A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF TWO URBAN ABORIGINAL CHILDREN’S
MEANING MAKING ACROSS HOME, SCHOOL, AND COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

by

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Abstract

In the field of early childhood literacy, researchers have begun to investigate the ways contemporary childhoods are being shaped by a range of multimodal communicative practices (Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Marsh, 2003). The link between children’s use of these practices, many of which are linked to digital technologies and global discourses, and their identity construction, is also being examined in the new millennium. The changing communication systems of the twenty-first century are also influencing the ways urban Aboriginal children make meaning in their worlds, and are impacting Aboriginal children’s identities. Drawing on a sociocultural theory of learning, the purpose of this qualitative comparative case study is to investigate the complexity of the everyday communicative practices utilized by two, six-year-old urban Aboriginal children in and out-of-school, in an attempt to inform the future direction of literacy curricula for young Aboriginal children. Acquiring insight into Aboriginal children’s meaning making is also vital to challenging and replacing long-standing deficit notions held by society and mainstream schools about Aboriginal students’ inferiority and ineducability. This is particularly relevant as the urban Aboriginal student population rises in the province of Saskatchewan.

The findings revealed the focal children’s homes to be vibrant, multimodal textual spaces in which the children were supported by their family members as they engaged in a range of communicative practices for multiple purposes. The findings also revealed the link between the dynamic and evolving nature of Indigenous knowledge and the families’ meaning making. Further, the findings showed how the practices valued and promoted in the focal children’s classroom generally reflected traditional and narrow modes of communication, specifically, print-based and teacher-directed practices, and also included superficial, rudimentary aspects of Aboriginal culture. This study offers new suggestions on the ways in which Aboriginal children’s out-of-school communicative practices, specifically those practices linked to digital technology, can be included in early childhood classrooms in culturally-relevant ways.
Preface

I received ethics approval to conduct this study from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The certificate number for this study is H07-00021.
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Finally, I thank the generous financial support of the UBC Institute of Early Childhood Education and Research, the UBC Department of Language and Literacy Education, and the UBC Faculty of Education.
**Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Dr. Walter Streelasky, who inspired me to begin this journey. Thank you for sharing your doctoral experience with me and for introducing our family to Farrell’s Ice Cream Parlor, Sea Lion Caves, Skinner’s Butte, and the mighty University of Oregon Ducks, all of which added to the richness of that experience. Many of my fondest childhood memories center on our family’s time in Eugene, particularly my visits to your study carrel on the U of O campus. Thank you for always leading by example.
Chapter One
Introduction to the Study

From birth, children are meaning makers, intrepid explorers and researchers, learning about the world around them through their actions and interactions.
- Fraser (2001)

The understanding that children are meaning makers, who utilize a range of semiotic systems to make sense of their worlds, is embedded within the shift in thinking about literacy that has occurred over the past few decades. Although some people continue to view literacy as simply a matter of acquiring the technical competence that enables an individual to encode and decode print texts, which is situated within an autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984), others view literacy as more complex, and argue that the concept of literacy involves learning a repertoire of practices for communicating in particular social and cultural contexts (e.g., Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Dyson, 1997, 2001; Heath, 1983; Nixon, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Street, 1984, 2000, 2005). This broader, alternative perspective of literacy acknowledges that literacy consists of social, cultural, political, and multimodal practices, and recognizes that literacy is not a generic, universal set of psycholinguistic skills and abilities, transferable from one context to another (Kendrick, Rogers, Smythe, & Anderson, 2005). This ideological model addresses issues of identity and power, and argues that literacy is always embedded in socially constructed principles (Street, 1984, 1993).

In this study, I draw on an ideological model to examine the ways two Aboriginal children living in an inner-city\(^1\) neighbourhood in Saskatchewan utilized a range of “communicative practices” (Street, 1997) over a ten-month period. Throughout this dissertation, I use this term to refer to the wide range of multimodal meaning making in which the focal children engaged. To explore these communicative practices, I draw on a sociocultural perspective (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) which recognizes that a child’s development cannot be understood by a study of the individual. Instead, we must also examine the external social world in which that child has developed, and how through participation in activities that require cognitive and communicative functions, the child is drawn into the use of these functions in ways that nurture him or her (Rogoff, 1990).

\(^{1}\) The term *inner-city* refers to the older, central part of a large city where poverty, transiency, and other social problems frequently exist. This area of the city is generally characterized by crowded neighbourhoods and abandoned buildings, and is often where minority groups predominate.
I also draw on the theory and research in multimodal social semiotics, widely known as multimodality (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006; Thibault, 1991), which refers to communication in the widest sense (e.g., written, digital, oral). A multimodal lens of communication has broadened our understanding of the ways that children make meaning across different sociocultural contexts (e.g., home, school). The study is also informed by the body of work articulated in the New Literacy Studies (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanić, 2000; Gee, 2000; Heath, 1983; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 1993) which focus on an understanding of literacies as multiple and situated that vary within time and space. The NLS offer a perspective that assumes literacy is a critical social practice, and focuses on a culturally-sensitive view of how people use literacy in different contexts for different purposes (Pahl & Rowsell, 2006). The emerging theory of Indigenous knowledge (Battiste, 2000; Brayboy & Maughan, 2009; Smith, 1999) also frames this study, and centers on the significance of complex systems of relationships from which knowing originates in Aboriginal communities, and recognizes that Aboriginal people have their own methods for classifying and transmitting multiple forms of knowledge, which have been largely marginalized in public schooling.

