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**Negotiating  
Critical Literacies  
With  
Young Children**

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# 6

## **We Know How McDonald's Thinks**

### ***Setting the Scene***

The instances of learning that I describe in this chapter focus on interrogating and analyzing discourses that are associated with McDonald's Happy Meals™. The work that we did with the Happy Meal was initiated when Ali, one of the girls in the class, started a conversation with a small group of children about Happy Meal toys. By this time in the school year (spring 1997), my students already had many opportunities to analyze different school and everyday texts. Therefore, they had built up quite a repertoire of critical literacies and were comfortable interrogating McDonald's Happy Meals as text.

### ***The McDonald's Happy Meal as Text***

In the following conversation, Ali introduced the Happy Meal toy for discussion because this was a topic that interested her. What resulted was a series of activities, engagements, and discussions exploring how Happy Meals work, including how McDonald's uses toys as a way of maintaining child consumers and the gendered way they went about doing this.

- 1 Ali: At McDonald's they have different toys.  
 2 Stefanie: Yah. Like now there's Beanie Babies™. It's a goldfish I think.  
 3 Ali: Well, before it was different. Like there were little Barbie™ and Hot Wheels™.  
 4 Michael: Yah, but the person actually said you're a boy so I'll put a Hot Wheel in your Happy Meal. Except I already had that car so I wanted a Barbie for my sister.  
 5 Alyssa: Well I'm a girl but I got a Hot Wheel.  
 6 Michael: I guess so. Sometimes stuff that's girls', boys like and stuff that's boys' girls like and ...  
 7 Alyssa: And if you tell the McDonald's people what you want then you can have the toy you want.

In this opening discussion, the children began to raise questions about McDonald's take on what toys girls like and what toys boys like. In doing so, they were interpreting their experiences within the McDonald's gendered discourse. This is seen when Michael stated, "Yah, but the person actually said you're a boy so I'll put a Hot Wheel in your Happy Meal. Except I already had that car so I wanted a Barbie for my sister" (line 4), and when he later added that, "Sometimes stuff that's girls', boys like and stuff that's boys' girls like" (line 6).

As the children interpreted their experiences, they also shared ways they had acted differently within McDonald's gender bias discourse, as demonstrated when Alyssa said "Well, I'm a girl and I got a Hot Wheel" (line 5) and then explained how she did this by saying, "If you tell the McDonald's people what you want then you can have what you want" (line 7). By making this statement, she implicitly shared with the other children how she had disrupted the gendered discourse by stating what she wanted. In a subsequent conversation, she explained that "If you don't tell people what you want then boys will get Hot Wheels and girls will get Barbies."

### ***We Know How McDonald's Thinks: The Discussion Continues***

As the discussion continued, the children began to unpack "how McDonald's thinks"; what their agenda was for changing the Happy Meal toys on an ongoing basis.

- 8 Curtis: They always change the toys.  
 9 Teacher: Why do you think they do that?  
 10 Ali: Well, maybe it's because they know we like toys.  
 11 Teacher: Do you mean children like toys or adults or both?  
 12 Ali: I think both but mostly kids that's why there's toys in Happy Meals.  
 13 Tiffany: Yah that's why.  
 14 Andrew: Well, if they didn't change the toys I wouldn't go.  
 15 Michael: Me either.  
 16 Andrew: Actually that tells me McDonald's knows how we think! But now. Now, we know how they think. Aha!

Curtis' statement "They always change the toys" (line 8) pushed the discussion in a different direction that focused on how McDonald's maintained child consumers. They hypothesized that McDonald's included toys in the Happy Meals because they knew that children like toys. In other words, pairing a toy with a meal makes the whole eating experience more pleasurable, which translates to becoming hooked as a satisfied customer. Further, they hypothesized that changing the toys is the strategy used to maintain this feeling of satisfaction. According to Andrew, "If they didn't change the toys I wouldn't go" (line 14). With this he surmised, "McDonald's knows how we [children] think" (line 16). In other words, McDonald's knows that if they do not use strategies such as including new toys in the Happy Meals, children like Andrew would not keep returning. Making this strategy visible led Andrew to conclude that McDonald's may know how we think but "Now, we know how they think. Aha!" (line 16). Recognizing this statement as an opportunity to explore what it means to be an informed consumer led me to dig deeper at what the children thought McDonald's knew about kids.

