The 'Cultural Capital' of *Play School*: Building a Multicultural Australia

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The foundations of an Australian national identity are laid during early childhood; the role of television and children's programmes during this stage of development is critical in the development of a multicultural national identity. Since the time of Aristotle, the socialising factors impacting childhood development have been recognised as the foundation of an individual's adult identity. In contemporary society, these factors are reflected by the significant influence of popular culture, with an emphasis on the medium of television programmes, within each age group, beginning with the country's youngest popular culture consumers. Media techniques targeted at a pre-school audience are able to promote a tolerance and acceptance of other cultures that is core to the idea of multiculturalism. These techniques are clearly defined within the long-running children's programme *Play School*, and the way in which it educates its audience on racial and cultural diversity, as well as instilling a subconscious acceptance of these differences. With an ethnically diverse cast as well as 'Through the Window' segments that share 'cultural capital' among children from a variety of family backgrounds, *Play School* is leading each generation towards a more tolerant and culturally accepting future.

The Whitlam government introduced the concept of multicultural governance in 1975; however, it was the Fraser government in 1978 who first implemented multicultural policies (Department of Social Services 2014). Since the implementation of multicultural policies within government, Australia's national identity has followed suit with studies conducted by Purdie (2007) and Lentini, Holafoff and Ogru (2009) showing a unity in the idea of multiculturalism as a national identity. A core national identity develops through the popular culture of the era: the shared imaginary of the community (Anderson, cited in Curthoys 2003) that is both reflective of, and perpetuated by, the ideals and mores of that community (Bennett, cited in Parker 2011). Mass cultural production through the medium of television allows for the propagation of a national identity almost entirely irrespective of locale or other socio-cultural circumstances (Frith, cited in Parker 2011). Within the medium of television, popular culture uses *semiotics*, 'the science of signs' (Butler 2012, pg. 381), to manipulate general reactions and create a common meaning, offering a sense of belonging to a wider community of people who all react to these signs in the same way (Arrow 2009). Semiotics is based on the idea that any image or sound that expresses meaning to an individual is a sign; these signs can be arranged in such a way as to guide cultural expectations and reactions without the audience being consciously aware of the manipulation (Butler 2012). When all audience members of a specific television programme start responding to signs in the same way, their internalisation of these signs, and their encouraged reactions, begin to form a new identity, first within the individual and then on a wider scale as their reaction expands from the private domain to a public one (Arrow 2009). Identity, be it individual or national, is developed based on how each person perceives themselves in relation to the world around them (Cote and Levine 2002).

What people watch, communicate with and interact with is a component of socialisation and teaches the behaviours and mores of the society (Cote and Levine 2002). When these behaviours and mores are internalised, an individual then performs the same behaviours and in doing so adheres to the social construct that began the process, effectively creating a cycle of identity (Cote and Levine 2002). Television is especially effective in teaching new behaviours and reinforcing established ones, as it is a visual medium and 'humans learn new behaviours by imitating the people around them' (Trawick-Smith 2010, pg. 41) and mirroring behaviours that they see (Lacan 1949). Popular culture, as the vehicle for identity development, provides visual markers by which individuals establish their own sense of self (Broderick and Blewitt 2015). These visual markers are particularly effective at influencing the socio-cultural development of young children who rely less on 'conscious symbolic learning… [and] learn more by what they see' (Eaude 2008, pg. 27). *Play School* uses semiotics and an understanding of early childhood development to expand its audience's awareness of racial and cultural diversity in such a way that this awareness, when internalised by the child, manifests in an increased tolerance and acceptance of other cultures, creating a multicultural identity within its young audience (Hill 2009).

Since its conception in 1966, *Play School* has aimed 'to open up the everyday world to children' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation cited in Hill 2009, pg. 69) and the increasing diversity of the programme's presenters, as well as the increasing diversity of cultural experiences shared during the 'Through the Window' segments, reflect the changing foundation of Australian culture. Leaving the 'White Australia' era behind and embracing the ideals of multiculturalism, *Play School* has endeavoured to represent a range of races and cultures in such a way that this diversity becomes 'real life', facilitating social change without being seen to threaten the current social clime (Hill 2009). Recent survey results conducted by Monash University and funded by the Scanlon Foundation (Markus 2015) revealed an increasing support for multiculturalism, and all that entails, through each generation: across the three generations surveyed (18-29, 40-49 and 60-69 years), support for and tolerance of cultures other than their own was seen to increase with each younger generation. This increase may be attributed to the casting: George Spartel joined the *Play School* cast in 1985 and was the first ethnic presenter; he was also joined by an Asian presenter, Joy Hopwood, in the same decade (Mackinlay and Barney 2008). As a result, the youngest generation surveyed by the Scanlon Foundation (18-29 years) was the first generation exposed to racial diversity within the *Play School* programme and a significant change in attitude towards multiculturalism can be seen between this generation and the other two surveyed; 84.8% of 18-29 year olds agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, 'we should do more to learn about the customs and heritage of different cultural groups in this country', compared to only 58.8% of the 60-69 year age group. When answering the question, 'people who come to Australia should change their behaviour to be more like Australians', 43% of the 18-29 year group responded in the negative while less than half that (17.4%) of the 60-69 year group responded negatively (Murdock 2015, pg. 50). In 2008, it was estimated that *Play School* was watched at least once a week by over 1 million children (Hill 2009) and since then the introduction of a new children's television station (ABC 4 Kids) as well as vodcasts and internet streaming suggests that this number is even higher today (Hill 2009); more than 80% of pre-schoolers are being introduced to a racially diverse