In this study, these theories provide a space in which two, urban Aboriginal children’s communicative practices can be investigated and interpreted within complex networks of social practices (Heath, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Solsken, 1993) that exist within the contexts of their families (Kendrick, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), classroom (Bloome, 1989), and communities (Ferdman, 1990; Heath, 1983; Scribner, 1988).

**Rationale**

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education document, *Building communities of hope: Best practices for meeting the learning needs of at-risk and Indian and Métis students* (1996), uses the term “at-risk” to describe the majority of children, many of whom are Aboriginal, living in the inner-city areas of Saskatchewan’s largest cities. The Ministry defines “at-risk students” as those children who are experiencing barriers to their learning, such as poverty, family breakdown, violence, and abuse (Government of Saskatchewan, 1993). In an attempt to address, and perhaps eradicate the barriers to learning that many urban Aboriginal children encounter, the
Ministry of Education recommends the holistic inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge\(^2\) in school curriculum in Saskatchewan community schools\(^3\). Although this is a sound recommendation, it is often difficult to implement. For example, Eurocentric and colonial educational ideals such as the inclusion of standardized assessments and prescribed learning objectives also infiltrate these schools. As a result, schools often default to incorporating superficial, rudimentary aspects of Aboriginal culture (e.g., the incorporation of Aboriginal drumming and dancing groups at school assemblies) as opposed to richer and deeper notions of Aboriginal culture.

Children who have been labelled “at-risk” are often perceived by society to be “deficient” (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). This label is particularly evident in relation to Aboriginal children, as prevalent assumptions are held by some classroom teachers about Aboriginal children’s meaning-making (e.g., “nothing” is occurring in Aboriginal families’ homes), and Aboriginal students and communities are often blamed by teachers for their own educational failure (Malin, 1990). Piquemal and Kouritzin (2003) add that underlying these ideas are racially prejudiced perceptions about Aboriginal children and their families. It is therefore vital to challenge and replace long-standing deficit notions about Aboriginal students’ inferiority and ineducability by developing culturally-appropriate curriculum that is meaningful and relevant to Aboriginal children (Malin, 1990). In Saskatchewan, the need to investigate young Aboriginal children’s meaning making is increasingly urgent as the number of Aboriginal children in urban settings in Saskatchewan increases (Statistics Canada, 2008).

The present research is therefore significant, as it provides insight into the valued communicative practices of two urban Aboriginal children, and addresses the understanding that Aboriginal children and their families “live in two worlds” (Brayboy, 2006; Hampton, 1995; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). One of these worlds is the locally-derived Indigenous world in which they are intimately associated, and which includes a range of cultural traditions embedded in a rich social history. The other is the externally-defined western world which has influenced the ways in which they construct meaning in their everyday lives, and includes communicative practices that are largely embedded in the technological transformations and global discourses of the new millennium. Finding a balance between these

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\(^2\) The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (1996) states that Aboriginal knowledge includes Aboriginal history, culture, languages, and traditions.

\(^3\) In 1980, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education developed community schools in the inner-city neighbourhoods of its largest cities. The objectives of these schools are to provide Aboriginal children with a learning environment that is culturally affirming, and that respects and reflects the experiences and realities of the students’ lives, and to enhance parent and community involvement in school programming.
worlds in classrooms in which Aboriginal children are enrolled is significant to meeting the needs of these children, and authentically representing their lived experiences and out-of-school realities.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to bring to the forefront the complexity of the local, everyday communicative practices used by two urban Aboriginal children in an attempt to gain an understanding of their meaning making. To do so, I acknowledge Street’s (1984) foundational work which recognizes literacy as a social practice, embedded in existing social structures, and the work of Kress (1997) who recognizes the multiplicity of modes used by individuals. From this view, I contend that children’s communicative practices are linked to social conditions, and in terms of this study, are framed by local value and belief systems both in and out of school. Street (1984) and others (Heath, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) were also part of a significant shift in literacy studies that began to emphasize the social nature of meaning making through ethnographies of communication (Hymes, 1964), or case studies that employed ethnographic techniques (this investigation being an example) in an attempt to provide an understanding of the ways people constructed meaning in their social worlds.

As previously stated, throughout this dissertation, I use the term “communicative practice,” to refer to the wide range of multimodal practices (e.g., drawing, writing, reading, playing, video gaming) the two children engaged in as they traveled across multiple contexts. My use of this term accurately represents the children’s utilization of different forms of communication, which is due in part to the cultural, social, and economic changes of the new century. To situate this study, I assert that while previous research has acknowledged the changing role of Aboriginal ways of knowing (e.g., reading the landscapes and seasons, oral traditions) across generations of Aboriginal families and communities (e.g., Hare, 2001), and research has also addressed the potential role Aboriginal ways of knowing can play in schools (e.g., Battiste, 2000; Hare, 2005; Schick & St. Denis, 2005), there are gaps in the research in relation to the role contemporary communicative practices play in Aboriginal children’s meaning making. Additionally, there is minimal knowledge of the ways Aboriginal children are being supported by family and community members as they construct meaning in their worlds, as well
as how they are establishing their identities and positioning themselves in relation to their use of communicative practices. Therefore, the research questions designed to guide this study are:

1. What are the types and purposes of communicative practices used by young urban Aboriginal children at home, at school, and in the community?

