Drawings as an alternative way of understanding young children's constructions of literacy

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Abstract As teachers seek to reflect children's diverse experience in the subject matter they present and in the questions they explore, they must also embrace children's multifaceted ways of knowing. Their major pedagogical challenge is to help children transform what they know into modes of representation that allow for a full range of human experience. In their lives outside of school, children 'naturally move between art, music, movement, mathematics, drama, and language as ways to think about the world [. . .]. It is only in schools that students are restricted to using one sign system at a time.' (Short et al., 2000: 160). This study uses young children's drawings about reading and writing as an innovative way of investigating their perceptions and understandings of literacy across the broad contexts of their lives. The study challenges the politics of classroom practices that privilege language-dependent modes of representation over other modes.

Keywords drawing, images of literacy, politics of representation

Students bring to the classroom knowledge that is constructed within the practices of their everyday lives outside of school. The politics of how this knowledge is represented, however, raises particular challenges in classroom settings where learners and teachers come from diverse historical, sociocultural and linguistic contexts (Stein, 2003). A major pedagogical challenge is to help children transform what they know into modes of representation that allow for a full range of human experience. Ideally, approaches to language learning and assessment should focus on the individual child's strengths and styles of representation (Sidelnick and Svoboda, 2000).

However, although research demonstrates that children are able to communicate 'powerful and imaginative ideas and problems' through a variety of symbol systems (Peterson, 1997; Weber and Mitchell, 1995; Wetton and McWhirter, 1998), in most instances, these alternative modes of representation are not highly valued in schools in general, and in language and literacy education classes in particular (Stein, 2003). The purpose of this study, which builds on our prior research and the method we developed, (McKay and Kendrick, 2001a, b; Kendrick et al., 2003; Kendrick and McKay, 2003; Kendrick et al., in press), was to investigate the ways in which drawing provides opportunities for young children (ages five and six) to communicate their literacy knowledge and experience.

The politics of representation in language learning

The cultural, economic and social changes of the new century mean that schools, colleges and universities must determine how to deal with 'new literate practices'; they must grapple with the question: 'What will it mean to be a reader and writer in the 21st century?' (Luke and Elkins, 1998: 5). According to Luke and Elkins,

> The most useful component of the tool kit for all literacy educators may not be the mastery of a particular method, but rather a vision of the future of literacy, a picture of the texts and discourses, skills and knowledge that might be needed by our students as they enter new worlds of work and citizenship, traditional and popular culture, leisure and consumption, teaching and learning. (Luke and Elkins, 1998: 4)

Literacy pedagogy must now account for the rapidly increasing fusion of text forms embedded in children's lives by creating new opportunities for learners to communicate using multiple modes of representation in a variety of social contexts. Eisner (1985) argues that becoming literate means more than being able to read, write or code; it means acquiring the ability to use a variety of representative forms for conceptualizing and expressing meaning. Kress and Jewitt (2003) emphasize that a multimodal approach to learning begins from a theoretical position that treats all modes of meaning making as equally significant.

Piazza (1999) is among a growing number of language arts educators and researchers calling for a multiple literacies perspective that recognizes art, music, dance, drama and film as forms of literacy that play an important role in the development of children's lives, particularly in the information age, where there is more need than ever to shape and express the world in meaningful ways. This broader definition of literacy goes beyond language

symbols to that of multiple symbols. Critical to this perspective is the under-standing that symbol systems other than language are not 'tack-ons' but rather relevant options for creating and expressing meaning. Mirzoeff asserts that the concept of visual culture is new because of the focus on the visual as a way of creating, expressing *and* contesting meaning. He goes on to suggest that in Western culture, the spoken word is consistently elevated to the highest form of intellectual practice and visual representations are considered merely 'second-rate illustrations of ideas' (Mirzoeff, 1999: 6).

Research consistently shows that drawing, as a means of investigating what children know, has 'the potential to modify the dominant view of verbal knowledge as the primary representation of what average people know, and ultimately to advance knowledge of the role visual memory plays in human understandings of the world in which we live' (Peterson, 1997: 7). Schools, however, often fail to recognize the alternative modes of repre-senting knowledge available in the culture. There is an urgent need for including in school curricula multimodal representations which allow for the expression of a much fuller range of human emotion and experience, and which acknowledge the limits of language (see for example Kress and Jewitt, 2003; Mirzoeff, 1999; New London Group, 1996; Stein, 2003).