- 17 Teacher: What do you think it is that they know about kids and how kids think?  
 18 Andrew: One thing they know is ...  
 19 Melanie: Well, one thing is that no new toys, no kids!  
 20 Curtis: Yah. 'Cause lots of kids go for the collectibles. There's always collectibles.  
 21 Teacher: Tell us more about that.

- 22 Curtis: Collectibles, you collect. Like, this week you get a Goldfish Beanie and next week you get a plat ... a plat ...
- 23 Ali: A platypus.
- 24 Alyssa: A platypus. So if you keep going back you can have the whole collection.

### Reflecting on How McDonald's Thinks

As the children engaged in talk about collections and being a collector, they simultaneously uncovered the ideological construction of the Happy Meal, which is why Happy Meals come with toys. The conclusions they came up with, that kids "go for the collectibles" (line 20), was consistent with those described in a *USA Today* article about a recent McDonald's marketing campaign, the "McFurby"™. This was a promotional campaign that explicitly advertised the desirability of collecting dozens of different McFurbys: small plastic versions of the talking Furby™ produced by Hasbro. The article described McDonald's development of the McFurby promotion and the role that children play in the success of food sales as a direct result of such promotions (Horovitz, 1999).

The report stated that McDonald's knows it has a delicate sales job to convince its most vital customers—kids. The report claimed that children influence almost two thirds of the \$110 billion that Americans spend annually on fast food. According to the report, "A super-hot toy promotion can rocket overall food sales 6% to 9% during its run" and "Kids will drag their parents to McDonald's kicking and screaming to get their mitts on Furby Happy Meals." One of the report's conclusions was that "McDonald's kids promotions have become habit forming." This is also consistent with my students' analysis as exemplified when Alyssa commented, "If you keep going back you can have the whole collection" (line 24) and when Andrew stated that if McDonald's didn't keep changing the toys kids wouldn't keep coming (line 14).

The children also talked about having to go back to gather each of the collectible items in a series. An example of this took place when Curtis explained that collectibles mean that you collect, "like, this week you get a Goldfish [Beanie Baby] and next week you get a platypus [Beanie Baby]" (line 22). According to Alyssa, the point is to keep going back until you have the whole collection (line 24). One of the goals for going to McDonald's, then, is to complete each of the collections. These

collections vary in size from eight Barbies in the year 2000 promotion to over two dozen McFurbys in the 1997 Furby promotion. Remember, each Happy Meal comes with one toy only, although extra toys could be purchased at an extra cost. However, with most promotions, the different toys in a collection are released at different times, which means multiple trips back to the restaurant. According to the *USA Today* article (1999), "Collectibility is what Happy Meals is about." In a column written by columnist Bruce Horovitz (1999) in the same edition of *USA Today*, he wrote, "The world changed in 1979 when McDonald's introduced its first national Happy Meal with plastic figurines from *Star Trek*." Further, he stated, "Licensing (of rights to toys representing films such as *Star Trek*) is the fast food industry's mantra.... Entire staffs of marketing gurus are constantly on the lookout for the next hot kids toy, tune flick or TV shows." In their own way, the children were able to recognize what is obviously a complex corporate strategy. One thing that we could have looked into more carefully was exploring McDonald's partnerships with other corporations to consider how the Happy Meal frenzy is not only about selling McDonald's food but advertising and merchandising for other film and toy companies with whom they have formed equally profitable relationships.

### Who Can Have Collectibles?

In the following exchange, the children engage in a discussion about fairness and access to collectible items, addressing the question of who can and cannot be a collector.

- 25 Andrew: When you have the whole collection, except not everyone can get the whole collection. You know my neighbor, well, they have seven kids in their family. That's a lot of kids.
- 26 Lily: That's a lot of Happy Meals.
- 27 Andrew: And a lot of Big Macs™ if the mom or the dad eats.
- 28 Ali: Yah or the nanas [grandmothers].
- 29 Andrew: Yah so what I wanted to say is they don't get to go all the time so they can't collect ALL of them.
- 30 Gregory: It's really not fair.
- 31 Michael: See, there's something else we can know about McDonald's. It's not fair that everybody can't have the collectibles.