2. What role do family and community members play in supporting and influencing Aboriginal children’s communicative practices?

3. What is the relationship between Aboriginal children’s use of communicative practices and their construction of identity?

**The Context**

The current study took place in a southern Saskatchewan city. The city had an estimated population of 179,246, with 5% of the people identifying themselves as Aboriginal, which includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. At the time of the study, the province of Saskatchewan had a population of 1,020,847 (Statistics Canada, 2008), with 141,890 self-identified Aboriginal people living in the province, the majority of whom identified Cree as their mother language.

Several studies (e.g., Drost, 1995; Hanselmann, 2001) have outlined the poor socio-economic conditions for Aboriginal people living in Canada. These conditions are particularly evident in the large cities located in the prairie provinces. In their work on Aboriginal communities and urban sustainability, Graham and Peters (2002) discussed the possibility of the emergence of urban ghettos in Canadian cities, noting that over the years, many of the Canadian Aboriginal people who have migrated from rural areas and reserves frequently live in poor inner-city neighbourhoods, are often unemployed, and are more likely to have low education levels. Aboriginal migration to urban centers also presents particular challenges to the maintenance of Aboriginal cultures and identities. As mentioned previously, in an attempt to address these issues, the province of Saskatchewan developed community schools in its inner-city areas. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (1996) describes Saskatchewan community schools as “centres of learning and hope for their communities” (p. 6). These schools strive to create learning programs that recognize and celebrate Aboriginal culture, and include numerous programs for students’ families and local community members (e.g., Community Kitchens, clothing exchange).
The focal children in the present study both attended the same elementary community school in their neighbourhood, and were peers in a Grade One classroom. This study began in September 2007 and continued until the end of the focal children’s school year in June 2008. At the beginning of the school year, the school had an enrollment of 242 students in grades pre-kindergarten to eight. At that time, the school’s Aboriginal student population was 57%. However, as the year progressed, the number of students in attendance fluctuated, including the number of Aboriginal students.

**Beginnings**

At the time of this study, I was teaching at a different elementary community school, ten blocks from where the focal children, Devin and Samara, attended school and lived with their families. I previously taught at the school they attended, and while I did not teach Devin and Samara, all of their siblings were enrolled in my pre-kindergarten classroom at different times during my tenure at the school. The children’s parents also participated in the family involvement program in my classroom. I spent my entire teaching career in the same inner-city neighbourhood, and during those eleven years, I noticed a significant shift in the student population as the enrollment of Aboriginal students in inner-city schools increased. This was primarily due to many Aboriginal families moving from their reserves or from smaller towns and villages to the city.

Several research reports have discussed the circulation of Aboriginal families between rural areas/reserves and urban areas (e.g., Clatworthy, 1996; Graham & Peters, 2002; Norris, Cooke, & Clatworthy, 2002), and although this was evident among the Aboriginal children in the school (as they often went back to their reserves on the weekends and during the summer with their families), this did not disrupt the Aboriginal students’ attendance in my early childhood classroom. As the composition of my pre-kindergarten classroom changed, I became interested

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4 Throughout this dissertation, the actual names of the focal children, and the actual names of their family members are used. At the onset of the study, I gave the parents in both families the option to include their actual names and the actual names of their children in this dissertation. Both families decided to include their given names and their children’s given names in this document because they wanted to share their “stories.” The parents of Samara’s best friend, Gabby, also decided to let their child’s actual name be used in the document. In this dissertation, the actual names of all other participants are not revealed.

5 In 1997, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education piloted a small number of half-day pre-kindergarten programs in community schools in Regina, Saskatoon, North Battleford, Lloydminster, and Prince Albert. Currently, there are numerous half-day pre-kindergarten programs located in public and Catholic schools throughout the province of Saskatchewan. These half-day programs are for three and four-year old children living in the inner city and rural areas. The pre-kindergarten programs also include a family involvement and home visiting component.
in learning about my Aboriginal students’ out-of-school communicative practices. As a Caucasian teacher and researcher, I was particularly interested in examining how Aboriginal children’s out-of-school communicative practices could be incorporated in meaningful and authentic ways in classrooms that are so often framed by mainstream, Eurocentric perspectives (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Farrell-Racette, Goulet, Pelletier, & Shmon, 1996; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1993).

Contacting the Families

As stated previously, I became acquainted with the families involved in the present study when Samara’s and Devin’s older siblings were enrolled in my classroom. My relationship with these families continued to develop when I conducted my masters’ research⁶, as both families participated in that study. Although there were several families that I considered contacting to participate in this study, I decided to approach these particular families because I had developed a sense of trust with them over the years, their families had remained intact, and I felt that both families’ youngest child had many of the qualities that I was seeking in a research participant (e.g., Aboriginal ancestry, comfortable with adults).

After receiving approval from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board to conduct the study, I initiated contact with both of these families by sending them letters of invitation to participate in the study. I was somewhat apprehensive to contact the focal children’s parents as it had been five years since I last taught at the inner-city school their children attended, and I was worried about the time-consuming commitment of this long-term study for their families. However, both families contacted me at my current school to express their interest in the research and their willingness to participate in the study. During these initial phone calls, I informed both families that I would call them later that day to discuss possible times that I could visit their homes⁷.