Theoretical perspectives

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides the basis for the concep-tual framework we adopt. Of particular value is his premise that the trans-mission and acquisition of cultural knowledge such as literacy takes place on an *interpersonal* level between individuals before it is internalized on an *intrapersonal* level. An understanding of this recursive relationship between the individual and the culture enables us to view children's meaning construction as embedded in their social and cultural milieu. Further, Vygotsky's (1978) formulation of spontaneous concept development informs our analysis of the children's drawings. Spontaneous concepts develop from the child's personal experiences. While information obtained about children's literacy knowledge typically portrays literacy that is charac-terized by the conventional forms of practices and products found in schools (Barton, 1994), the images of literacy constructed by the children in their drawings provide us with insights into their personal experiences of literacy, that is, what sense they have made of the complex world of literacy in their lives both inside and outside of school.

Kress (2000) provides a strong argument for taking a completely fresh look at multimodality in theories of communication, and re-evaluating how we use different symbol systems to communicate and represent

meaning. He stresses that it is critically important for this new agenda to include the full range of semiotic modes and a full understanding of their potentials and limitations.

In this article, we adopt a broad definition of literacy that goes beyond school-based literacies and incorporates the child's ability to communicate using a variety of forms of representation, including visual images. Although a limited number of educational researchers have used visual images such as drawings to investigate children's knowledge and understanding of particular topics and concepts (Peterson, 1997; Prosser, 1998; Weber and Mitchell, 1995; Wetton and McWhirter, 1998), our method for using children's drawings to understand their constructions of literacy is unique.

Method and analysis

We use a qualitative, interpretative research approach with a specific focus on image-based research (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; Prosser, 1998). It has only been within the last 30 years that qualitative researchers have given serious consideration to the use of images as a viable way of understanding aspects of humanity. Image-based research includes both moving forms such as films and videos and still images such as photographs, drawings, graffiti and cartoons (Prosser, 1998). The images provide researchers with a different sequence of data and an alternative means of perceiving it. Specifically, the images are differently situated from other forms of data because visual images, in comparison with words, evoke for research participants a different way of viewing their own reality and a different way of understanding how they see themselves and how others see them. In other words, individuals see themselves reflected in images in a way they may not see themselves reflected in words. From a social constructivist stance, image-based research enables us to investigate the potential of drawing as an alternative way for children to create and represent themselves in relation to literacy.

This study is part of a larger study involving two primary schools in a large urban city in Western Canada. In this article, we focus on Primary 1 and 2 (Grade 1 and 2) children because many of these children were just beginning to articulate their language and literacy experiences through school-assigned written language tasks. Each data collection session, which lasted approximately 60 minutes, began with a class discussion about literacies in the children's lives, both inside and outside school. Our goal was to explore the children's images and ideas, so questions were used to guide the class discussions rather than rigidly format them. The directions for the

drawing task, as outlined in Question 6 below, were deliberately left open-ended and did not specify who or what should be included in the drawing or where it might take place. The discussion provided the impetus for drawing, and we were aware that hearing the ideas of their peers could influence the children's drawing.

1. What kind of reading/writing do you do in school/outside of school?
2. Why do you read/write in school/outside of school?
3. Where do you read/write in school/outside of school?
4. How is reading/writing in school both similar and different from reading/writing outside of school?
5. How do you think you will use reading/writing in the future, as you grow older?
6. Draw a picture of reading or writing. It can be a picture of reading or writing that you do at home or at school. It can be a picture of reading or writing that you do now or that you think you might do when you're older.

Following the group discussion/drawing session, the children met individually with one of the researchers or a research assistant to explain their drawings. The scribed or written explanations were used to verify the researchers' interpretations of the children's drawings (e.g. who and what was in the drawings, when and where the literacy event or activity took place, and why the children chose to draw what they did).

