming one another's ideas during play and other routine times.

Meal times in Sadie's classroom were family-style which meant the children helped set the table and serve themselves. Sadie and Sylvia, the educational assistant, sat and ate with the children. Discussions were informal and lighthearted in nature.

During a breakfast conversation on a very cold temperature week in April, Sadie is serving sliced pear to the red table where Sylvia and seven children sit.

Kyle:           Guess who I saw at McDonald's?  
Sadie:           Who?  
Kyle:           Natasha.  
Sadie:           No way!  
Kyle:           Yes Way!  
Sylvia:          (to Corrina) What did you do last night?  
Corrina:        Nothing, because my mom forgot.  
Nikki:          We went to McDonald's but we didn't eat anything.  
Shamya:        Did you play?  
Nikki:          Yeah. We just played.

It is important to add that this restaurant was a powerful aspect of many children's lifeworlds because their families frequented this fast food place. A McDonald's restaurant was one block from London Bridges and accessible by many of those who live in the area and for families and staff to stop at on their way to and from the center. McDonald's was not only a place for people to eat but a social space to gather. For these children, McDonald's was a cultural community place that played an important part of their lives (Kincheloe, 2002). Families went there in the bitter cold winter months to socialize with other adults and it served as a place for children to play on the playland structure.

At the end of April, Omar and Chris rebuilt the wooden McDonald's structure. The children still played a variety of roles and the materials from the block area were once again used for imaginative play.

When the 'cashier' was asked for a bag to take the big mac and fries home, he handed the 'customer' a large hollow box and took the invisible money.

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Omar: Chris, this is your cash register and this is my cash register. This is my money.

Omar: I would like chicken nuggets, a happy meal and a drink.

Chris: That will be \$.25.

Sylvia comes over to the block area.

Sylvia: You guys made McDonald's?

Chris: That will be \$500 million dollars. Here is your order. He put blocks inside of the hollow block.

Sylvia: Do you have a bag or something? How am I gonna carry all this home? Oh wait. I have an idea.



Figure 2

She puts the small wood blocks into a hollow block. As she does she says what each item is.

Sylvia: I got a big mac and some fries, some more fries, and a coffee and this... I don't know what this is. I didn't order this.

Chad: Nuggets.

Sylvia: That is exactly what it is!

Sylvia enhanced this play experience by incorporating the restaurant food names and authentic reactions with the imaginative play scenario the children started. Sylvia provided scaffolding of language and social competencies to mature the play and create a zone of proximal development (Bodrova, 2008) instead of academicizing the play or correcting the extravagantly fanciful \$500 million dollars,

Relationships amongst adults and children were established in this classroom. Sadie and Sylvia recognized the role of McDonald's in the lives of their students. Families carried disposable coffee cups and paper bags from McDonald's. Weekly, Sylvia brought her breakfast from there to eat with the children during meal time. The interactive and communicative approach present during meals as well as a shared understanding of terminology and behaviors of going to the fast food restaurant transferred into play scenarios. This is due in part to their established relationships and connections with one another.

### ***Co-construct new understandings***

Two weeks later in the beginning of May, TJ extended Omar's original structure by using blocks in a different way to build his own interpretation of a drive thru.

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TJ vertically stacks large block, places a thin cylinder at the top of the stack, and sings, "bada bum bum bum" (the McDonald's theme song). TJ sits down on the step and looks through the hollow block. TJ picks up a rectangle block and holds it to his ear to represent a fast food drive thru headset. He passes blocks through the hollow block.



Figure 3



Figure 4

TJ: (to himself) McDonald's. [Pause] Give me a soda.  
Sadie comes over and stands next to the block structure.  
Sadie: I will take a number 3.

TJ hands her a block.

Sadie: What about my drink?

TJ: Here's a soda.

Sadie: I want a milkshake.

TJ: Here you go.

Sadie: You didn't ask me what kind I want.

TJ: What kind do you want?

Sadie: Strawberry banana.

TJ turns around and pretends to push buttons.

TJ: (to himself) Hook up strawberry banana.

TJ hands Sadie a block.

Sadie: My little person would like a mini happy meal.