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⁶ Early in my teaching career, I developed a family literacy program with my three and four-year-old Aboriginal and culturally-diverse students and their family members (Streelasky, 2001, 2008). This program was inspired by the students and family members’ interests (e.g., the students’ interest in babies, farm animals; the family members’ interest in prenatal health, parenting issues), and included the adult family members’ involvement as teachers in the classroom. This collaborative experience spurred my interest in social justice issues in research (e.g., power issues between participants and researchers, the “voice” of children in studies in which they are involved) which in turn, also acted as a catalyst for the current study.

⁷ I had previously visited both focal families’ homes on numerous occasions in my role as a pre-kindergarten teacher.
When I called Samara’s home that evening to confirm a time that I could visit her and her family to further explain the study and answer any of their questions about the research, no one answered the phone, so I left a message on their family’s answering machine. Three hours later, Samara’s father, Renae, returned my call. After I inquired about how his daughters were doing in school, Renae suggested that I come to their home the following Wednesday. During our conversation, he also mentioned that Samara did not have many teeth due to “bottle rot” and that I might find her speech difficult to understand. When I visited their home the following week, the entire family was there, and after explaining the study to Renae, his wife, Beatrice, and their daughters, I talked specifically to Samara about the study. I explained that I would like to play with her in her home, and visit her at school during her Grade One year. Samara responded to my request by smiling, nodding her head, and grabbing my hand.

When I called Devin’s home, his mother, Carol, answered the phone. After discussing how her children were doing in school, I asked if I could come to her home to share more details about the study. She quickly agreed to my visit, and stated that she was interested in learning more about my research. Four days later, I visited the family’s home. When I asked Carol if she thought my visits would be alright with Devin’s father⁸ (who lived in a different house close by), she stated that it would be “no problem” because I had been their daughters’ teacher. During my visit, Carol hinted that Devin’s personality was quite different from her two older daughters. Carol stated that Devin, unlike his relatively calm and compliant siblings, was boisterous and aggressive. When I talked to Devin about the study, and I explained that I would like to play with him throughout the school year, he agreed to my request by replying, “yeah, sure!”

⁸ Several weeks into the study, Ollie, Devin’s father, was at his children’s home when I arrived for a home observation. At that time, I shared the purpose of this study with him. He verbally agreed to participate in the study, and he stated that Carol had shared the details of the study with him immediately after she received the letter of invitation to participate in the study.
Family Gathering

In mid-September, following my visits to each home, I invited both families to a dinner in my classroom. The children’s teacher and principal\(^9\) were also invited, but chose not to attend. The intent of this gathering was to provide the families with consent forms, and to answer any additional questions they had about the study. Samara attended the dinner with her parents, and three of her four sisters. Devin attended the dinner with his mother and both of his sisters. During that dinner, I encouraged the families to share their thoughts, ask questions, and determine the days or times that would be most convenient for them for home visits. I made note of these times, and recorded them on the monthly calendars that I provided to the families at the beginning of each month. At the bottom of each calendar, I also included my home phone number and the phone number at my school. At this meeting, I told the families that they could call me at anytime to chat or ask questions about the study, or if they needed to change any of the scheduled visits outlined on the calendar.

In addition to visiting the families’ homes and the children’s classroom, I also expressed my desire to observe Devin and Samara in a variety of other contexts during the research period (e.g., family outings, after-school clubs). This request was graciously agreed to by both families. The dates and locations of these observations were added to the monthly calendars as the study progressed. After the dinner, the children started to play in the classroom, and the parents chatted with one another about the happenings in their neighbourhood, and the activities that were occurring at their children’s school.

The Participants

In the following sections, I include profiles for both Devin and Samara. I also include descriptions of their parents, siblings, and Grade One teacher to provide a sense of who these children are as situated within their family and primary classroom. I also incorporate descriptions of each focal child’s home and neighbourhood, as well as descriptions of the contexts they shared during the research period.

\(^9\) Several months before this study began, I visited the principal and Grade One teacher at the school in which I was hoping to conduct the research (pending UBC ethics approval). I chose this school because I previously taught there, I knew several of the teaching staff, and I was familiar with many of the children (and their families) who lived in the area and attended the school. Once I received approval to conduct the study, and the focal children’s parents agreed to be involved in the study, I made contact with the principal and teacher again to ensure that they were still willing to have me conduct observations in the school. I also requested and received permission from the school division to conduct the study.
Samara Pasap

Samara is a tall girl, with wide brown eyes, and an amiable disposition. She has black hair past her shoulders, and is missing several teeth. Samara has limited verbal skills, and often uses gestures and sounds to express her thoughts and feelings. She is six years old, and is the youngest of five girls. Although her mom shared that Samara could be “tough and mean,” I primarily observed the gentle and caring side of Samara, which was evident when I observed her hold her kitten, coax one of her puppies into her arms, or sit on her mother’s lap.