## Reflecting on the Conversation

In that exchange (lines 25–31), the children raised issues of fairness regarding who has and does not have access to Happy Meal collectibles. Andrew set the issue in context by talking about what he knew of his neighbors who have “seven kids in their family” (line 25). Further into the conversation, he returned to this issue, clarifying what it was he meant by bringing forward his neighbors’ situation, saying, “They don’t get to go all the time so they can’t collect ALL of them” (line 29). He clarified the issue as being one of collectibility and the subsequent unfair or inequitable access that children have to collectibles. In our school, children in the schoolyard, as opportunities to show their latest collectible acquisitions, constantly formed clubs. So on any given recess period, children could be seen gathered in groups based on these informal clubs. Andrew worried about what this meant for his neighbors when they were in the schoolyard. Would they be marginalized if left out of such activities?

In rare cases a child could become a member of a club without having to display his or her wares as long as the child was able to present a good deal of knowledge about the item being collected. Being able to talk knowingly about collectibles, therefore, was a discourse that brought children a good deal of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) in the schoolyard. The downside of this is that it is, of course, difficult to gain a good deal of knowledge about the collectible items without having access to them.

### Further Analysis of the Happy Meal

As the conversation continued, the children began to name the ways in which McDonald’s constructed them as consumers through the use of clever promotional strategies.

- 32 Andrew: Yea and then they change them all the time. (Referring to the Happy Meal toys)
- 33 Teacher: Why do you think they do that?
- 34 Alyssa: Well, kids won’t go if they don’t.
- 35 Gregory: We said that before. Remember. We know how McDonald’s thinks. They think if they don’t put toys in the food pack that kids won’t want to eat their food.

- 36 Curtis: That’s like tricking kids because they trick them to buy food by pretending they give them toys.
- 37 Andrew: My dad said, “The price of the toy is in the bag.”
- 38 Michael: What?
- 39 Teacher: Did your dad mean that the price of the toy is included as part of the whole Happy Meal package?
- 40 Andrew: That’s what I said. Yea that’s what I mean. You got it.

## Reflecting on the Conversation

In this particular portion of our conversation, the children made it clear that they were not naive to why McDonald’s uses different sets of toys in their promotions. Further, they talked about McDonald’s manipulation of child consumers in the way they present the promotional toys as included “free” in Happy Meals. The children talked about how McDonald’s “pretends to give” the toys away (line 36). A conversation regarding this issue had obviously come up in Andrew’s home as indicated by his statement, “My dad said, it’s in the bag” (line 37). Making this statement made it clear that to some extent, Andrew had an understanding of how consumers are charged with hidden costs. So the apparently free toys were not free after all.

In response to Andrew’s comment and to consider McDonald’s notion of “free” toys and what “free” really costs we created a web of what makes up a Happy Meal (Fig. 6.1). The original web (Fig. 6.2) consists of the parts of the Happy Meal that are immediately visible to the consumer, such as a hamburger, toy, and french fries. After this initial webbing, I asked the children to think about each item in the Happy Meal and then brainstorm all of the things that are part of each of those items (Fig. 6.3). We then went back to our web a third time and talked about all the things they could think of that are part of each of the items listed during our second webbing activity (see Fig. 6.1). To differentiate each of the lists, I used a different color marker.

