Popular Culture, New Media and Digital Literacy in Early Childhood

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Chapter 12

Resistance, power-tricky, and colorless energy

What engagement with everyday popular culture texts can teach us about learning and literacy

Vivian Vasquez

Picture this. It is fifteen minutes before dinnertime. Patricia decides to put this lag time to good use by sitting with her six-year-old son, Kris, at the dining room table to read a series of cards, each with one word written at the center.

Patricia holds up a card with the word ‘had’ on it.

Kris: h-h-had
Patricia: That’s good you’re sounding out. [Holds up a card with the word ‘after’ on it.]
Kris: af-ter
Patricia: Really good sounding out Kris. Read this next one slowly so you don’t miss any sounds.

[The phone rings while she is holding up the next card. She continues to hold up the card in one hand while picking up the phone with the other. While she’s on the phone Kris takes out a Pokémon card from his pocket and begins looking at it.]

Put that card away. That’s why you’re having trouble keeping up with your reading.
Kris: g—o—ing
Patricia: Excellent.

[In the background the sound of a timer goes off. Kris’s mother gets up, opens the oven door and announces that dinner is ready. From the other end of the kitchen she calls out, ‘Daddy can finish up with you later’.

As his mother busies herself with final dinner preparations, Kris turns to me and asks if I would like to see his new Pokémon magazine and cards. Pokémon is a name given to a popular series of what are called ‘pocket monsters’, imaginary characters that have various capabilities such as being able to transform into different versions of the same character, and powers, such as using water, electricity, or fire to fend off opponents. These characters live in an alternate reality where they have the ability to evolve by winning battles over
one another (Vasquez, 2003a). With its introduction to American television in 1996, *Pokémon* quickly became popular culture material for children in playgrounds, neighborhood streets and schoolyards. It was an imported Japanese cartoon dubbed in English and created in anime style. Anime film was first introduced in the 1960s by master animator Osamu Tezuka who in 1963 produced Japan’s first televised anime, *Astro Boy* (Vallen and Thorpe, 2001). At the time, anime was produced by painting images on cels. Celluloid animation is based on a series of frames or cels in which the object is redrawn in each consecutive cel to depict motion. This was the technique used by all cartoon creators before the dawning of computer animation.

**Kris:** Look at this (pointing at a chart in the magazine). This says resistance, it tells you how much resistance these (pointing at various cartoon characters, known as Pokémon) have to each other and these (pointing to a symbol at the bottom of one of his cards) tells you how much energy you need to do Power Tricky (a gaming strategy particular to *Pokémon*). And this down here (pointing to yet another symbol on another *Pokémon* card) tells you how much energy, like colorless energy, you need to win.

**Vivian:** How do you know all this about *Pokémon*?

**Kris:** Actually, my friends and I learn together. We read the trainer magazines and make our own cards and watch TV.

In the modern world, language is not the only important communication system. Today, images, artefacts, and many other visual symbols have gained in significance. So it would not be surprising if you have been witness to exchanges similar to those at the opening of this chapter. Children, more so than adults, seem to have an affinity with these new communication systems, as is displayed by Kris in the second exchange and as evidenced by his comment regarding where he learned about *Pokémon*, namely through magazines, through conversations with his friends, through creating his own cards and through television. It is therefore not enough to rely on a single cueing system, as was the case in the exchange between Kris and Patricia where phonics was given center stage. In order to best support the literacy learning of children today, we need to understand what literacies they currently learn and use and what participating with such literacies affords them. While talking about everyday literacies, Alvermann and Hong Xu (2003: 147) note that popular culture ‘is not something to be shunned, set aside, or kept at a distance’.

### Texts for a new millennium

Popular culture texts such as *Pokémon* cards and games have become the kinds of materials that many children ‘read’, have access to, and participate with as literate beings in the new millennium. For the purposes of this chapter, I will
use ‘popular culture’ to refer to everyday culture where audiences negotiate its consumption (Alvermann and Hong Xu, 2003). Pokémon has become such a hot topic for conversation that even John Stossel, a media personality who co-anchors a popular television show in the USA called 20/20, dedicated a segment to it in which he argued against those who claim that Pokémon viewing encourages children to gamble (Vasquez, 2003a). Pokémon has even had a turn at being on the cover of Time magazine (1999). Pikachu, one of the best-known Pokémon characters, was included in Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, joining the ranks of Snoopy and Curious George in an American tradition that started in 1927. In November 2001, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences sponsored a lecture on Japanese animation (Vasquez, 2003a). Even more interestingly:

the University of Hawaii Center for Japanese Studies Endowment, in November 2000, sponsored a two-day conference, Pikachu’s Global Adventure. The conference involved an international team of professors, lecturers and media scholars from around the world who gathered to discuss the phenomenon Pokémon