The unit of analysis was the literacy event portrayed in the drawing. Analysing the range of literacy events involved coding the social settings, reading and writing practices and genres, domains (e.g. school, work, etc.), and social identities (e.g. reader, writer, teacher, professional athlete) inherent in the literacy event depicted. This information was then used to categorize each event according to common themes and patterns. Both researchers worked together to code and analyse the data. In the following sections, the predominant themes are presented along with brief examples of the range of literacy events portrayed by these young children. Primary 1 largely comprised five-year-olds and Primary 2 included mostly six-year-olds. In both schools, only children whose parents returned permission forms were included in the study.

Images of literacy

Bolton Primary School

Bolton Primary is located in a middle to lower-middle socio-economic neighbourhood. Like many Canadian schools, this school has a linguisti-

cally and culturally diverse student population. Home languages included Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Croatian, Polish, Fijian, Acholi and English, among others. The participants were 14 children in Primary 1 (10 girls and 4 boys) and 13 children in Primary 2 (8 girls and 5 boys).

Primary 1
Literacy in home and family contexts For this group of Primary 1 children, home and family contexts were the focal points of literacy. Of the 14 children, 10 portrayed literacy events that took place at home or with family members. The children who drew these pictures talked explicitly about reading with their mothers, sending messages and letters to relatives, and listening to stories read by older brothers and sisters. Their drawings reflect the children's knowledge of reading and writing for communication, maintaining family relationships, and one's own entertainment. Alex's portrayal of literacy involves his whole family; he drew a restaurant scene, which suggests that he is aware that dining out involves both reading (menus) and writing (recording food orders). However, unlike Alex, instead of portraying their entire family, many students included only siblings in their drawings. Robert's drawing, for instance, shows four figures; the one holding a book is his brother and the three others represent Robert and his other two brothers; and he talked about his brother reading a story to him and the other two boys. Ainsley's drawing also includes siblings. It is a picture of her grandfather's house where she uses his computer with her brother and sister. Similar to Ainsley, Vina made reference to her siblings when she described the picture she drew of playing math games on the computer at home. These drawings capture snapshots of what Gregory (2001: 309) refers to as 'synergy', 'a unique reciprocity whereby siblings act as adjuvants in each other's learning'. Gregory problematizes the view that in the majority of families, parents are the exclusive teachers of language and literacy. These drawings suggest that this group of children see their siblings as playing a more dominant role than their parents in their home literacy activities.

Maintaining emotional ties with absent family members, as an important motivation for literacy, was evident in other drawings. Brandy talked about writing a letter to her father, who did not live in the same household and worked for long periods outside the city. In her drawing, she included a pencil and a letter that reads, 'Dear Dad How are you doing Love Brandy' (see Figure 1). On the reverse side, she drew her father and his written response to her letter: 'Dear Brandy. I love you very much.' The drawing done by Victoria was designed as a 'book' for her mother. Inside the book,

Figure 1 **Brandy**

she wrote a poem. In discussing the drawing, she pointed out the hearts on the front cover and explained, 'Now we're going into the middle. Let me read this to you: I like hearts. Hearts like me. I like me.' Victoria's drawing also reflects her knowledge of the physical format of a book (front, middle and back). In addition, her insistence on taking her drawing home that day to give to her mother is an indication of her strong sense of audience.

Other drawings that represent literacy events at home are those done by Ishrat, Samantha and Katrina. Ishrat's representation of reading and writing was a picture of his house where he makes Lion King posters in the attic. In her drawing, Samantha provides an inventory of her bedroom in relation to reading and writing. Her drawing includes a book bag that contains the books she has read, a Valentine book that you can 'make stuff out of', stickers for being good at day care and a tray for holding papers. Katrina's drawing is one of the few that provides a window into her experience of school literacy. Her picture is an illustration of items she uses for playing school at home: a spelling test, a storybook from home, stickers and check marks (see Figure 2). In her description of playing school, she made reference to 'getting a happy face' for 'getting the story right', getting tests and checkmarks, and earning certificates to go to McDonald's. Katrina characterizes school literacy as the rules and routines associated with story writing, test taking and home-reading programmes.
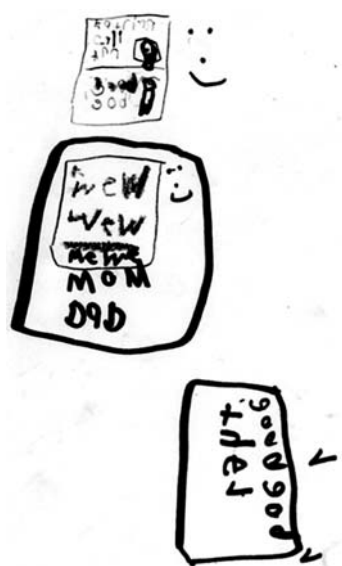