I became acquainted with Samara’s family in the fall of 1998 when her oldest sister was enrolled in my pre-kindergarten classroom; this occurred three years before Samara was born. My introduction to Samara occurred on the day of her birth as I happened to be at the hospital visiting a colleague who was a patient in the maternity ward. As I was leaving my colleague’s room, I noticed Renae and two of his daughters standing by the elevator. When they saw me, Renae told me that Beatrice gave birth to another daughter earlier that day, and he asked if I could help take care of the daughters that were with him, while he assisted his wife with their new baby. I happily obliged, and the girls and I walked to a small delicatessen in the hospital where I bought them a snack. After the girls finished eating, we walked back to their mother’s room. When we entered their mother’s room, Beatrice was sitting upright on her bed, holding Samara. When she saw us, she quickly told her daughters to come up on the bed beside her, and unreservedly handed Samara to me. Samara was born on a cold day in late January, and several weeks later Beatrice brought her to my pre-kindergarten classroom for a visit.

Samara’s parents and sisters rarely called her by her first name. As the youngest child, Samara was affectionately referred to as Baby by everyone in the family. As I spent more time with Samara, it seemed natural to me to address her by this name too. When I asked Samara if I could call her Baby, she happily nodded her head. Initially, Samara and her sisters would giggle when I addressed her using this name. However, as the study progressed, and I became more involved in the family’s life, my use of this term of endearment seemed natural to everyone. Throughout the study, Samara’s world revolved around her time at home with her parents and sisters, her weekly routine of attending a local Christian-based Kids Club, and her life at school, particularly her interactions with her best friend, Gabby\(^\text{10}\). Gabby and Samara have been classmates for four years, having attended two years of pre-kindergarten and a year of

\(^{10}\) I have known Gabby since she was a baby, as her older sister, and two of her older cousins were previously enrolled in my pre-kindergarten class.
kindergarten together, before sharing the same Grade One classroom. Gabby is also of Aboriginal descent, and has an older sister, and a younger sister and brother. Similar to Samara’s family life, it was her mother who worked outside of the home, while her father was unemployed and stayed at home during the day. In comparison to Samara, Gabby is a very verbal and assertive child.

As my visits became less novel, and more a part of the natural rhythm of the family’s life, Samara’s older sisters invited me to their birthday parties, Samara’s father asked me to attend a reserve Christmas party at The Gathering Place\(^\text{11}\) with him and his daughters (Beatrice had to work), and on one occasion, Beatrice and I shopped together for groceries for her family. During the study, Samara’s sisters and parents also expressed an interest in my life as they asked to see my childhood photo albums, and inquired about my personal life. I reciprocated by asking to see childhood photographs of them, and I also asked Beatrice and Renae about their experiences in school when they were young, including their experiences growing up on the reserve.

\textit{Samara’s Parents}

Samara’s parents, Beatrice BigSky and Renae Pasap, are both of Aboriginal descent. They met at a local mall when they were teenagers. At that time, Beatrice was a single mother to her first child, Natasha. In her childhood and early teenage years, Beatrice was raised on the Muskowekwan First Nation Reserve in central Saskatchewan. Beatrice is a Plains Cree woman, and during the study, she shared that she could understand the Cree language when she was a small girl, but had since forgotten it. Although Beatrice stated that she had a difficult upbringing and was raised by different extended family members, one of her aunts played a positive role in her childhood years. Beatrice continued to have a close relationship with this aunt, and frequently played Bingo with her at a local hall. She also remained in contact with one of her sisters, who lived on the reserve with her children. Beatrice received her Grade Twelve diploma by enrolling in a General Educational Development (GED) program at a local high school.

\(^{11}\) The Gathering Place is housed in a small building that used to function as an inner-city school. The Gathering Place provides a venue for Aboriginal people to congregate for a variety of purposes (e.g., meetings, celebrations, counseling sessions). The mission of the Gathering Place is to provide efficient and effective programs and services to the Treaty/Status Indian population living in the city where the research was conducted.
Renae was raised on the White Bear First Nation Reserve in southern Saskatchewan, which consists of four First Nations: Saulteaux, Cree, Nakota, and Dakota. When I asked Renae which Nation he belonged to, he laughed and said, “I don’t really think like that, I’m just an Indian. My mom is a half-breed, and I think my dad was part Assiniboine and part Chinese” (personal communication, October 16th, 2007). Renae was raised by his mother and grandparents. He has many brothers and sisters, and is close to one of his sisters who still lives on the reserve. During the study, he also talked about another sister who had “turned out good” and was teaching on a reserve in northern Saskatchewan. Although Renae did not complete high school, he hoped that his daughters would finish their schooling, as he believed it was important for their future success in the job market.

Renae moved to the city in his late teenage years and met Beatrice soon after his arrival. He was very open and talkative during my visits, and he was often the parent at home since Beatrice cleaned rooms during the day at a downtown hotel. His mother lived in the same prairie city, and rented a home down the street. Throughout the study, she played a minimal role in the family’s everyday life (e.g., the girls would occasionally ask her for money, she would watch the family’s house when they were away). Although Beatrice and Renae were not married, nor have they plans to marry, they have lived with one another since Beatrice became pregnant with their first child together. Throughout their union, they have moved several times within the same inner-city area (due to rental increases by absentee landlords). Once their children began school, they always made a point of living within blocks of the local elementary community school. Their reasoning for finding homes close to their daughters’ school was so their children would have consistency in their school life, and so the girls could maintain relationships with neighbourhood friends and their grandmother. Aside from the occasional argument or disagreement about their children or money, Beatrice and Renae appeared to have a very committed and respectful relationship.