Andrew summarized what this webbing activity made visible for us when he said, “For something that’s free there’s lots of people who sell things and get money.” Through our analysis of the Happy Meal,

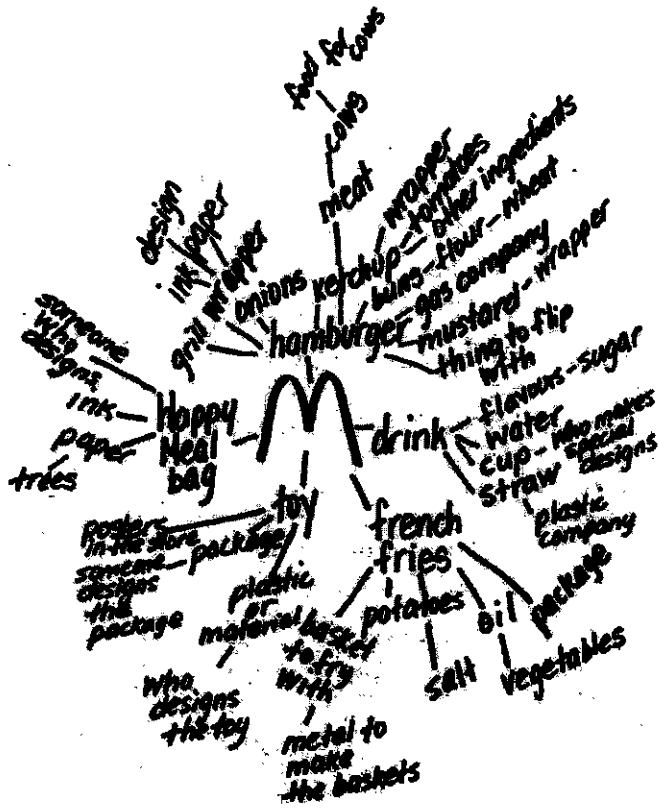


FIG. 6.1. Happy Meal web.

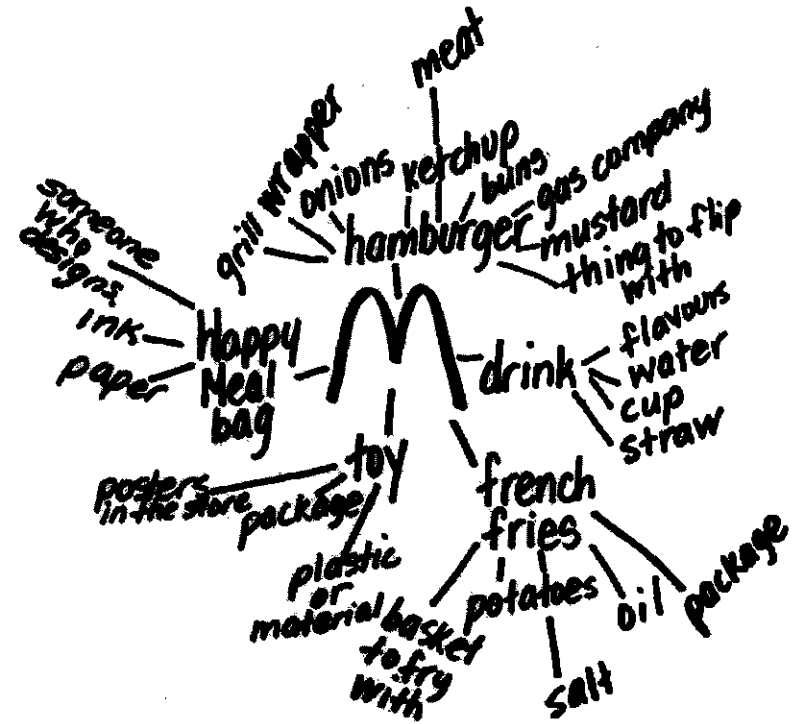


FIG. 6.3. A second round of webbing.

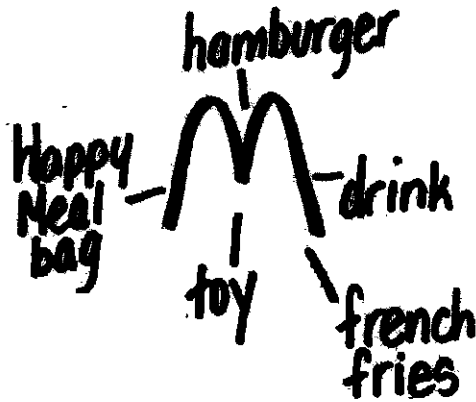


FIG. 6.2. The first round of webbing: What is in a Happy Meal?

the children realized that many people have investments in children as consumers.