(Vasquez, 2003a: 119)

In this chapter, I will highlight opportunities for engaging pleasurable and powerful literacies by looking at three- to eight-year-old children’s appropriations of the popular text, Pokémon. Specifically, I will show and tell of the literacies children learn and use while participating as a member of a Pokémon club, and as they create their own Pokémon cards and work with various Pokémon texts. My intent is to show what engagement with such popular culture texts can teach us about learning and literacy and to discuss the powerful and creative learning people can bring to the aspects of popular culture with which they choose to identify.

The children whose work I describe were part of a five-year study on literacy development and popular culture that took place at a child care pre-school and before and after school center in a suburb of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. The center is located in a lower-middle-class neighborhood where approximately 50 per cent of the children receive government subsidy. The children are culturally diverse, many of them being first-generation Canadian. For a summary of data sources and analysis, refer to Appendix 1. This study made use of interpretive methods (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992) and data were analyzed inductively.

Show and tell: literate behaviors that come from children’s participation and use of popular culture texts

As a former pre-school and elementary school teacher of fourteen years, I ask myself how young children’s participation with popular culture texts could
inform my own literacy teaching practice and my students’ learning. This is, in fact, what is central to this chapter. My intent is not to sell teachers on using popular culture text in the classroom, even though I have been witness to the power in doing so when teachers are able to negotiate interesting and meaningful ways to support their students’ cultural and linguistic experiences (Luke, O’Brien and Comber, 1994; O’Brien, 1998; Kavanagh, 1997; Dyson, 1999, 2003; Alverman and Hong Xu, 2003; Carrington, 2003). Further, I am not arguing that everything learned from playing Pokémon is good, but that there are a lot of good things we can learn about how best to support children’s literacy development by watching children closely as they engage with such texts. My intent, therefore, is to show and tell about the sorts of literate behaviors that come from children’s participation and use of popular culture texts such as Pokémon. I believe there are some important questions that those of us who work with young children can ask with regard to popular culture texts. The following is a list of such questions that can act as a starting point for this work and which formed the basis for the research questions in this study:

- What motivates children to ‘stay in the game’ in spite of the increasing complexity of that game? What attracts them to the game in the first place?
- How can we capitalize on the new literacies developed through engagement with everyday popular texts that children encounter during the course of daily life?
- What does it mean for learning to be social? What happens to literacy development in these social spaces?
- What role do multimodal texts and the integration of different symbol systems play in literacy development?

Pokémon texts are just one example of the sort of highly complex literacies that children are appropriating, especially since the dawn of the new millennium and the multi-mediation of texts. Luke (2000) refers to these complex literacies as ‘new literacies’. In essence, this chapter is about developing ‘new critical literacy’ pedagogies and curricula that go beyond debates over basic skills and best methodology, but that are informed by observation and analysis of children’s participatory engagement with texts for which they have an affinity and for which they are willing to participate in complex learning situations for a sustained period of time.

Comber (2001) describes critical literacies as involving people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life in schools and communities, and to question practices of privilege and injustice. She continues to suggest that often – perhaps usually – critical literacies are negotiated in the more mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life. As such, a critical literacy curriculum needs to be lived. It arises from the social and political conditions
that unfold in communities in which we live. Therefore, it cannot be traditionally taught. In other words, as teachers we need to incorporate a critical perspective into our everyday lives with our students in order to find ways to help children understand the social and political issues around them (Vasquez, 2004).  

Critical literacies include an ongoing analysis of textual practices: How do particular texts work? What effects do they have? Who has produced the text, under what circumstances, and for which readers? What’s missing from this account? How could it be told differently? (Comber, 2001: 1). My experience working with teachers attempting to engage in critical literacy shows me that in many cases, social issues are treated as variables to be added to the existing curriculum. This, rather than using these issues to build curriculum, is done because the topics are associated with cynicism and unpleasurable work. However, critical literacy does not necessarily involve taking a negative stance, rather it includes looking at an issue or topic in different ways, analyzing it and hopefully being able to suggest possibilities for change or improvement.

