Multilterate Star Warians:  
The force of popular culture and ICT in early learning  
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**Introduction**

Popular culture and ICT can have ‘a positive effect on the motivation and engagement of children in learning, particularly through the mediums of narrativity and storytelling’ (Hermes, 2005, p. 140; Smolin & Lawless, 2010, p. 184). McDonnell (1994) observes, ‘Kids’ culture has a particularly strong grounding in narrative because kids themselves demand it … It’s their main way of interacting and making sense of the world …’ (p. 15). Children’s interest in popular culture and ICT also gives ‘a variety of pleasures’ that includes exploration of ‘new images, new possibilities and new ways of seeing’ (Hermes, 2005, p. 140; McDonnell, 1994, p. 20). Illustrated in the Children’s Star Wars Project, popular culture and ICT have extensive propensity to enrich multiliteracies experiences.

The multiliteracies theoretical framework is embedded in *The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (COAG, 2009). The national framework articulates a vision for early childhood education (ECE), one that observes the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). A pedagogy of multiliteracies encapsulates these rights, the right to self-expression through individual meaning-making, the right to cultural and linguistic identity by adopting ‘a broader perspective of the student learner and valuing diverse ways of knowing, thinking, doing and being’ (O’Rourke, 2005, p. 10), and the right to be an active participant in all matters affecting their lives, including popular culture and ICT. To ensure children ‘maximize their potential and develop a foundation for future success in learning’ they need to be adequately equipped with skills necessary to interpret, exchange, and generate knowledge in new communication and text environments (COAG, 2009, p. 5).

The Children’s Star Wars Project documents how ICT extended children’s interest in *Star Wars* popular culture to enrich multiliteracies experiences. Eleven boys, aged between five and seven years, shared a desire to design a movie sequel communicating their story of good versus evil, and victory over defeat. As previously stated, the Children’s Star Wars Project was developed in a small Western Australian independent community school committed to the Reggio Emilia educational philosophy. The case study provides an exemplar of the integral relationship between early childhood pedagogy, multiliteracies metalanguage, and multimodal designs of meaning. Implications for educational research are that popular culture and ICT can be readily integrated with early childhood education (ECE) to broaden multiliteracies experiences. As shown in this case study, these experiences facilitate the achievement of *The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* outcomes.
proceeding to the case study, a review of literature pertaining to popular culture, ICT and multiliteracies in the early years is necessary to establish readers’ shared understanding of these concepts.

**Popular culture, ICT and literacy**

Out of school, children have extensive exposure to popular culture and ICT. Popular culture is an elusive concept and there have been many attempts to define its meaning. In the early years it is identified as ‘cultural texts, artifacts and practices which are attractive to large numbers of children and which are often mass produced on a global scale’ (Marsh, 2005, p. 2). Equally complex is defining ICT for ECE. This study adopted the definition ‘technologies that communicate information’, which is broad and includes a range of services, applications and technologies.

Popular culture and ICT offer ready sources of new literacies. Research findings on young children’s use of popular culture, media and new technologies (Marsh, 2005) revealed that children are immersed in these resources from birth. Edgar and Edgar (2010) confirm that, through interactive play, ‘most children acquire many of the media literacy functional skills early and without formal instruction’ (pp. 1–2). Zevenbergen (2007) observes that, when the ‘digital native’ commences ECE, the provision of ‘a digital habitus’ compatible with that experienced at home is best facilitated through ‘exploratory learning’ and ‘guided interactions’ (pp. 1 & 23). ICT, when infused with popular culture, offers participants a ‘journey to discover … a wide range of role models and images that show different cultures, styles and environments’ (Edgar & Edgar, 2010, pp. 1–2). These experiences enhance understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity.