Figure 2 **Katrina**

Imagined literacies, imagined identities Several of the children focused on how they might use literacy in the future, when they are older students or adults. Amy drew a 'book about books' and explained, 'When I grow up, I'm going to read a book about scary dinosaurs and

tornadoes and about Valentine's and dogs.' The cover of her book includes a dinosaur, and a greeting card with a dog, two hearts, and a tornado and the message: 'I Love You Mom and DaD'. Inside the book, Amy drew herself with a book in her hands, her name, and again included a dog, a tornado, and a Valentine heart. Her drawing reflects her knowledge of genre (information books and greeting cards), her reading preferences and goals as a young reader. Kaela used both sides of a paper to illustrate reading and writing. On one side, she depicted herself and one of the researchers and she talked about the fun they would have 'doing reading and writing things' together. On the other side of the page, she again included herself along with two friends from day care. She explained that her picture is about books she is going to read someday at her day care, where they have '600 books'. Shawn drew a scene from a Goosebumps book, a book his older brother can 'kind of read', and a book that Shawn imagines reading in the future. Each of these drawings provides a vision of how these young children see themselves as readers in future contexts.

Primary 2
Literacy across different social settings and domains
One of the most striking aspects of the ways in which the Primary 2 children in this school represented literacy was the broad array of settings and literacy events depicted in their drawings. The range included singing with the music teacher at her house, acting out Romeo and Juliet on a stage, working in an office building, reading at school, at home, at the beach and in a tent. This variety of settings and domains is reflective of the experiences this group of children have had with literacy both inside and outside school. Many of these literacy activities are extensions of the home domain.

Jodi's unique portrayal of literacy shows both music and writing as symbol systems. In her drawing, she is sitting at a desk, holding a red-tipped pen. She clearly positions herself as a writer here. In front of the desk is Jodi's music teacher. Speech balloons indicate that Jodi is 'doing the notes' and that her teacher is 'singing the words' (see Figure 3). Ashley's illustration of the balcony scene from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet communicates her understanding that a play is also an enactment of literacy (see Figure 4). She emphasized, 'I like Romeo and Juliet because there's all sorts of parts in there: There's happy parts, and there's sad parts, and there's mad parts and stuff. I have drawn the part where Juliet is standing up by her bedroom door – and Romeo is down here saying, 'Juliet!'. She then indicated that she has drawn hearts around Juliet's head because 'Romeo and Juliet are in love.' Her complex understanding of reading for aesthetic purposes is evident in the images her drawing evokes. Ashley's experience

Figure 3 **Jodi**

with community theatre is quite extensive because she spends after-school time with her grandmother, who directs plays on a regular basis.

Kenny's picture of the Capital City Tower provides a glimpse into his understanding of workplace literacy. His tower includes numerous windows behind which he has drawn offices with small figures working at computers. During our interview, he talked about visiting the Capital City Tower where his father used to work. His perception of how reading and writing are used in this particular work environment was as follows: 'They sit in their offices, and they typewrite the bill, and they write to the bank, and they have this little truck, and then they deliver it to whoever made it. This little truck goes to the bank, and then he hauls all the money out.' He also talked about his father being fired from his job in the office building and described how this affected his family, which could be an indication of why the Capital City Tower was such a prominent image. Delacey described the beach, where she often spent time with her family, as a perfect place to 'settle down and read'. She drew herself standing on the beach with a book in hand: 'it's a book about the beach,' she explained, 'stuff about sharks and fish.' The blue sky and shining sun in her picture serve to create an atmosphere conducive to settling down to read.