TJ gives her more blocks and tells her this is the toy.

Omar: I would like a happy meal...[pause]...with a chocolate shake.

TJ gives him blocks.

Jason: May I have um...a root beer and Toy Story cake?

TJ: Your food will be done in a few seconds. Here is your ticket.

Omar comes back over to TJ with his block. He hands TJ the block.

Omar: Where is my chocolate shake?

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TJ hands him a block. TJ calls to Sadie. He points at the Lincoln Log bin that he is sitting on.

TJ: I am sitting on money, Mr. Crab.

TJ sings 'SpongeBob Square Pants. SpongeBob Square Pants.'

Through verbal interaction, teachers and children co-constructed shared meaning of objects and ideas that meld cultural resources of school and home. TJ conveyed his idea to Sadie who responded to him to continue to play and reproduce an authentic customer reaction. This was an example of a feedback loop in which Sadie used questioning and statements to continue the conversation (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Omar enters the play and places a realistic order. Jason, on the other hand, understands that he can order food, however his order is not representative of menu food at McDonald's. TJ accepts this idea and continues the play by offering him a receipt. Interestingly, TJ further connected this play scenario of McDonald's to his interest FoK of the TV show Sponge Bob Square Pants. In the TV show, Mr. Crab is the manager of a burger shop and Sponge Bob works as a cashier.

The children in Sadie's class continued to recreate and play McDonald's through the end of the school year. In June during an exit interview, Sadie brought up the McDonald's play when asked about children's FoK in play. She discussed her students' recent interest in creating Dunkin Donuts in the block area and connected it to the McDonald's play.

Sadie: McDonald's is still cranking. Especially when Omar's here. Sometimes it doesn't happen when Omar's not here.

Anne: It's very intense.

Sadie: It is! But so is McDonald's, I guess [laughs].

Anne: And delicious. They're lovin' it, right?

Sadie recognized that Omar is a leader in this play scene and understood his direct family connection to the restaurant. Sadie explained that his mother uses McDonald's as an incentive for "good" behavior and it has a lot of power with him. Sadie saw these as instances to "incorporate a small bit of FoK. It doesn't necessarily have to be a big old theme. It can be little things here or there, like something they do on the weekends like go to Dunkin Donuts." She acknowledged that this was a step away from the traditional FoK approach of designing curriculum and saw how the cultural practice of visiting particular restaurants could be present in play.

## **Discussion**

Sadie took a sociocultural approach in the classroom. This rejects the typical learning situations where skills are transmitted from adults to children and students are perceived as passive learners who sit quietly and reproduce information. Instead, it focuses on the construction of authentic spaces where children can try and manipulate ideas as they make sense of the world. Children in these spaces are active in their own academic and cultural development and learn content through various social relationships facilitated by the teacher.

Most notably, the children in Sadie's classroom innovatively created the cultural place, McDonald's, in the block area. Through this play scenario the children demonstrated their understanding of the restaurant: the roles of employees and patrons, the commercial jingle, the

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cultural materials, the transactions, and the fast-paced nature of the eatery. Unlike a conventional approach to child-directed, popular culture scenarios in play, Sadie did not inundate the play with academic content. A discussion about money and the role of a 'manager' occurred, though I argue the mature play stayed alive over months because she provided consistent materials, participated in their cultural experience by ordering McDonald's specific foods and using vocabulary heard in that real-life space, and encouraged children to mediate and co-construct knowledge with one another.

The silent actor in empowering young children to mediate their own FoK was the classroom context. Sadie designed the physical space of the classroom to encourage social interactions and learning. Together, the group co-constructed a class culture that fostered children's sharing of their FoK with other children and adults. Because this space existed, children naturally integrated their cultural experiences, interests, and expertise into their play.

Researchers continue to recommend honoring and incorporating children's cultural resources and popular culture knowledge in learning tasks (Henward, 2015). Furthermore, teachers continue to seek ways to view children from an asset-based perspective, bridge connections between home and school, and integrate children's popular culture interests into play. This is beautifully idealistic and remains quite a challenge (Edwards, et al. 2016). With the growth of universal prekindergarten programs and growing diversity of student populations, many teachers acknowledge the importance of addressing individual needs of young children yet may struggle with the idea of allowing play that is FoK rich yet is not directly connected to the thematic unit or have apparent academic content.