A review of the literature confirms that teachers’ ‘very low levels of confidence and competence’, limited quality resources and inadequate ‘on the spot’ support impede integration of these resources in ECE (Plowman & Stephen, 2005, p. 6). There are also issues pertaining to ECE relevancy. Alliance for Childhood (2004), for example, insists that children’s use of ICT can cause ‘loss of wonder’ and results in ‘stunted imagination’ (p. 482). Abbott, Lachs and Williams (2001) rebuff these claims, providing case study evidence that children use ICT for creative purposes and, in the process, extended literacy learning. Students at schools in an inner-London district, some in ECE, were encouraged by teachers to become creative and critical users of ICT, ‘authors of their own work’, when designing interactive games that included different forms of media (text, images, sound and animation). Abbott et al. (2001) comment that ‘looking at the screen design, they had to make decisions about which media would get their message across most clearly … students needed to listen to one another … to respond to criticism and able to be analytical about their own work’ (p. 484).

According to Sinclair (2005), postmodern ECE teaching approaches are more likely to support literacy practices that can include popular culture and ICT since ‘there is a deliberate move away from the idea of a meta-narrative’ and this encourages ‘greater diversity and tolerance’ (pp. 1–2). As shown in the case of the Multiliterate Star Warsians, opportunities for children to use ICT for the purpose of constructing their own meanings and making sense of their popular culture world had rich potential when a pedagogy of multiliteracies was practised.

**A pedagogy of multiliteracies**

Children are multiliterate, ‘thoroughly experienced makers of meaning’, who have acquired a myriad ‘symbol systems’ to ‘voice’ feelings, perceptions, and thought (Kress, 1997, pp. 8 & 97). A pedagogy of multiliteracies invites teachers to reflect critically on how their ‘curricular, pedagogical and classroom designs’ can provide greater latitude for children to use ‘modes of representation much broader than language alone’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). The multiliteracies metalanguage is based on the concept of ‘design’. Design is ‘an active and dynamic process … which recognises that the individual and the individual’s culture are inseparable’ (Brazil, 2000, p. 2).

Just as language is viewed as pluralistic in nature, so too is its metalanguage; it ‘is not developed to impose rules, to set standards of correctness or to privilege certain discourses …’ but rather provide ‘a language about talking about language, images, texts and meaning-making interactions’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 24). A pedagogy of multiliteracies ‘supplements traditional literacy pedagogy’, but also accommodates new ‘communication channels, and media’ and ‘cultural and linguistic diversity’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, pp. 5 & 29).

**Designs of meaning**

Every child is a potential designer of meaning at any given time. Using different modes of meaning (visual, aural, gestural, spatial, linguistic and multimodal resources) children can use an available design; engage in active designing to achieve their purpose. In so doing, the redesigned text, practice or artifact may be investigated by others as an Available Design. The ability to design is a ‘creative intelligence’, a quality ‘central to workplace innovations, as well as to school reforms for the contemporary world …’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 19). As evidenced in the Children’s Star Wars Project, designing necessitates opportunities for children to ‘demonstrate their ideas, learning and knowledge’ (O’Rourke, 2005, p. 2). Before proceeding to our case study, three interactive
design components that contribute to the multiliteracies meaning-making processes are reviewed.

a) Available Designs

Available Designs are ‘resources for design’ that include semiotic systems. Mavers (2007) describes semiotics as a sign language that involves a ‘combination of form and meaning’ and ‘a process of transformation’ (p. 156). Children's access to ‘multimodal resources’ with which to design meaning and further extend their learning is dependent on their ‘particular sociocultural context’ (Kenner, 2000, p. 77). The relationship between Available Designs, ‘lived experience’ and the construction of meaning is interactive and changing. ‘As there is never a total “fit,” the resources are always transformed’ (Kress, 2000, p. 155).

b) Designing

During the Designing process, the child does not reproduce an Available Design, but rather, ‘making use of old materials … transforms knowledge by producing new constructions and representations of reality … to produce distinctive expressions of meaning’ that reflect cultural and linguistic diversity (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 22). The transformation of knowledge through Designing involves a learning journey that explores modes of meaning ‘interplay’. In ECE, children may pursue individual learning interests ‘into new places’ by exploring Available Designs. Opportunities for transformation of Available Designs is dependent, however, on pedagogy and school culture. While the decline of monoculturalism beyond the school gate may challenge the dominance of traditional literacy teaching approaches, inside the classroom this may not be the case.