*Samara’s Siblings*

When my visits to Samara’s home began, her older sisters Natasha (14), Angel (11), Savanna (10), and Aasia (9) all lived at home. Natasha (14) is the biological child of Beatrice; however, she has been raised by both her mother and Renae since she was a baby. At the beginning of the study, I learned through her parents, principal, and teacher that she was bullying several of her classmates, as well as the younger students at the school she attended with her.
sisters. She also stole property from the school. During the study, her parents were concerned that her actions were also beginning to impact her sisters, particularly, their next oldest daughter, Angel. Soon into the school year, Natasha was placed in an alternative school in the city where she was bused to and from home. This change of school was recommended by her classroom teacher, the school principal, and the school’s psychologist. Although Beatrice was initially hesitant to send her daughter to this school because she did not want her to be labeled as a “bad kid” (Beatrice had also attended this school as a teenager), she eventually signed the consent forms allowing Natasha to enroll. However, during the four months that Natasha was enrolled in this school, she frequently skipped classes. This led her parents to send her to the Muskowekwan reserve to attend school and live with her aunt (Beatrice’s sister), and her aunt’s four children.

Angel (11) is a large girl, and on several occasions throughout the study, I observed her use her size and strength to intimidate her young siblings (e.g., taking food from them, monopolizing the computer). During my time with the family, Renae and Beatrice confided that they were considering sending her to the reserve too, as she didn’t listen to them, and would occasionally not come home at night. Savanna (10) is a tall girl, with a very gentle nature. During the research period, I often observed Savanna help around the house, and look after her younger sisters. Aasia (9) is closest in age to Samara, and is very temperamental. Throughout the study, I often observed Aasia tease and provoke her younger sister, and Renae and Beatrice stated that she occasionally initiated physical fights with Samara.

Throughout the research period, it was obvious that Beatrice and Renae cared about their children, and strived to create a home environment that was both nurturing and stimulating. Their house was also a gathering place for many of their daughters’ friends, and during my visits, it was not uncommon to find a group of children congregated in front of their television playing video games, or sitting and chatting on the front steps of their home. During the years that I was a teacher at the children’s school, I also observed both parents take an active role in their daughters’ education (e.g., attending parent-teacher-student conferences, attending school and classroom celebrations, initiating meetings with the principal to discuss their children’s progress and behaviour). Throughout this study, their interest in their children’s social and academic well-being at school continued to be a priority.
**Samara’s Home and Neighbourhood**

Samara and her family lived in the inner-city area of a large prairie city. During my visits to the family’s home, it was evident that they resided in an active neighborhood. There were many school-aged children walking on the streets or riding their bikes, prostitutes stood on the street corner and chatted with one another and potential customers, and city police officers were frequently visible, as their station was only a few blocks away. Many of the garages on the street were covered with graffiti, and close to the family’s home were a pawn shop, an old church, and a new, brightly painted playground structure.

The family’s two-storey home was located on a tree-lined street, comprised of old and neglected rental homes. The children’s school was three blocks away, and from their front doorstep, Samara and her sisters could see their grandmother’s home on the opposite side of the street. The family’s house was painted white with blue trim, and had a small, fenced yard. Their front porch was filled with bikes, sports equipment, and tools, and on my initial visit to the home, as well as on every subsequent visit, the blinds were always drawn. The living room occupied the majority of space on the main floor, and contained two recliners, a couch, a television, an Xbox video game console, and two large speakers that were attached by an extension cord to a computer in the dining room. Dreamcatchers made of leather, beads, and feathers were nailed to the walls of the living room. The hardwood floor was scuffed and worn, and although the walls were painted white, the paint had begun to fade, and there were scribbles on the walls and doorframes.

During my visits, it was evident that the dining area, which was separate from the kitchen, was where Samara and her family spent most of their time. In that space, three chairs were placed around a small metal table, and mounted to the walls in the dining room were numerous photographs of the girls at various stages in their lives, and photographs of extended family members. Beside the table was a set of wooden shelves which held the family’s laundry baskets and cleaning supplies, as well as the girls’ backpacks, an assortment of magazines, bills, flyers and coupon books, Beatrice’s notebook of her work hours, and other household items. The dominant fixture in the dining room was the family’s computer, which was situated in the southwest corner of the room and sat on a small computer stand. Next to the computer was a leather swivel chair. The kitchen was adjacent to the dining room, and was located at the back of the house. The appliances in the kitchen were in need of repair, and the sink was stained and chipped. The kitchen had a door leading to the basement, and another door leading to a small
backyard that was surrounded by a chain-link fence where the family’s Rottweiler dogs were kept.

The first time I went upstairs with Samara was in late November to help her search for her kitten. As I followed Samara up the staircase it became apparent that the steps were going to be particularly difficult to navigate with the small amount of light in the home. Another difficulty was soon pointed out to me by Samara, as she warned me to be careful of the exposed nails on the staircase by grabbing my hand, pointing to the nails on the floor, shaking her head, and saying, “No!” In each of the four bedrooms, queen-sized mattresses were placed on the floor. Natasha had her own bedroom, which contained a television and compact disc player. She had also taped posters of teenage actors and musicians to the walls (e.g., The Cheetah Girls, the cast of High School Musical). Although Natasha did not live at home for most of school year, her room was left vacant while she was away. Angel’s room was sparse, aside from a basketball, and several baseball caps scattered on the floor; and Savanna’s and Aasia’s room was cluttered and messy, and colourful posters (e.g., Winnie the Pooh, SpongeBob Squarepants) were taped to their brightly painted pink walls. Samara slept with her parents in their room which was sparsely furnished. Aside from a mattress, their bedroom contained a set of drawers and a small lamp.