Often, teachers view favorite popular culture characters or games as non-academic and of little to no value in the classroom. Hedges, Cullen, and Jordan (2011) argued that from a sociocultural perspective, popular culture interests influence young children's language, play, relationships, and behaviors in ways consistent with the FoK framework. Teachers who welcome children's interest-based FoK are demonstrating an acceptance of social norms and rules, values, behaviors, humor, and playfulness that are important for building social-emotional and cognitive skills at a young age. Further, child-mediated conversations about popular culture can lead to critical conversations about gender roles, identity, and other social justice topics.

The role of the teacher is to co-construct and mediate this space to foster child control to eventually do so independent of their assistance. This is especially true for teachers situated in an academically driven climate of schooling culture. González and her colleagues (2005) recognized that the emancipatory FoK approach contends with the push for standardization and can actually isolate teachers. Practitioners may find themselves in the crux of an incredible dilemma of how to retain play in prekindergarten classrooms that allows children's FoK in the current context of early childhood education. As Sadie reflected about McDonald's and Dunkin Donuts, stepping away from the thematic unit to incorporate little instances of FoK can work.

Teachers also require support in understanding that in a hybrid space that welcomes children's lifeworld knowledge and empowers them to use it in the school context has incredible effects on learning. Helping pre-and in-service teachers experience being inside the play with young children (Fleer, 2015) has potential to develop children's play and characteristics of teacher pedagogy. Teacher education and PD programs need to emphasize ethnographic methods and other ways to incorporate and honor children's cultural ways of knowing into school activities. Taken together, these approaches move early educators to reshape deficit perspectives.

## Conclusion

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This study draws attention to the importance of children mediating their popular culture interest into learning activities (play) at school and demonstrates that a lack of emphasis on cultural knowledge and resources can no longer be 'accepted' or 'justified' in early childhood education. Recent literature emphasizes the need for teachers to design learning experiences that honor and respond to children's cultural interests outside of school (Henward, 2015; Souto-Manning, 2013). While popular culture interests, such as tv show characters or McDonald's, may be difficult to view as a resource acceptable for an educational space, other forms of interest, such as holidays or construction vehicles, often are accepted and at times become themes of study. This is not to say that learning about diggers and bulldozers are bad or that understanding another's festivities is wrong. Rather, attention should be raised of why particular interests are deemed as of value to learning over others. The idea that we need to change in the way educators perceive their students' experiences outside of school is not new (Moll, et al., 1992). This approach assists teachers in reframing their professional dispositions to view all children as capable and active agents in their learning

Children need support and social interactions during play to mediate social and cultural knowledge across contexts. This can be from the environment, adults, and peers. Drawing on Vygotskian view of play, scholars such as Bodrova (2008) raise the question of the degree and quality of the adult mediation to propel learning and development of higher mental functions. Considering this spectrum of adult involvement is wide, variable and non-linear, additional research is necessary to truly understand teachers' spontaneous choices to connect children's interest FoK into activities, routines, and play. A study that included reflective interviews or written and oral reflection following instruction would allow access to the momentary decision making process (Loughran, 2002). This research would be twofold. It would provide the researcher insight into the teachers' thinking and potentially influence practice. A research study of this nature would also benefit from examining how connections to children's FoK were purposefully avoided and/or unintentionally unseen. What influences teachers' decisions to include or ignore particular FoK? Or popular culture? How do teachers determine what is "appropriate" for the classroom context?

Most importantly and widely overlooked in FoK and popular cultural interest research is the child's experience. The cultural experiences and expertise for children may differ from that of adults and other siblings in the household (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). Literature investigating the child's involvement in the household and cultural institutions such as McDonald's would provide insights into what children identify as their cultural knowledge. Doing this type of research with young children may be more of a challenge, yet it is completely possible. Exploring the child's role at home from their perspective would offer a view into *their* FoK in addition to the families.

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