cast, of which half of the presenters are easily recognisable as being other than Anglo-Saxon (ABC 2015), as well as experiencing cultures other than their own during the 'Through the Window' segments. This exposure to racial and cultural diversity during the pre-school years lays the foundations for a multicultural national identity.

The racial diversity of *Play School* presenters introduces children to the concept of ethnic diversity as something that is inclusive and part of the Australian cultural experience rather than as 'other' (Mackinlay and Barney 2008). This introduction to varied races occurs at an age when children are looking at their own family unit for an understanding of self, differentiating between race and ethnicity for those who are the 'same' and those who are 'other' (Trawick-Smith 2010). Without exposure to varied races, this sense of 'other' solidifies and a culturally singular identity develops (Eaude 2008). *Play School,* through the use of an opening door and the lyrics 'come inside' during the introductory credits (ABC 1987), welcomes its audience into the *Play School* world. During each episode, the presenters directly address their audience, interacting with the children and creating a relationship based on familiarity (Harrison 2012). The combination of these techniques results in the pre-school audience reacting to racially diverse presenters in a 'family' environment, effectively including people from varied races in their perception of 'same' and familiar. The relationship formed between presenters and audience, despite being one-sided, creates an awareness of, and tolerance for, people from varied races at a level normally reserved for family (Eaude 2008). With the majority of children interacting with this diverse *Play School* family and internalising the racial differences, the resulting tolerance will further support a multicultural national identity.

Culture is not solely based on race and *Play School*'s 'Through the Window' segments introduce children to a wide range of cultural activities that may not otherwise be available to them as a result of location, socio-economic status, or ethnicity. The concept of 'cultural capital' is the 'wealth of experience and expectations accumulated both from their cultural inheritance and since birth' (Eaude 2008, pg. 47) that children carry with them, shaping their individual identity and influencing the way in which they perceive and experience popular culture (Wann 2010). Within the *Play School* programme, each episode contains a 'Through the Window' segment, which transports children from their own homes 'through the window' and into the life of someone else; the viewers are able to sample a different cultural experience in such a way that they are encouraged to feel comfortable with these differences (Mackinlay and Barney 2008). Within these segments, *Play School* provides the opportunity for children to share 'cultural capital' with others. For example, in 2015 *Play School* looked through the window at a family of dairy farmers during one episode and then visited a family who lived on the coast: two cultural experiences defined by location yet able to be shared across the country with the *Play School* audience (ABC 2015). In 2004, children looked through the window at a family with two mums, deaf children signing while they played, and a musical essay on different types of hair belonging to a range of ages and ethnic backgrounds (Mackinlay and Barney 2008). These segments also allow children from varying socio-economic backgrounds to experience cultural opportunities that would be otherwise restricted by finances such as ballet classes (ABC 2015). Access to the show and engagement with both presenters and the

'Through the Window' segments is 'largely resilient to socio-demographic factors' (Harrison, van Vliet and Anderson 2012, pg. 855). 'Through the Window' segments not only provide social and cultural experiences, but also teach children the importance of understanding and embracing racial and ethnic diversity in an inclusive environment (Mackinlay and Barney 2008). Harrison (2012, pg. 46) states that 'contemporary understandings of childhood … contends that children co-construct knowledge in the social context', further theorising that what they learn through observation is then used in their construction of a socio-cultural understanding and identity. This approach to childhood development suggests that, when children observe others' cultural experiences 'through the window', they internalise that 'cultural capital' and perform some of the observed behaviours themselves, effectively mirroring behaviours and creating a multicultural identity (Eaude 2008; Lacan 1949; Cote and Levine 2002; Comstock and Scharr 1999).

While other external factors also influence the move from a culturally singular national identity to a more inclusive, multicultural identity, the role that *Play School* fills in the socialisation and identity formation of young Australians should not be underestimated. The inclusivity of the programme acts as a social commentary while simultaneously paving the way for social change and increased multiculturalism. The racial and cultural tolerance learned by the pre-school audience fosters a culturally aware and inclusive national identity. Cultural attitudes have already shifted further towards fully accepting and practicing multiculturalism—a difference visible within a single generation of *Play School* viewers. This change speaks to the possibility of further inclusivity within an Australian national identity.

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