### Final Thoughts on the Happy Meal Discussions in the Classroom

The McDonald's issue is somewhat more complicated to talk about than the issues dealt with in previous chapters because of the various subtexts that were generated, such as the susceptibility of child consumers and gender construction through the distribution of Happy Meal toys. What the subtexts have in common, however, is that each questions the taken-for-granted normality to consider how things could be different (Comber, 1999). This happens through using what children know, their experience with McDonald's as a starting

point for analysis, and then unpacking texts such as the Happy Meal. Informed by practices demonstrated in the literature on critical literacy (Kamler, 1994; O'Brien, 1998) disrupting taken-for-granted normality (Comber, 1999) happened as we engaged with questions like, What kinds of things do you learn from analyzing what makes up a Happy Meal? Or, What do the toys in the Happy Meals tell you about being a girl or being a boy? In this way, the children are able to begin to make visible new ways of being and acting that involve resisting dominant practices such as giving girls Barbies and giving boys Hot Wheels.

### **Social Action Outside the Classroom**

"Although children are not direct income earners, they are in charge of more (pocket) money than in the past, and they also exert significant power over parental purchase choices" (C. Luke, 1997, p. 21).

Shortly after we engaged in our McDonald's conversation, before we could send home a newsletter about it, the mother of one of my students came up to me and asked if we had talked about McDonald's in our classroom. Apparently, since Melanie was about 2 years old, she and her parents had had a routine whereby every Sunday they would go to McDonald's after church.

As our work with the Happy Meal as text was wrapping up, McDonald's was receiving a lot of publicity from the famous McLibel trial whereby McDonald's sued a couple of activists for libel regarding a pamphlet they had distributed revealing the ways in which the food giant engaged in such practices as animal cruelty, waste production, and rain forest depletion (Klein, 2001). As a direct result of the work we had done regarding McDonald's in our classroom and what she had heard on the news about the McLibel trial, Melanie decided that she no longer wanted to support McDonald's as a consumer. In essence, she decided to boycott McDonald's. In response, her mother had suggested going to another local fast-food burger restaurant. According to her mother, Melanie quickly pointed out that the other restaurant was no better because she felt that they manipulated child consumers by changing or adding equipment to their Playland on an ongoing basis as well as by giving out toys as a way to keep young customers buying their products in the same way McDonald's did.

The reason I like this story is because it demonstrates the kinds of literacies that are constructed through the critical literacy practices in our classroom and, most importantly, how these literacies extend into the lives of the children outside of school. As Melanie grew as a

literate learner in our classroom, she also learned to read the world and versions of the possible roles she could take in the world (O'Brien, 1998). She has begun to understand how the world as text works on her and what she can do to respond to that text. She was capable of sharing her ideas and influencing others.

While engaged with McDonald's as text, multilayered conversations were constructed; different children involved themselves with different activities and actions in response to the text.

As you can see, the issues we dealt with were very generative. We were never short of ideas for projects or issues and topics to research. There was always more for yet another day. The following section demonstrates ways that we used what we discovered through our previous conversations and analysis to reimagine ways of repackaging McDonald's toys.

### **Designing a Toy Container**

While we were analyzing the McDonald's Happy Meal, a small group of children began looking closely at the plastic bag used to package some of the toys. They started by asking me to read out loud the text on the bag. They were particularly interested in the warning label, which read:

**WARNING: TO AVOID DANGER OF SUFFOCATION,  
KEEP BAG AWAY FROM BABIES AND CHILDREN.  
DISPOSE OF THIS BAG IMMEDIATELY.  
(© 1999 McDonald's Corporation)**

My students argued that if the bag was so hazardous, then why are they used to package the toys inasmuch as children purchase the toys. Gregory suggested that the packaging really should be changed. In response, a group of four students designed their own toy containers, which they felt were safer for children.