**Popular culture texts: an introduction**

I was first introduced to the world of *Pokémon* gaming by my nephew, Curtis (see Figures 12.1 and 12.2), who purchased his first set of cards at age six when he and my husband Andy walked into a corner store in his neighborhood and he noticed familiar television cartoon characters on the packaging of

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*Figure 12.1* Curtis creating his own *Pokémon* cards
some collector cards. The children I write about in this chapter were from the before and after school center Curtis attended.

I have written previously (Vasquez, 2003a) about Curtis’ engagement with Pokémon cards, highlighting the literacies Curtis learned and used as he created his own Pokémon cards (see Figures 12.3 and 12.4).
In particular, I have used Gee’s (2003) principles of learning to show that many of the same principles apply to the construction, understanding and design of the Pokémon cards. In a study of first-person shooter games, Gee used previously documented research on literacy development regarding important principles of learning to unpack the principles of learning that undergird the playing of computer games (Gee, 2003). In the study, he developed a collection of learning principles, such as *Learning about and coming to appreciate design* and *Design principles are core to the learning experience* (Gee, 2003). I have summarized the intersections between some of Gee’s principles of learning and the repertoire of skills children use when designing such cards. Table 12.1 represents this summary and is included here to illustrate specific connections between Gee’s principles of learning and the skills used by children in designing their Pokémon cards.

**Inserting unofficial curriculum**

Pokémon has been banned from Curtis’ school, so he is able to do this kind of work only at the before and after school center, at home, or while with his neighborhood friends. The kind of work that counts at school is represented in Figure 12.5. It stems from a story starter that he and his classmates were required to use during writing time in his third grade classroom. Upon closer
Table 12.1 Intersections between creating Pokémon cards and Gee’s Principles of Learning

Active, Critical Learning Principle
All aspects of the learning environment including the ways in which the semiotic domain is designed and presented are set up to encourage active and critical, not passive, learning.

Design Principle
Learning about and coming to appreciate design and design principles is core to the learning experience.

Semiotic Principle
Learning about and coming to appreciate inter-relations within and across multiple sign systems (images, words, actions, symbols, artifacts, and so forth) as a complex system is core to the learning experience.

Committed Learning Principle
Learners participate in an extended engagement as extensions of their real-world identities and

Practice Principle
The learner gets lots and lots of practice in a context where the practice is not boring.

On-Going Learning Principle
The distinction between learner and master is vague, since learners, thanks to the operation of the ‘Regime of Competence’ principle listed below, must, at higher and higher levels, undo their routinized mastery to adapt to new or changed conditions. There are cycles of new learning, automatization, undoing automatization, and new reorganized automatization.

Situated Meaning Principle
The meanings of signs (words, actions, objects, artifacts, symbols, texts, etc.) are situated in embodied experience. Meanings are not general or decontextualized. Whatever generality meanings come to have is discovered bottom up via embodied experiences.

In order to trade cards successfully players engage in an active, not passive, flurry of decision-making regarding gaps in their card collections along with determining how the value of particular cards would increase the worth of their collection.

The children found great pleasure in creating their own cards. To engage in the redesign of cards required an understanding of how the cards were designed in the first place.

While creating their cards, the children drew from and made use of multiple sign systems through engagement with such resources as books and magazines, videos, and the Internet.

The children live in Canada and were used to the metric system. The cards made use of the imperial system. While creating their cards, therefore, they made use of a conversion program they found on the internet to convert the Pokémon’s weights and heights from imperial to metric measurement.

The children took on the role of Pokémon trainer as they created and designed their cards. With lots of effort and practice they played out this Poke-world identity for extended periods of time.

The sustained time they were able to devote to the task of designing was impressive.

Card manufacturers were very good at sustaining gamers’ interest by continuously putting out different versions of the cards. With each new version came another complex set of understandings. With this players were required to continuously adapt to new or changed conditions for trading, collecting and designing.

While designing Pokémon cards the meaning of signs are situated in the designer’s experience as a collector and trader of cards which is contextualized based on who the other trainers are and the corpus of cards that they have on hand.
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texts, etc.) are situated in embodied experience. Meanings are not
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**Intertextual Principle**
The learner understands texts as a family ("genre") of related texts
and understands any one such text in relation to others in the
family, but only after having achieved embodied understandings of
some texts. Understanding a group of texts as a family (genre) of
texts is a large part of what helps the learner make sense of such
texts.

**Multimodal principle**
Meaning and knowledge is built up through various modalities
(images, texts, symbols, interactions, abstract design, sound, etc.),
not just words.

**Intuitive Knowledge Principle and Affinity Group Principle**
Intuitive or tacit knowledge built up in repeated practice and
experience, often in association with an affinity group, counts a
great deal and is honored. It is not just verbal and conscious
knowledge that is rewarded.