Devin Pepper-Machiskinic

Devin is six years old, and is the youngest of three children in his family. I met Devin’s family in the fall of 2000, the year before he was born, when his oldest sister was one of my pre-kindergarten students. Physically, Devin is tall and lean with short cropped hair, and he is missing several teeth. During several of my visits to the family’s home, Devin’s mother expressed her belief that her son had attention deficit and hyperactive tendencies. However, she adamantly stated that she would never medicate him, and was instead hoping that he would “grow out” of this active stage. From the time he was born, Devin was also a frequent visitor to my pre-kindergarten classroom as he often came with his mother when she participated in different family programs at the school, or when she attended monthly assemblies and concerts.

The first time I visited Devin in his home he was wearing a Spiderman t-shirt, and before my coat was off, he was already leading me upstairs to his bedroom to show me his toys. He excitedly showed me a robot he made with Lego blocks, as well as a large plastic container filled with his collection of dinosaurs. As he showed me his dinosaurs he told me their names, and he
shared other related information about them, including which dinosaurs were meat-eaters and which were plant-eaters.

On my subsequent visits to Devin’s home, his sisters were often close by, and seemed to hover around him, wanting to be a part of his play world, while at the same time, making sure that he wasn’t being too rambunctious in my presence. His sisters were also continually perplexed by my interest in Devin’s communicative practices, and often asked me questions about the study (e.g., Why did Devin get to be in the study and not them? Would I talk about them in the “book” that I was writing? Would my “book” be in their school library?). Due to their interest, I kept them informed about specific aspects of the study that I thought would interest them, and told them about the discussions I was having with my professors about Devin’s meaning making.

Devin’s Parents

Carol Pepper and Ollie Machiskinic met several years ago at a local community high school. The school they attended provided regular mainstream classes, as well as Aboriginal classes (e.g., history of Indigenous people) and modified and life-skills programming for students (e.g., cooking, mechanics, carpentry, parenting classes). A subsidized daycare was also housed in the school to assist the large number of single, teenage mothers enrolled in classes. When they began dating, Carol was sixteen and in grade ten, and Ollie was a year ahead of her in school, but was three years older. They have been together since then, but during the past fifteen years they have never lived with one another. When Carol was a teenager, they had their first daughter, Niki. Two years later, she and Ollie welcomed their second daughter, Tammi, and three years after that their son, Devin, was born.

Carol is Caucasian and was raised in what she described as a dysfunctional and troubled family. When Carol was fourteen her father left the family; this event caused her mother to suffer a mental breakdown. Soon after, her mother became unable to care for Carol and her siblings, and the children were sent to different foster homes for several years. Carol’s childhood experiences were predominantly negative, and because of this, she had a “list” of things that she wanted her children to achieve before they got married and had children. During one of my home visits in late November, Carol and her children were watching television

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12 Although Carol received her high school diploma from the school she and Ollie attended, Ollie left school before finishing his Grade Twelve courses to enter the workforce.
together when she turned to them and said, “What do I say you have to do before you can get married?” They were all aware of their mother’s list, and vied to be the first to share with me what she had told them. Together, Devin and his sisters responded, “Travel all around the world, buy a house, and….oh yeah, buy a car!” Carol started to laugh and looked somewhat sheepish that her children could name these aspirations so quickly. She confided that she no longer had these dreams for herself, but hoped that her children would have the opportunity to experience these things in their lives. Carol has two older brothers with whom she does not communicate, and a younger, single sister who has two young children. Throughout the study, Carol’s sister and her children were sporadically involved in her family’s life (e.g., going to movies together, visiting each other’s homes).

Often when I arrived at the family’s home, Carol was busy assembling scrapbooks for her children, and her scrapbooking supplies were spread out on the living room floor. Her membership in a scrapbooking club was an important part of her social life and identity, and throughout the study she often attended scrapbooking workshops with her two closest friends. During the study, Carol was employed part-time at an outlet bakery, and also volunteered at a local inner-city community centre close to her home.

Ollie is a Saulteaux man from the Kawacatoose First Nation Reserve in southern Saskatchewan, but was raised primarily in the city. He has a large extended family, and he rented a home with two of his cousins, a couple of blocks away from his children’s home. Although he had his own house, he often spent time at the home his children shared with their mother, and he appeared to have a very respectful and loving relationship with his children and Carol. His mother also lived in the same neighbourhood, and during the ten months I spent with the family, Devin’s oldest sister occasionally spent the night at her grandmother’s home or attended cultural events, such as powwows or feasts with her. However, Carol stated that her other daughter did not like being away from home and rarely went to her grandmother’s, and Devin also rarely spent time with his grandmother because his grandmother felt that he was too loud. Carol’s parents also lived in the same city as she and her children. They had both remarried, and were rarely involved in the family’s life.