Some of the Primary 2 children also drew literacy activities in or around their homes. Unlike the Primary 1 children, however, family members were not prominent figures in their drawings. Instead, they represented literacy events that included peers or that they did on their own. Amber, for instance, drew a colourful picture of a large red tent with three small figures sitting and reading in front of it (see Figure 5). She explained, 'I like to make tents in my bedroom and read with a flashlight.' This is a favourite activity to do with friends who spend the night. Michael's representation of literacy also relates to home. He drew his father's house, which is where he spends

Figure 4 **Ashley**

117

Figure 5 **Amber**

weekends and explained that at his father's house, he plays games with his cousin and his step-cousin. Michael's drawing also has the added feature of the caption 'On the weekend, I go with my mom and dad.' The drawing resembles a typical page in a journal diary (see Figure 6). It was unclear from Michael's drawing and his description whether his intention was to illustrate playing games as a reading and writing activity or whether the journal-type page he produced was his image of writing.

Ashley D. portrayed herself reading a book at her desk with her cat watching. Although she described the desk as a place where she likes to sit and read, she explained that usually the seat is where her older brother chooses to sit. Kimberly's drawing represents her favourite place for reading and writing, which is the front step of her house where she likes to do her math homework and read. Viannara's drawing also represents a favourite reading spot, which she described as 'the table between the living room and the kitchen.' She explained that this was where she read the *Ugly Duckling*. Brian's drawing illustrates his reading spot at school, at his desk.

Imagined literacies, imagined identities

Jocelyn's portrayal of literacy moves beyond the here and now into a place where she imagines reading and writing taking place. Her picture is of a large building. 'When I think about reading and writing, it sounds like you need a big place for that,' she explained. Jocelyn went on to talk about her understanding of the writing process as it would take place in this imaginary building: One person might be writing about penguins, or someone might be writing about health, or someone might be reading. Someone might be the person who reads all the book to see if it's good. [If the book is good], they put it in the library. [If the book is bad], the person

Figure 6 **Michael**

who writed the story. It doesn't sound good. There has to be a solution and problem and where it takes place and the characters. And something has to be at the end, that they lived happily ever after. So then they might have to make a different story. Jocelyn's drawing represents a remarkable under-standing of genre, text structures and book publishing.

Jackson Primary School

Jackson Primary School is in a middle to upper-middle socio-economic neighbourhood. In total, 19 students in Primary 1 (7 girls and 12 boys) and 21 students in Primary 2 (13 girls and 8 boys) participated in the study. Similar to Bolton Primary, this school has a diverse population of students whose home languages included Mandarin, Cantonese, Croatian, Ukrain-ian and English, among others.

Primary 1
Literacy in home and family contexts   Of the 19 children in this class-room, 14 represented literacy events at home or in other contexts with their families, which was also the most frequently depicted literacy setting in the drawings of the Bolton Primary 1 students. Illustrations of favourite reading places at home were very common. Taylor, for example, drew a picture of himself sitting on what looks like a very comfortable couch reading 'Weany the Poo' (see Figure 7). The reading event is encapsulated in a cloud, which vividly illustrates the experience of reading as separate from the here and now. The image communicates the experiential aspect of being completely absorbed in reading much more lucidly than language. Cole's colourful picture of reading Pokémon (a television cartoon character) in his bedroom reflects his reading preferences at home. Other examples that portray literacy at home include Taylor's picture of herself reading in her basement and Logan's drawing of the bookshelf in his bedroom. Catrin also shows herself at home in her room, a place where she has many tools for literacy, namely books on a shelf and a special desk for reading and writing. Jordan drew an amusing picture of what often happens when he is reading books in his room at night: 'I was sleeping [because] I couldn't read any more books' (see Figure 8). Alternatively, T.J. depicts his mother rather than himself as a reader. His picture shows her reading a book in the house while he is playing outside.

   Brett's picture is also set in a home context; in the picture, he is reading his favourite fairy tales and doing math homework. The picture shows an active engagement in the reading process and provides examples of both home and school literacies. Other children also included both home and
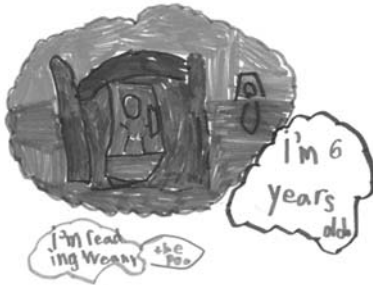
Figure 7 **Taylor**

school literacies in their illustrations. Sebastian, for example, drew a picture of getting a book from the school library to read to his mom and dad at home. Tyler, like Brett, drew a picture of doing math homework and from the smile drawn on his face one can infer it is something he enjoys.