c) The Redesigned

The Redesigned construct, which emerges from the Designing experience, is ‘tailor made’ to suit the designer’s purpose and ‘never a reinstatiation of one Available Design or even a simple recombination of Available Designs’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 23). The epistemological assumptions underpinning the multiliteracies theoretical perspective are that teachers support Designing processes and value The Redesigned construct. This assumption is founded on the premise that mainstream education accommodates ‘pluralism’, and that it is ‘a site of openness, negotiation, experimentation’ where children can take different ‘textual journeys’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 124; Dyson, 2001, p. 15).

Multiliteracies in the early years

Insight to children’s different ‘textual journeys’ are presented in case study research. In an Australian project, Mapping multiliteracies: Children of the New Millennium (2004), 20 ECE teacher researchers studied their students’ knowledge and understandings of multiliteracies. After visiting their homes they discovered that the students had ‘a high level of use of new technologies … far greater’ than ‘anticipated’ and that students ‘thrive on generating new multimodal texts’ (Hill, 2005, p. 3). Teachers surmised that ‘the use of electronic multimedia options opened up an interactive world that can support children’s literacy development … and provide them with stories that may be beyond their reading level’ (Hill, 2005, pp. 2–3). Other research findings include Mavers’ (2007) case study accounts of resourceful ‘meaning-making’ when, after observing Available Designs on the home computer, a six-year-old child designs a series of emails that are exchanged with family members, ‘the multimodal possibilities of screen literacy’ are examined (p. 159). Smith (2002) documents a case study of a two-and-a-half-years-old toddler whose interaction with a CD ROM storybook (talking books), led ‘to the internalisation of technological concepts’ that supported literacy learning (p. 18). Using an Available Design, the child enjoyed designing interactive games to play with family members such as ‘click on me’ (Smith, 2002, p. 11). Gillen’s (2002) research on telephone discourse between three- and four-year-olds during ‘spontaneous telephone talk’, revealed that children applied critical and analytic thinking to deconstruct text ‘on the spot’ to create the redesigned construct integrating ICT (p. 27).

Children are ‘resourceful meaning-makers’, using whatever comes to hand as a ‘potential resource in the semiotic work’ and these resources are a part of the child’s ‘cultural development’ (Mavers, 2007, p. 155; Smith, 2002, p. 13). If it is accepted in principle that ‘by children’s own actions, the singular classroom becomes dynamic, multilayered worlds’, then it is pertinent to ask how ECE accommodates the child in ‘childhood literacies, their interest in popular culture and ICT’ (Dyson, 2001, p. 14). These interests are integral to domestic literacy experiences that underpin a child’s ‘sense of identity and their conceptual development’ (COAG, 2009, p. 38).

The Early Years Learning Framework

In 2009, the Australian Government circulated the mandated Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). It describes ECE pedagogy, principles, practices and outcomes required if young children are to be given the ‘best start in life’ and ‘maximise their potential’ (COAG, 2009, p. 5). While many EYLF outcome components are embedded in the Children’s Star Wars Project, this paper’s focus is on Outcomes 4 and 5:
Outcome 4: Children are connected with and contribute to their world:

- Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity.
- Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, enquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating.
- Children transfer and adapt what they have found.
- Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processed materials.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators:

- Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes.
- Children engage with a range of texts and gain meaning from these texts.
- Children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media.
- Children begin to understand how symbols and pattern systems work.
- Children use information and communication technologies to access information, investigate ideas and represent their thinking.

As shown in the case study, Children’s Star Wars Project, these learning outcomes can be achieved successfully by children across the ECE spectrum (birth–eight years) when teachers adopt a pedagogy of multiliteracies supported by the school community. The following section identifies ‘the making of meaning’ processes involved in case study construction.