One of the designs was of small boxes to hold the promotional toys. Another suggestion involved recycling McDonald's wrappers. Someone else came up with a bag similar to party favor bags. Gregory was one of the people who designed a box. Once having thought about how to design his box, he hand-delivered his proposal (Fig. 6.4) to the McDonald's branch close to his home. At the end of the school year, we had not heard back from McDonald's. However, Gregory did say that if he didn't hear back soon that he would see if he could "do it on the Internet." Looking closely at his letter, it is interesting to note that,

April 1997

Dear McDonald's Toy Packagers,

There are two ways you can make boxes for the toys in the Happy Meals so you don't have to have a warning anymore.

The first way is to get a Kleenex box. Then cut out a piece of cardboard from another Kleenex box. Put it over the hole of the first Kleenex box and glue it on. Wrap it up in some paper so it will look nice.

For the second way, you get a shoebox. Then you put paper on it. Cut out one end to put the toy in. Then tape it all up again.

We want kids to be safe and the warning means the bags aren't safe enough. The kids in my class who buy Happy Meals think you should change the bags also.

Gregory

FIG. 6.4. Gregory's proposal.

similar to the letters written by his classmates to deal with the vegetarian issue, Gregory's letter also demonstrated the assertion of identity through the use of "you" and "we." When he said, "There are two ways you can make boxes ...," he made it clear that he was aware that other options exist for packaging the toys. He then took on the position of a knowledgeable informer by offering two versions of how alternate packaging might be constructed. He did not just name his ideas but outlined how to turn his ideas into reality.

In the final paragraph of his proposal, he evaluated what was currently used as packaging for the toys when he said, "... warning means the bags aren't safe enough..." What he was saying to McDonald's was that a warning is not enough; you need to do something that is safe for children so that these warning labels are no longer necessary. Finally,

Gregory made use of what he knew regarding the role that consumers play in the business market by making it clear that the people involved with submitting the proposal were McDonald's customers.

What Gregory and his "Design a Toy Container" group did was to take the McDonald's toy bags, treat them seriously as classroom text by analyzing them and then construct new versions. Writing the proposal letter moved them beyond mere interrogation or finding fault (O'Brien, 1998) toward taking action to change, in this case, a specific danger to young consumers.

To represent the McDonald's issues on our audit trail (Fig. 6.5) the children decided to post a Happy Meal bag and a Beanie Baby as artifacts. We also included a receipt and three quotes of topics that came up during our conversations to remind us of those conversations.



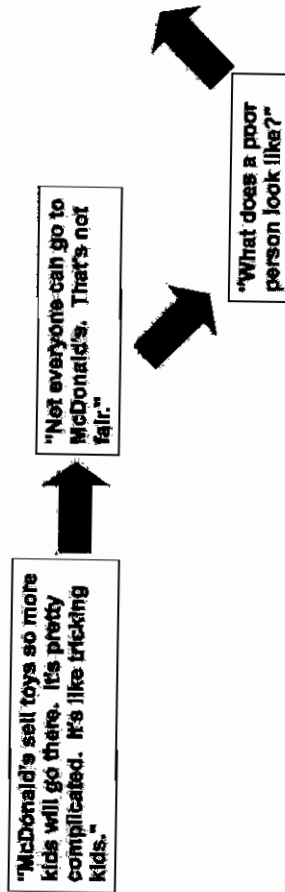


FIG. 6.5. Some of the artifacts representing the McDonald's issues on our audit trail.

# 7

## *A Look Back Over the Year*

### ***Organizing a Junior Kindergarten Conference: A Culminating Experience for Our Negotiated Critical Literacy Curriculum***

As the end of the school year approached, Melanie arrived in class talking about a conference that her mother had attended. Her enthusiasm was infectious. Other children began asking her questions about the conference. She shared that her mother had listened to different speakers and that she had to sign up to hear them. She also talked about how her mother wore a badge and that there was a book (program) about what was happening at the conference. One of the children asked, "Why did she want to go?" Melanie replied, "To learn."

After several more minutes of conversation about conferences, the children started to talk about how we could have speakers, too! Why not, I thought to myself. Igoa (1995) wrote about the importance of the "end of the year good-bye" for giving closure together on the year that has passed. I thought the conference idea would be a terrific way to do this.

Later that evening, I began to list the issues that we had dealt with over the course of the year as well as people we could invite to