Imagined literacies, imagined identities Four of the students in this Primary 1 class took from the whole class discussion the idea of how they might use literacy in the future when they are adults. Kathleen imagined herself in the future teaching ABCs to kindergarten children. Melody saw herself as a soccer coach: her picture shows her studying a book about coaching. Jaleesa depicted herself as a camp counsellor reading a book to children around a campfire. Zack, who dreams of becoming a professional hockey player for the Edmonton Oilers, illustrated an autograph signing session (see Figure 9). Interestingly, it was primarily girls who imagined themselves in future roles; many of these roles involved teaching literacy to children in one capacity or another. In comparison, Zack most likely viewed literacy as a tangential skill for someone who plays hockey.

Metalinguistic awareness

Young readers and writers, when given the opportunity, frequently demonstrate metalinguistic awareness, including not only knowledge about the structures of language but also 'beliefs about oneself and others as language users, knowledge about the demands of different literacy events, a repertoire of language strategies, and knowledge about orchestrating this complex of concepts and strategies in the face of particular literacy events' (Rowe and Harste, 1986: 236). Unique to this group of children is that two of them demonstrated an awareness of what takes place inside a writer's head during the writing process. Jesse uses thought

Figure 8 **Jordan**

Figure 9 **Zack**

balloons to indicate what he and his friend are thinking about while they write stories at school. Dylan's drawing represents what he imagines while writing a story about dinosaurs.

Primary 2
Literacy in home and family contexts

Like many other children in this study, this group of Primary 2 children frequently represented literacy in home and family domains. In total, 9 of the 21 children portrayed literacy events at home or with family members. Devyn's picture of his mother reading in bed (see Figure 10) provides a snapshot of a literacy event in his household. The drawing reveals his familiarity with the event and the type of books his mother likes to read. Esther's picture is also a portrayal of a common literacy event in many homes – doing homework at the kitchen table. Equally representative of household literacy is Matthew's drawing of himself reading books while simultaneously watching television. Nicola depicts two roles in her drawing: the first as a student doing a spelling test at the kitchen table, the second as an artist.

A variation in how these children portrayed home literacy events, however, is the increased inclusion of technology in their drawings. In total, 4 of the 9 children who represented home and family literacy events drew pictures that related to the use of computers at home. Mitchel drew himself using a computer to write a Cinderella story. His drawing represents both an awareness of genre and his knowledge of computers as word-processors. Chantelle depicted herself using the computer to write a story about her cat. Two other children also included computers in their drawings. Brent drew a picture of his friend Kelsey playing a game on his

Figure 10 **Devyn**

121

computer at home. Katie, who does not yet have a computer, drew a picture of the computer she is 'going to get'.

An extension of home and family literacy is the inclusion of literacy events with friends in home contexts. Kelsey's drawing is an illustration of Shelby who is writing a story. The caption for her drawing is: 'This is Shelby writing lots. It is at her house. She has lots of books.' Shelby similarly depicts reading and writing with Kelsey, pointing out that Kelsey is sitting beside her in the picture she has drawn. Dyson (1993) uses the term 'social work' to refer to the role writing can play in defining and bonding friendships in a classroom. In the case of Shelby and Kelsey, drawing appears to serve an identical purpose to writing. For these young girls, inserting each other into their drawings defines, confirms, and perhaps maintains their friendship in the classroom.

Imagined literacies, imagined identities   Several of the students in this class depicted how they imagined themselves as readers and writers in the future. Brandon, for instance, portrayed himself as a soccer player. Similar to Zack, the Primary 1 student who dreamed of becoming a hockey player, Brandon pictured himself in the prestigious role of a professional athlete who is frequently asked to sign autographs for the public. Meyna saw her future role as a teacher. In her drawing, she is 'teaching about science – how the stars grow and shine' (see Figure 11). Kara imagined being a tap dancer, and she drew a picture of herself reading a book that would help her accomplish this goal. Sabrina's drawing is also about the future but rather than depicting a particular role, she has drawn pictures of books, complete with titles ('*The kings little girl, Baby truble* and *The frog prince*') that she would like to read in the future. Ursula's picture is of an imaginary scene at the public library. Her description of the drawing reveals her awareness that books can evoke a range of responses in readers: 'These are kids reading books. The boy is surprised with his book. The girl is happy with hers. These children are at the public library.' Deanna's very colourful and abstract picture is also of the public library, a place where she imagines there are '280 books' (see Figure 12). 'I've never been to a public library,' she wrote, 'but maybe I probably will.'