Methodology

Social researchers on both sides of the paradigm divide study reality and search for knowledge to further universal understandings on the nature of ‘truth’. Those adopting a qualitative research persona, such as myself, employ ‘a set of interpretative, material practices’ aimed at making ‘the world visible’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). During this study, fieldwork was done within a ‘natural’ setting, meaning was interpreted, and knowledge constructed. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that their observations, interpretations and constructions are subject to a set of unique circumstances, and that multiple realities will shape research findings, ‘Their aim is not to establish generalisations but rather to learn of the unique social behaviour within different cultural contexts, to provide insight to the particularisation of one or more cases’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). To achieve this end, ethnographic inquiry methodology was employed to construct a single case study. Initially I focused on ICT use in an ECE classroom to determine if these resources supported multiliteracies. However, some events were unforeseen. The integral relationship between popular culture, ICT and multiliteracies, a teacher’s willingness to accommodate a child-initiated learning project over the course of a year, and my adoption of a broad ICT definition were three such events.

Case study research presents in different forms, employs a variety of strategies, and is subject to a range of definitions about what constitutes ‘a case’. I employed Yin’s (1989) case study definition, ‘A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used’ (p. 23). Thomas (2004) suggests, ‘The case study aims for the extensive examination of one or a small number of instances of the units of interest’ (p. 127). In this research, my units of interest commenced with the examination of student learning in an ECE setting, with instances of ICT use and multiliteracies expressions recorded. As fieldwork progressed, my units of interest focused more on the teacher participant and the school culture, as well as how popular culture and ICT broadened multiliteracies learning. A variety of strategies, consistent with an ethnographic inquiry approach, was used to gather and then assemble information into a case study account. These strategies included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, document analysis and vignettes. Each of these methods, used at different times during the research process, sought to ‘uncover meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 7).

My entry to the school was facilitated by the school principal who shared my ECE pedagogical considerations. The principal suggested that I discuss my research aims with ECE teachers at a staff meeting, and introduced me as someone with whom she had had a long association. Teachers’ consent to participate in my study was quickly secured. Throughout fieldwork there was an unconditional acceptance of my presence as a participant observer. Teachers and parents of children involved in the Multiliterate Star Warians case study provided participation consent.

This case study was documented in a school (Bridgewater Community School) inspired by the Reggio Emilia social-constructivist view of education. The school community recognises that children learn and communicate in ‘multilevelled and multimodal ways’ by means of The hundred languages of children (Spaggiari & Rinaldi, 1996, p. 13). ECE components that support The hundred languages of children are daily class meetings where members are responsive to each
other’s ideas and interests, teacher documentation of children’s expressions, and provision of a stimulating learning environment. Peer interactions during small group project work, where Pedagogy of Listening, interdependence, partisanship and relationships are explored, are also fundamental to this approach. Children are encouraged to ‘take leadership in planning’; assume ‘responsibilities’ for their own learning; and, using a ‘multi symbolic approach’, access a wide range of mediums to communicate meaning (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 359; Katz, 1998, p. 33).

Teachers adopting the Reggio Emilia teaching approach recognise children as ‘unique individuals with rights’, who are ‘rich in resources, strong and competent’ (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 114). Described as ‘a new paradigm for the sociology of childhood’, children are perceived as ‘authors and inventors’, ‘who know how to walk along the path of understanding’, who are ‘protagonists of their own growth’ (Nimmo, 1998, p. 306; Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 67). At Bridgewater Community School (CS), there was a high level of commitment and support towards the accommodation of students’ ‘out of school interests’ that included popular culture. An IT specialist was employed to facilitate multimodal communications.

The Children’s Star Wars Project unfolded in one of Bridgewater Community School’s ECE classrooms. Classes consisted of 24 students aged between five and seven years, and two early childhood teachers (one teacher is referred to as Reece). During the school year there were three long-term class projects operating concurrently in Reece’s classroom. Owing to the length of the project and the spontaneous and diverse way it evolved, the project is presented in four school term accounts with a final reflection from Reece on its learning processes.