Learners constitute an 'affinity group', that is a group that is
bonded primarily through shared endeavors, goals, and practices
and not shared race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or culture.

**Bottom-Up Basic Skills Principle**
Basic skills are not learned in isolation or out of context, rather
what counts as a basic skill is discovered bottom up by engaging in
more and more of the game/domain or game/domains like it. Basic
skills are genre elements of a given type of game/domain.

**Dispersed Principle**
Meaning/knowledge is dispersed in the sense that the learner shares
it with others outside the domain/game, some of whom the learner
may rarely or never see face-to-face.

**Insider Principle**
The learner is an 'insider', 'teacher', and 'producer' (not just a
'consumer') able to customize the learning experience and
domain/game from the beginning and throughout the experience.

While designing *Pokémon* cards the meaning of signs are situated in
the designer's experience as a collector and trader of cards which is
contextualized based on who the other trainers are and the corpus
of cards that they have on hand.

Designing their own cards required the children to frequently
engage with a variety of related texts. They knew which magazines
to go to for information on the strengths of the various characters
and which internet sites could offer them further information, how
the magazines and knew/worked in conjunction with the internet
sites and other resources to provide them with the information
they needed.

It goes without saying that meaning and knowledge underlying the
creation of *Pokémon* cards was built up through various modalities
and not just printed words.

Curtis and his friends formed what Gee refers to as an affinity
group, that is a group bonded through shared endeavors and
practices. Knowledge gained through repeated practice and
experience carried with it great cultural capital. For example, Curtis
became better and better at knowing how to draw the various
characters and became 'the' primary resource for neighborhood
children who wanted to design their own cards.

The more that Curtis and his friends created their own cards and
engaged in the exchange of cards the more they liked it and the
more they learned about it. As such this learning always took place
in social spaces in particular contexts. The experiences he had with
his affinity group provided opportunities for him to take on
different roles as 'insider', 'teacher', 'producer' and 'consumer'.
The next day he saw his pig but the pig turned into a Bull. The boy went on the bull then they climbed the Bean Stalk. When he was on the top he saw a trail of gold. When he reached end he saw 100 carat gold harp. He grabbed all of

Figure 12.5 A story written by Curtis at school as part of the official curriculum
inspection, however, the ways in which Curtis is able to insert his interest in *Pokémon* into the ‘official curriculum’ become noticeable, but only to those who know *Pokémon*. The ‘O’ in ‘once upon a time’ is not just any ‘O’. It is in fact a Pokeball, a cage of sorts used to keep pocket monsters. The Pokeball is also a sign of an impending Pokebattle. The cover of his journal is peppered with pocket monsters. He is able to insert his interests because his teacher is not familiar with ‘Poke discourse’ or the ways of talking and doing by those familiar with *Pokémon*.

The text Curtis has created is therefore heterogeneous. It contains a combination of ‘official’ classroom text (assigned genre, assigned format, assigned base topic) and ‘unofficial’ classroom text (*Pokémon*). His story represents an instance of Bakhtin's heteroglossia, where struggles over difference and different ideologies take place (Bakhtin, 1981). The struggle in this case takes place between the text that Curtis is told to write for class and the text that Curtis wants to write regarding *Pokémon*. Foucault (1982) talks about how language users are both produced by discourse and producers of discourse. Curtis’ story reflects how he is forced to comply with creating text assigned by his teacher while at the same time interrupting that text by his insertion of a Pokeball into his story. This interruption of the official classroom text is readily recognizable to his peers but remains invisible to his teacher. As such, the text carries cultural capital in his peer world.

The question we need to ask here is, how can we strike a balance between creating spaces for childhood popular culture discourses in the classroom while at the same time making sure not to co-opt their interests? A growing number of accounts documenting such work with students are appearing in print (Alvermann and Hong Xu, 2003; Comber, 1993; Dyson, 2003; O’Brien, 1998; Luke, O’Brien and Comber, 1994; Vasquez, 2004). In the following section, I outline pedagogical approaches to using *Pokémon* texts which were undertaken with the children at the childcare center. The children were aged between three to eight years old.

**Toy packaging as text**

The children regularly brought to school toy packages and cut-outs from magazines to share with one another. Capitalizing on this, I asked them to bring in packaging from their *Pokémon* toys. The following exchange took place while a group of children and I were looking across a series of such texts which we spread out on the classroom floor.