Figure 11 **Meyna**

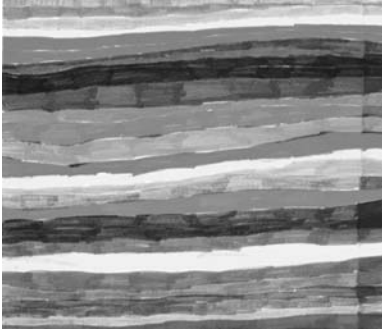**Literacy in school and community contexts**   With the exception of the

Figure 12 **Deanna**

drawings described in this section, there are very few examples of children positioning themselves as students in classrooms or depicting examples of school literacy events. Zeina drew a picture of her own classroom and portrayed her teacher 'teaching math' and 'reading to the kids'. When writing about her drawing, she provided a detailed description of the classroom organization: 'There is a brown table beside the orange one. There is a door right beside the brown table. There is a chalkboard and the places where you put the chalk. The erasers go on the chalk thing.' Garratt's picture shows him reading at school with the caption: 'When I was in [Primary] 2.' The smile drawn on his face suggests a positive attitude. Both Nathan and John inserted themselves into their drawings. Nathan pictured himself reading his journal at school and wrote the following descriptive caption: 'I have a game boy. I have a play station.' Similarly, John drew an aerial view of the top of his desk with a piece of writing positioned in the centre of the desk, and wrote this caption: 'I like my game boy and I like playing it. I got a new fire pit and I have firinit [fire engines].' The writings that these two students integrated into their drawings reveal something about who they are in out-of-school contexts. The captions also suggest that, like many five- and six-year-old boys, both boys have a preference for what Newkirk (2000) refers to as visually mediated narratives such as video games and computer graphics.

Drawing as an alternative mode of representation in language learning   An important aspect of the politics of representation in language learning was highlighted for us when we shared the students' drawings with their classroom teachers. The teachers were overwhelmingly surprised that their students were able to express complex understandings of reading and writing, which were apparently not evident in classroom language arts activities. Their responses illustrate the privileged position that language holds over other forms of representation. Unlike language-dependent modes of representation, the drawings allow these young children to represent whole areas of their sensory lives. Like snapshots, the pictures capture sensory modes such as sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch in a way that language cannot; they infer the moods, sentiments, relationships and interactions that are embedded and diffused across the

many different literacy contexts of children's lives. Kress points out that 'the general assumption is that language is a communicational and representational medium which is fully adequate to the expression of anything that we might want to express: that anything that we think, feel, sense, can be said (or written) in language' (Kress, 2000: 193). This assumption places language in an exceptionally privileged position, particularly in early childhood classrooms where many young children are just learning to use print to represent their understanding of the world.

The human mind, Hubbard (1989) posits, has a need for organizational systems that sort out the kaleidoscope of images to which we are exposed. Both art and language provide a means of encoding experience, whether real or imagined (Baron, 1984). However, as Kress argues, the two modes – art and language – are 'embedded in distinct ways of conceptualising, thinking, and communicating' (Kress, 2000: 195). Drawings, he explains, show an astonishing conceptual understanding and imagination that cannot be expressed through language, even language in narrative format.

The basis of this study is that children's drawings about reading and writing have unrealized potential for understanding how they use alternative symbol systems to make sense of the literacies in their lives. Drawings are children's earliest representations of experience and stimulate their narrative impulse to create stories (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Sidelnick and Svoboda (2000: 174), 'aesthetic, narrative, and reflective inquiries using the arts help children attain new conceptual language to organize and express their learning, and serve as an instrument for acquiring knowledge'. This collection of drawings demonstrates that young children's visual representations of their own literacy can provide teachers and researchers with additional or alternative ways of understanding children's constructions of reading and writing. As Dyson (1992) and Sidelnick and Svoboda (2000) point out, drawing can also act as a bridge from one symbol system to another, in this case, from image to word. In addition, print literacy can be made more appealing and accessible when it is embedded in systems that are more attractive to the learner. As Newkirk (2000: 297) observes, 'primary-school children regularly break into print by making elaborate drawings with a label at the bottom – print literacy being pulled in the wake of the visual'.