Case study vignette: Children’s Star Wars Project

Available Designs in Term 1

Figure 1. Outdoor light sabre role-playing

In early February the Star Wars project group was formed. Reece recalled, ‘… the boys sitting in a circle trying to think of something just didn’t work, but one thing the boys did vividly discuss was that everyone needed a light sabre’.

Role-playing with paper light sabres was child-initiated. Reece videotaped the boys’ Star Wars action and later presented his recording for class viewing. Other students informed the Star Warians, ‘We don’t actually get what’s happening! You’re just running and playing and doing sword-fighting’. The boys considered peer feedback and reflected critically on how they could improve their Star Wars story. Reece described this process:

Some children just wanted to start the story with a fight with Luke Skywalker being the winner: The End. However, one boy was very vocal and commented, ‘You need him to go exploring, find a planet with baddies, then a fight. He wins and then flies home’. After discussing how stories are developed, that is beginning-middle-end, the children agreed the boy’s story ‘sounded right’. It was then decided that this would form the basis of their story script.

Project time, which occurred most days for at least two hours in Reece’s classroom, provided opportunities for the group members to share and extend their Star Wars story ideas. Group members identified two essential Star Wars story events:

1. An exploratory galactic spaceship flight.
2. A light sabre battle between ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’ when good triumphs over evil.

Initially all the boys wanted to be on the ‘winning’ team; they wanted to be ‘goodies’. The boys designed life-size cutouts of their body shapes, from sheets of large cardboard, to present imaginary ‘baddies’. These were anchored in dirt outside the classroom and an imaginary battle was fought. The boys discovered the cardboard designs were too easily defeated, and concluded, ‘There won’t be much action, no-one to defeat, if we’re all on the same team’. At project meetings, participants deliberated how best to solve this problem. They insisted that, to have ‘fair’ competition, each team needed to have equal number of players. Through a long negotiation process (over days) team membership was finalised. The boys persisted in establishing what they believed constituted ‘fair play’ when rehearsing light sabre battles.

Children Star Wars Project: Designing in Terms 2 and 3

Figures 2 and 3. Designing using available resources including ICT
During Term 2, the boys continued to share an interest in designing a Star Wars story. At one project meeting, they told Reece they wanted to design a Star Wars movie. They experimented with light, shape, shadow and reflective images, using the classroom light table and overhead projector to design Star Wars imagery (Figures 2 & 3). As members manipulated translucent geometric shapes, symbol and pattern systems were explored. Critical reflections by other class members on Star Wars designs were spontaneous.

While Star Wars discussed their story ideas during project meetings, Reece documented their language. At the beginning of each meeting members reviewed progress while Reece confirmed documentation accuracy. Further discussion of ‘dark-’ and ‘light-’ side team membership, light sabre engagement and ‘fair play’ provided opportunities for higher-order questioning and scaffolding critical thinking. The boys aimed to duplicate Star Wars authenticity in their portrayal of characters, language, costumes, music and space travel. Commercially manufactured light sabres were brought to school and used as models for designing additional sabres. The boys investigated different weaponry used in the Star Wars movie such as the Naboo Blaster and Ion Stunner. These models provided additional Available Designs. Students’ interest in Star Wars action was extended to designing Star Wars model Game Boys, using pencils and paper (Figure 4). They transferred and adapted what they learned from life experiences to play imaginary games. Students used available designs to create the redesigned constructs that suited their purpose.

A popular project activity was designing spaceship models. Star Wars accessed a range of classroom resources: pencils and paper, ICT, blocks, paint and collage materials, to create two- and three-dimensional spaceship designs (Figures 5, 6, 8 & 9). Student designs were simplistic; however, their description of design features provided insight to their extensive knowledge of spaceships (Figure 7). The boys persisted with how they could create the illusion of flight in their movie. They reproduced their Lego spaceship models, using cardboard templates.