**Vivian:** How many times do you see ‘Gotta Catch 'Em All'?³

**Curtis:** You can find ‘Gotta Catch 'Em All’ in almost all the posters that you find.

**Vivian:** Any ideas why that might be?

**Curtis:** Uh, I don’t know. I can take a guess though.
Vivian: Okay.
Curtis: Well in the show, the object is to catch all the Pokémon. So maybe that’s ‘Gotta Catch ’Em All’ means you gotta (pause) catch them all.
Vivian: So catching, is that the same or different as collecting?
Emily: It’s sort of like collecting cards.
Miguel: Except you’re collecting the Pokémon.
Emily: Who wants us to do that?
Miguel: The sellers?
Curtis: Ya, they make the Pokémon for their job.

This brief exchange set the groundwork for later conversations whereby the children and I began to look more closely at the use of words across Pokémon texts and how these ideologically position readers. We did an analysis of the texts by bringing to the fore the way that audience is maintained through the consistent use of the phrase ‘Gotta Catch ’Em All’, as Curtis noted, ‘in almost all the posters [author note: referring to toy packaging, posters, magazines and other Pokémon related products] you find’. We also brought to the fore the notion of consumerism when Emily asked, ‘Who wants us to do that?’ and Miguel replied, ‘The sellers’.

Vivian: If these posters and pictures didn’t have the images of Pokémon on them would you still know that these are Pokémon?
Curtis: Well yes because like I said before ‘Gotta Catch ’Em All’ is on almost everything.
Miguel: And they have the same kind of thing like they made a Pokémon pasta so it’s like you ‘Gotta Catch ’Em All’ except it’s you ‘Gotta Eat ’Em All’.
Vivian: So the ‘Gotta’ was the same the ‘’Em’ was the same and the ‘All’ was the same.
Emily: Right instead you don’t say catch. It’s eat. You ‘Gotta Eat ’Em All’.

In this exchange, the children begin to unpack how the same wording is used in different contexts, playing and eating, to encourage the same ‘collecting’ behavior. Emily shared later in the conversation that when she and her sister eat Pokémon pasta (pasta in the shape of Pokémon characters) they check to see which Pokémon they have eaten, with the goal of eating all the different characters.

Vivian: Let’s try to find all the words that have to do with catching or collecting. You said it has to do with collecting right?
Curtis: Yeah
Vivian: Okay so let’s find all the words that have to do with collecting.
Miguel: Catch . . . best
Vivian: D’best
Emily: D’best
Vivian: What do you think that has to do with collecting? D’best?
Miguel: Like you gotta get the best or something like that.
Vivian: And you said the best is . . . ummm . . . what are the three categories?
Curtis: Rare, common, uncommon
Vivian: So then the best would be which . . . which one would the best be?
Emily: Rare.
Vivian: Let’s look at this one to see if there are things that have to do with collecting.
Curtis: Watch these little creatures grow like magic.
Vivian: How do we know this is a collecting thing?
Curtis: Well, it’s not really collecting it’s just like watching creatures grow like those dinosaurs that grow in water.
Miguel: But you when you see one grow maybe you want to see all of them grow.
Vivian: Yeah yeah
Curtis: Watch those creatures grow. They would be one.
Emily: After you want one, you might want more.
Vivian: That’s true. Let’s find some other words that mean collecting.
Curtis: Some . . . They . . . Their . . . 25 packs
Vivian: Any other ones?
Miguel: 10 packs . . . original
Vivian: You were talking about original before
Curtis: Uhum.
Vivian: What about this one?
Curtis: Collect more Puzzles
Emily: Again, more more more

This transcript represents qualitative analysis of media texts whereby the children and I began to uncover the symbols and codes used to position viewers in particular ways. By identifying the different ways that the phrase ‘Gotta Catch ’Em All’ was presented, Curtis, Emily, and Miguel began to recognise how Pokémon were being offered to them in intertextual ways as indicated by the use of such words and phrases as ‘D’best’, ‘original’, ‘25 packs’ and by the use of the plural version of merchandise as in ‘collect more puzzles’ or ‘25 packs’. These are some of the words and phrases used across Pokémon texts that engage the same practice of having to ‘catch ’em all’.