Interacting through symbolic forms carries with it assertions – tacit or conscious – 'about the kind of person one (and other) is, how one is (currently being) related to others, and what feelings are to be associated with the social arrangement' (Carbaugh, 1999: 160). In learning language, and learning through the use of that language, children move in and out of different social contexts, and by engaging in the practices specific to

these contexts, they come to understand how to position themselves as people with recognizable social identities. Dillon and Moje (1998: 194) use the phrase 'occupying subject positionings' to emphasize that these positionings are 'temporary, fluid, and context dependent'. Positionings, in other words, are possible ways of being and each person's experience of those possibilities, as they are made available through specific discourses and contexts (Fernie et al., 1993).

In occupying subject positionings, children necessarily become involved in positioning themselves as gendered beings (Davies, 1989). Cherland (1994) reminds us that gender is not something people *are*, but rather, it is something people *do*. The young children in this study have learned to 'perform' gender, as Barrs (2000) observes, by taking on roles, and playing with and being curious about not only the roles, but also the idea of themselves in those roles. The drawings are a performance of imagined future gendered identities that are inextricably linked to imagined literacies that transcend time and space. In the here and now of their drawings, these children are teachers, sports heroes, readers, writers and friends who engage in literate practices that allow them to enact how they position themselves as boys and girls, men and women.

Conclusions and future research

The children in this study produced unique texts into which their personal and social histories were woven. By using what they 'have to hand', children make their own representational resources part of a constant production of signs (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). The interests of the sign-makers lead them to select what they want to represent in a particular moment and context and determine the process. Through drawing about reading and writing, young children are able to transform what they know about print into a mode of representation that allows for the full range of their experience. As researchers, the drawings gave us a glimpse into the 'spontaneous concepts' being developed by the children in relation to literacy in their lives, both inside and outside of school. Their drawings communicate the diverse ways in which they see themselves and others as literate beings; their wealth of literacy experiences across contexts such as home, school and community; and demonstrate, as Anning (2003) has also observed, that children have a keen awareness that literacy tools such as books, pencils and paper are used in different ways in different communities of practice.

As we move from a culture dominated by language to one in which images are becoming increasingly important (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996), it is critical that current literacy policy debates include broader

aspects of communication beyond 'lettered representation' (Bearne and Kress, 2001). At the core of current literacy development paradigms are the literate behaviours traditionally associated with learning to decode and encode print (Anning, 2003). Kress has been critical of such paradigms because they place language in an exceptionally privileged position:

> The assumption underlying a multimodal approach to communication and representation is that, on the contrary, humans use many means made available in their cultures for representation precisely because these offer differing potentials, both for representation and for communication. (Kress, 2000: 194)

Despite recent rhetoric about the importance of sociocultural context and semiotics in language and literacy policy debates, policy continues to focus almost exclusively on language with little or no reference to other modes of representation. Moreover, while a growing number of language and literacy educators and theorists are calling for a 'multiliteracies' perspective, much of the current literacy research itself continues to be grounded in a 'verbocentric' approach. Seminal reference collections in the field of English language arts such as the *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts* (2003) and *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* (1994) make little or no reference to visual methodologies either in future directions for research or in the methodological sections. On the whole, the visual aspects of early literacy in particular and graphical forms of representation in general are 'under-valued, under-researched, and under-represented', and within institutional settings, young children's meaning-making is unremittingly geared toward narrow definitions of literacy and numeracy (Anning, 2003: 5).

Future research focusing on how young children represent their literacy knowledge and experience through drawing and other symbol systems has the potential to provide a broader perspective on the dynamic and evolutionary nature of children's literacy development. The use of children's drawings in this article is limited to 'snapshots' of the children's literacy experience. A comparative study that involves collecting a series of images over an extended period has the potential to provide unique insights into how language learners from diverse backgrounds represent themselves and their literacy experiences across time and place.

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