One strategy that encouraged collective ownership of the developing script was providing members with a large sheet of paper, then asking them to draw their story ideas simultaneously. As the boys congregated around the paper, they articulated ideas to accompany their designs, talking freely about their Star Wars knowledge. To stimulate further interest in this activity, Reece accessed The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) internet information. Images of planets and moons in the solar system were discussed (Figure 10).
Members were highly motivated to study a range of non-fiction texts on the science of planet hunting, identification and exploration, and popular culture magazines, comics, visual dictionaries and Star Wars storybooks (Figures 11 & 13). These texts were used as research material to design ‘dark-side’ and ‘light-side’ planets, masks, costumes, and movie props for inclusion in the movie (Figure 12). Towards the end of third term, Reece told the boys he would videotape their own Star Wars performance.

On the day of the Star Wars Movie Take 1, group members changed into their costumes, put on their masks, took hold of sabres, and then awaited Reece’s direction. Three boys managed the ICT (video and digital camera, and laptop ‘background scenery’ PowerPoint presentation). While the Star Warians’ acting was spontaneous and often forgetful, there was a sense of order in this sea of chaos. Reece prompted the actors on what they should be doing according to the script they had designed. While scene sequences were barely distinguishable, there was an atmosphere of fun. Overall, the boys appeared pleased with their performance.

The next day commenced with a class viewing of the child-produced Star Wars movie. As the video recording was shown, the children observed, for the first time, Reece’s inclusion of the Star Wars movie introduction. In the final moments of the film, luminous shooting stars spread across the screen. Children were enthralled by these unexpected events (Figure 14). While editing the video footage, Reece introduced special effects. This decision proved instrumental in presenting a new dimension to consider. The boys’ understanding of what was possible motivated them to redesign their script, desiring a higher level of sophistication. They were committed to making modifications to improve quality and authenticity.

**Children’s Star Wars Project: The redesigned script in Term 4**

Early in Term 4, Star Warians documented script modifications, The redesigned construct (Figure 15). Star Wars project activities now included writing letters to parents for additional resources, and asking piano teachers to teach Star Wars theme music. Children visited Tesori recycling centre to access ‘useful’ materials.

Reece requested help from IT specialist (pseudonym Jon) to facilitate the use of ‘the blue screen’ and inclusion of special effects in the children’s ‘Take 2’ movie production. The boys wanting Star Wars authenticity started bringing Star Wars Lego from home (Figure 16). With Jon’s assistance, the boys created ‘light-’ and ‘dark-’ side music using GarageBand software (Apple Inc., 2004). They experimented with electronic sounds to create special effects for sabre-clashing, stormtroopers firing bullets, and spaceship flight. Voice-overs were created to imitate Yoda and Darth Vader’s tones (Figure 17).
Jon and Reece talked to the Star Warians about the possibility of using the ‘blue screen’. While the integration of this ICT was explained, the boys did not fully comprehend the ICT process. For example, they did not understand how wearing blue clothing could result in them becoming partially invisible when on the ‘big screen’.

One boy suggested designing a diorama to create background scenery for their Lego spaceships. Once the video camera was centrally placed in the diorama the boys attached fishing line to their Lego spaceship models and took turns to suspend them into the diorama space. The Star Warians then took turns delivering Trifighter commands to an imaginary crew. They plotted an imaginary flight course to the World of Utapau and then aborted their mission when threatened with destruction from enemy Mankvin 814 Interceptor spaceships.

One morning near the end of the school year, Jon attached a large blue tarpaulin to one of the classroom walls and anchored it into position with rocks, thus creating the ‘blue screen’. Reece assumed the role of director, Jon the producer, and Star Warians the actors. During the re-enactment of each scene, Reece reminded the Star Warians of the camera position and indicated body positions so that their actions clearly communicated story meaning (Figure 18). Jon reassured the boys that a voice-over audio recording would ensure their voices would be heard.

