

# Exploring Discourses: Third Culture Kids' digital lives

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**Abstract:** An important question for research is the ways in which children from globally mobile families negotiate the different Discourses they encounter through mass-media digital technologies, the home, and the classroom. The study reported on here took the form of a multiple case study, which was undertaken at a European International School over the course of a school year. This paper focuses on students' digital game play documented within the different contexts of classroom and out-of-classroom environments. It reports on the social dynamics and the productive outcomes made possible in spaces such as these, and the ways these children negotiated, appropriated or embraced the Discourses that they found as part of their ongoing work in establishing social identity.

**Keywords:** Identity, digital play, third culture kids, literacy education

## Introduction

Issues of identity are of intense significance for the globally mobile child, and so too is digital play, as a forum for both pleasure and community. To inform contemporary pedagogy and curriculum in school, more information is needed about the ways in which issues of identity present themselves in on and offline contexts, and the ways in which children in turn negotiate them. To explore children's integration of digital games into their lives, for my Master's research study I held a series of after school computer clubs in the International School in which I was teaching. Through these clubs, I investigated the children's imaginative engagement with internet games [1] [2]. This research prompted more questions, particularly concerning identity and digital play, and the challenges these distinctive young people face in negotiating the worlds of the internet, home and school. For the last two years I have explored this topic as a full-time PhD student.

## 1. Related work with key references

My research draws on a wide selection of literatures, briefly summarised here in the following three topics:

### 1.1 Identity

Questions of identity and subjectivity are central to this research. So too is language use in both print and multimodal contexts for establishing these constructions of identity. Sociolinguists such as James Gee point to strong connections between language use, specifically how terms and concepts are framed and the everyday language used to speak about them, and the processes by which people perceive themselves and are positioned

within society. Gee calls on the notion of Discourse to explain key distinctions and operations here [3]. In his writings about identity, Gee uses a capital letter to distinguish between the familiar use of the word ‘discourse’ to mean a dialogue, and ‘Discourse’, by which he refers to a socially-formed grouping embedded with cultural practices. Gee theorises that we all have experience of a unique primary Discourse, our formative social communication learning from our parents, which is shaped by cultural influences such as national and religious Discourses, as well as a comprehensive range of secondary Discourses, our necessary ways of communicating differently in different situations, such as may be encountered within digital environments and school communities.

### *1.2 Third culture kids*

The site of the research is an International School that prioritizes the children of intergovernmental organizations’ employees. The majority of these children are expatriates, many of whom live a peripatetic life and thus live as outsiders from their home country, and to a large extent from the country where they currently reside. Consequently, these children have quite different formative experiences than children who have matured primarily within one culture. Such children have been labelled as “global nomads” [4] or “third culture kids” [5], and as Sears notes, these children can be seen as “exemplars” of an increasingly mobile world [6 p.79]. The growth of new digital technologies has presented a new range of options for the ways these children live their lives. Such changes consequently have important implications for the educational institutions that serve these children.

### *1.3 ‘New’ Classroom Literacies*

In 1996, the New London Group collaborated to produce a manifesto that seeks to broaden the scope of literacy pedagogy to accommodate both technological changes, and changes in the social landscape. Literacies occur within a broad social context, and within a wider range of spaces and Discourses than is dealt with by traditional classroom settings. Educational research therefore needs to move beyond classroom doors and into students’ wider communities [7]. The research undertaken here adopts such a sociocultural approach, and is grounded in the idea that communicative production can best be understood within the social and cultural practices from whence it is formed.

## **2. Research Questions**

The central research question in this study is ‘how do third culture kids negotiate the Discourses of home, school and new media’. In researching this question, it is also necessary to identify some of the key Discourses these culturally diverse children encountered in the different intersecting spaces and places of digital culture, the classroom, and the home, and to explore the ways in which these children position themselves in relation to these Discourses. To refine the focus, this topic is being broken down into a number of specific directions.

One direction concerns the social dynamics established by the participants when playing or working in a group, both in school, and in out-of-school contexts. This includes group dynamics within virtual spaces. This focus works towards understanding the central research question as each student’s differing Discourse backgrounds can be glimpsed within social interactions such as these. Questions being explored in this direction are:

- When the children play internet games in a room together, or work in collaborative learning situations utilizing digital technologies, what are the characteristics of the group dynamic that develops? And then:
- How do the individual children negotiate their relationships within these different places and/or within virtual group settings?

A second direction is concentrated on the need to know more about how game play, and other uses of digital technologies, factor in the performance of, and development of, these children's language and literacy skills. Students produce and share meaningful texts via internet games and social networking sites used at home, and games and other digital platforms used in the classroom. Exploring this production works towards understanding the broad topic as the research is grounded in a sociocultural position that language is central to identity; that identity is one and the same as its expression or performance through literate practices. Specific questions being explored in this direction are:

- What are the characteristics of the texts which children produce utilizing mass-media digital technologies in the home?
- How do they differ from texts produced in classroom situations when digital technologies are utilized?
- What evidence do these literate productions provide of the students' negotiation of the Discourses that surround them?

### **3. The contribution of the proposed research**

Young people in the 8-13 year age group are at a stage of vital importance in how they see themselves, and in the development of their points of view and values, yet this age group remains under-investigated in most areas of educational research. This study specifically contributes to the literature due to the unique nature of its third culture kid participants, and aims to bring investigations of identity and the third culture kid into a digital-age focus. This broad research topic directly addresses Jackie Marsh's declaration of the "urgent need to map children's engagement with cultural texts in a global context" [8 p.12].

### **4. Research methodology**

The research is guided by case study procedures. Over the course of the past school year, twenty International School students aged from 8 to 13 years kept a journal recording their at-home digital play. These journals were then used as an aide-memoire at weekly meetings where the students discussed their use of digital games and other media. The students were also observed in the classroom, focusing on the children's experiences with digitally enhanced learning. An opportunity to attend an after-school computer club during which students played on their own choice of internet games was also offered. Interviews were held at the beginning and the end of the school year with the students. Their teachers and parents were also interviewed.

The research employs qualitative research methods to ensure the authentic, "messy complexity of human experience" can be seen and contemplated [9 p.3]. The design encompasses two different kinds of triangulation to impart validity, a methodological triangulation and a data triangulation [10]. First, three methods have been employed to collect information from the child participants; taped interviews and discussions, observation notes, and journals. Secondly, three different data 'categories' have been engaged as interviewees: children, parents, and teachers.

Appadurai [11] maps contemporary global fluidity within a set of five different categories of flow: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financerscaples, and ideoscaples. These ‘scapes’ provide an illuminating framework for exploring the contemporary childhood of the globally mobile child. The data, which is now in the initial stages of analysis, is being initially codified according to these categories. This involves selecting representative sections of dialogue and image as the data is transcribed and collated. These selections highlight typical and atypical responses, as well as characteristic responses for different age and/or gender subgroups.

## 5. Preliminary results

The data is in the early stages of analysis and it is not yet possible to draw conclusions. Two papers utilizing early findings have been written and are currently under consideration for publication. One centres on the experiences of one family who had recently moved into the school community, and considers the complex and conflicting pressures, expectations and possibilities they encountered at home, at school, and in their online play, at this moment of cultural transition. The other reflects on the differing attitudes observed between the school community and the children’s families, with respect to the role of digital play in children’s lives, and suggests that schools need to understand parental positions around technology and digital culture, and reflect on these as they plan their digital futures.

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