During other conversations, we engaged in quantitative analysis, counting and sorting different ways that collecting was represented and then talking about why certain representations were more dominant. For instance, we discovered that a large percentage of the words used to entice collectors fit into a category of words that mean something is rare or uncommon such as ‘D’best’ or ‘original’. Also, the way that words and phrases co-occur or
collocate (Fairclough, 1989: 115) as in ‘Gotta Catch ’Em All’ and ‘collect more puzzles’ offers a dominant scheme for classifying ‘collecting’ behavior. The main meaning relations (Fairclough, 1989) being used are synonyms, as in ‘catch’ and ‘collect’, and hyponymy, as in the use of ‘more’ and ‘D’best’, where the meaning of one word is included in the meaning of another word. Fairclough (1989: 116) suggests that ‘a text’s choice of wording depends on, and helps create, social relationships between participants’. For instance, the use of ‘collecting’ vocabulary has experiential value in terms of representing Pokémon trainers, who collect Pokémon cards.

**Quantitative analysis, semiotic analysis and sociological analysis**

The kind of analysis outlined above lends itself to semiotic analysis, the study of signs, symbols and signification systems. This semiotic inquiry can then lead, for example, to analyzing the use of color as semiotic shorthand to produce gendered texts. For instance, the creators of Pokémon claim that these creatures are not gendered, yet there are clearly recognizable features that lead children to assign gender orientations to particular characters. The following are some comments from the children with whom I worked when I asked them if Pokémon were male or female.

*Vivian:* Are Pokémon male or female? Are they boys or girls?

*Emily:* Clefairy could be a girl.

*Julia:* Sometimes Pikachu could be a girl but sometimes Pikachu could be a boy.

*Eric:* Pikachu sucks. Bulbasaur I think is a boy.

When I asked Emily why Clefairy could be a girl, she told me that first of all Clefairy sounds like a girl ‘but mostly she’s a girl because she doesn’t look like a boy’. She classified the Pokémon gender not from the semiotic information she had available, but with the semiotic information that is missing, claiming that Clefairy did not look like a boy and therefore must be a girl. Her second comment is directly tied to a conversation she had previously with Eric and Ryan who were busy sorting Pokémon according to whom they liked and didn’t like. Clefairy was one of the Pokémon that, according to Eric, ‘sucks’. When I asked the boys what they meant, they basically used the same rationale that Emily did, claiming that if Clefairy were a boy, its characteristics would be consistent with other ‘boy’ Pokémon, e.g. it would be a boy color like blue or green instead of pink, which is a girl color. In Emily’s schema, if Clefairy were a boy, then it probably would not have fit into the ‘sucks’ category. In the boys’ schema, if Clefairy were more like the other ‘boy’ Pokémon, based on its appearance, then it too would be male. When I asked Julia why Pikachu was sometimes a girl and at other times a
boy, she referred me to the cartoon. In the cartoon, Pikachu is often seen being cuddled and hugged by Ash, Pikachu’s trainer. When in battle, however, Pikachu is quick to shoot off lightning bolts to take down his opponents. Pikachu therefore has both ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ qualities. It is not surprising, therefore, that when I asked the children for their favorite Pokémon, it was the girls and younger children who chose Pikachu. (For further accounts of highly gendered discourses of early childhood refer to Carrington, 2003; Davies, 1989; McNaughton, 1997; McNaughton and Hughes, 2001; Vasquez, 2003b; Yelland, 1998).

Developing highly complex, new literacy pedagogies

*Pokémon* texts are just one example of the sort of highly complex literacies that children face today. In essence, this chapter has been about developing ‘new literacy’ pedagogies and curricula beyond debates over basic skills and best methodology. Rather, these new literacy pedagogies should be informed by observation and analysis of children’s participatory engagement with texts for which they have an affinity and for which they are willing to participate in complex learning situations for a sustained period of time. Through engagement with such texts, young children participate in an open pedagogy for which print text is not privileged over all other texts, especially those that stem from the children’s everyday lives. Rather, it becomes one of many symbol systems used as a generative multimodal tool for cultivating different forms of literate behaviors beyond those traditionally associated with literacy, such as reading and writing. This supports the idea that participating in children’s culture is based on an acknowledgement of a broad range of literacies. In this open pedagogy, where learning is not pre-determined but generated – based on a functional need to continue to learn to play the game better – children thrive as literate beings, continuously seeking out more knowledge and willingly taking up the challenge of participating in a game that grows in complexity and difficulty over time.

Notes

2 ‘Gotta catch ’em all’ is a phrase from the *Pokémon* rap that is at the beginning and end of the *Pokémon* cartoons.

References


### APPENDIX I DATA SOURCES AND ANALYSIS

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<td>Children's participation with popular culture texts</td>
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<td>Discourse on popular culture texts</td>
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**Note:** The focal students are those featured in this chapter.