At the end of the school year, Bridgewater CS rehearsed class performances in readiness for Parents’ Night. One performance was the Star Wars Movie Take 2. This was the first viewing of the redesigned movie. The boys had not yet seen Jon’s final editing and inclusion of the ‘blue screen’ special effects, and everyone was enthralled to see miniaturised Star Warians, aged between five and seven years, sitting in the cockpits of their Lego model spaceships flying across the screen. The culmination of a year’s work was realised and the Star Warians were ecstatic: ‘Jon shrank us and put us on mini spaceships! Yeah, he gave us the force!’

**Project reflections**

In mid-December, I found Reece burning DVDs of the Children’s Star Wars movie to provide Star Warians with a project keepsake. He reflected:

> When we first started, it wasn’t actually to make a Star Wars movie or a DVD. It just ended up going in that direction because that’s what the children wanted to do. The movie part came along as the project evolved. The process was open-ended … The producer and director’s roles, namely Jon and I, only came in because the Star Wars’ members had never had experience with the blue screen. They had no idea of how these things are put together. Now they understand the process, they know the procedure, and they are aware of the components required to make a movie. The only thing I would expect differently, if they did this again, is it will probably be better because they know what is possible.

The Children’s Star Wars Project presented extensive opportunities for multiliteracies learning which integrated popular culture and ICT. The original Star Wars film offered students an Available Design, and throughout their work they sought authenticity, clarity and fairness in the designing process. It was, however, through the redesigned construct that students realised their aspiration, to perform in a Star Wars movie that told their story on the big screen.

**Discussion**

Children are immersed in and enjoy popular culture and ICT outside the classroom and these experiences enable them ‘to recognise and draw on their already existing literacies and the cultures they know in order to analyze and think critically, skills that can be expanded and applied to other, less familiar domains’ (Freccero, 1999, p. 4). As evidenced in the Children’s Star Wars Project, these resources enriched multiliteracies experiences in ways that supported children’s achievement of The Early Years Learning Framework
for Australia outcomes. These ways were consistent with early childhood pedagogy, principles and practice. During the project, children had multiple opportunities to achieve EYLF Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners. Star Warrians showed learning dispositions that included curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity. They used a range of skills and processes that included problem solving, enquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating. They actively transferred what they had learned from Star Wars popular culture and adapted their knowledge to design a new movie sequel. They endeavoured to resource their own learning through connecting with people (piano teachers, IT specialist, school community, family), place (school, home, public library, Tesori), technologies (computers, digital and video cameras, light tables, overhead projector, blue and white screen), and natural and processed materials (costumes, props, diorama).

Also achieved was EYLF Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators. There was clear evidence that the school’s educational philosophy of The hundred languages of children supported Star Warrians’ multimodal expressions to interact verbally and non-verbally with others during the project. They engaged with a range of spoken, written and visual texts and gained meaning from these texts. The multiliteracies metalanguage of Available Design, Designing and The Redesigned was evident as documented over four school terms. Star Warrians expressed their ideas and made meaning using a range of media including ICT to access information (NASA information), investigate ideas (GarageBand) and represent their thinking (light table and overhead projector). Achievement of EYLF Outcomes 4 and 5 was made possible through a pedagogy of multiliteracies, ‘He gave us the force’, and a school culture that supported social-constructivist learning principles. The children’s interest in Star Wars popular culture and teachers’ willingness to accommodate their interest in ways that integrated ICT-enriched multiliteracies experiences were sustained over a year.

Conclusion

The multiliteracies theoretical framework rests upon the proposition that cultural and linguistic diversity should be recognised, embraced and accommodated during student learning. Young children have the ‘creative intelligence’ to use popular ‘kids’ culture and ICT resources to access, design and communicate meaning in many ways. The child’s right to self-expression using these resources within a community of learners has implications for early childhood practice. In this paper, I have illustrated that, during the early years, children’s shared interest in popular culture and ICT has the potential to broaden multiliteracies experiences. I have also demonstrated how these learning resources can be readily integrated in ECE when the classroom teacher subscribes to a social-constructivist view of education. In the case of the Children’s Star Wars Project, a combination of popular culture and ICT created a formidable force that supported children’s achievement of The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia outcomes.

References