Unlike Carol, who was the strict disciplinarian in the children’s lives, Ollie had a calm and even-tempered manner with the children. Several years ago, Ollie injured his back while working at a construction site. Since then, he has collected disability insurance. During the study, Ollie shared that he often spent his days listening to music, playing video games, and
fixing old computers that he acquired from a recycling center close to his home. Due to Carol’s work hours, Ollie often picked up his children from school at the end of the day, and stayed with them until she finished her shift in the late afternoon. He also spent time with Devin and his daughters on the weekends. Devin was particularly excited about a weekend he spent with his dad in mid-April when they went to a Monster Truck Show at a local hockey arena. As Ollie became more comfortable with my presence in his family’s life, he became more talkative. During the study, he confided that when he was a child growing up in the city, he attended a school where there were few Aboriginal students, and that he was often bullied by classmates because of his race.

_Devin’s Siblings_

During the research period, I observed Devin’s two older sisters, Niki (12) and Tammi (10), act as both playmates and adversaries in his world. Niki is a quiet and affectionate girl, who according to her mother, is liked by both her teachers and classmates because of her gentle disposition and willingness to please. For the past two years, Niki attended a classroom for children with learning disabilities in an affluent area of the city. The local community school did not offer this program, so every school day, Niki and several other children in the neighbourhood were driven to the out-of-area school by a taxi service commissioned by the school division. Although Niki enjoyed spending time with Devin and often participated in his play, she also got frustrated with him, particularly when his behaviour became aggressive. However, unlike Tammi who yelled at Devin, physically fought with him, or called for their mother, Niki preferred to walk away and spend time on her own, either reading books from school or listening to her _Hannah Montana_ CD in her bedroom.

Tammi and Devin attended the same local community school, located two blocks from their home. Every morning they walked to school together, making sure to arrive in time to partake in the hot breakfast program funded by the school division. At times, Tammi was quite belligerent with Devin, and enjoyed teasing him about the girls in his classroom, or reminding him of past inappropriate behaviour (e.g., swearing, fighting). Academically and socially, Tammi did well in her mainstream classroom and had many friends. Like many girls her age, she was a fan of _Hannah Montana_ and the _High School Musical_ series, and she loved to sing and dance to their music.
Although Carol had disagreements with her children, many of which centered on the children keeping their rooms tidy or getting ready for bed, these issues arise in practically every home with young children, and did not diminish the fact that this family loved and cared for one other. Carol and Ollie were also very involved in their children’s schooling (e.g., attending parent-teacher-student conferences, school assemblies, holiday concerts), and through informal conversations with each of them, it was apparent that they wanted their children to have childhoods filled with more opportunities than they experienced. As a result, they provided their children with a wealth of out-of-school experiences during the research period (e.g., going to movies together, enrolling in free family swimming sessions, attending events and concerts in the park).

_Devin’s Home and Neighbourhood_

Devin, his sisters, and his mother lived in an old two-storey house behind a large inner-city hospital. Devin’s father lived in his own rental home a couple blocks away. Carol and her children resided in the same neighbourhood as the Pasap family, but their home was located on a much quieter block. The family rented their home from an absentee landlord who proved to be very lackadaisical in the home’s maintenance and preservation. This became apparent early in the study when Carol discovered an infestation of cockroaches in the kitchen, and the children found mice droppings in their bedrooms. Little was done by the landlord to make the home desirable or safe, and he did not offer to get rid of the infestation. This led Carol to contact an exterminator on her own in an attempt to solve the problem.

The family’s house was located on the same street as the community school Devin and Tammi attended, and was also near an inner-city community centre that provided children’s programming and parenting classes. Devin and his family frequently attended the programs offered at this community centre (e.g., Community Kitchens program, Children’s Craft program), and Devin and his sisters also participated in a recreational children’s hockey league that was offered at the outdoor ice rink adjacent to the community centre.

Whenever I visited the family’s home, there were always plastic toys or balls strewn about the fenced-in front yard. Upon entering the home, the living room was on the south side of the house. In the living room there were two couches, a small coffee table, and a television that was connected to an Xbox video game console. A dining area was attached to the small living room, and this was where Carol kept her containers of scrapbooking supplies, and where many
of Devin’s toys were stored. In that space, there were numerous print-based artefacts (e.g., school notes, bills, flyers, community centre pamphlets) lying on the dining room table. Two calendars, a Spiderman calendar for Devin, and a High School Musical calendar for the girls were also fastened to the wall to record special dates and appointments. A computer was placed on the dining room table and several DVDs (e.g., StarWars, Hannah Montana) were positioned beside the monitor. As the school year progressed, Niki was required to keep a log of the number of minutes she read at home each day. Therefore, Carol constructed a large Bristol board chart that she taped to one of the dining room walls so Niki could independently record the minutes she spent engaged in storybook reading. During the research period, Carol also created another chart that she taped next to Niki’s chart, listing the household chores the children were required to help with, such as cleaning their rooms or washing dishes.

The final room on the main floor, the kitchen, was attached to the dining area. In that room, the laminate floor was worn and scratched, and many of the cupboard doors were missing. At the back of the kitchen was a door that led to the back yard. The back yard had a small patch of grass that bordered a gravel back alley. During the research period, I observed the children play in the backyard on only one occasion.

On my first visit to Devin’s home, he excitedly took me upstairs to see the toys in his bedroom, and to quickly show me the other rooms located on the second floor. When we briefly peeked into Tammi’s room, I noticed that her mattress was on the floor, and was adorned by a bright pink Barbie comforter. Her prized possession, her compact disc player, was also on the floor in the northwest corner of her room. Niki’s room was painted dark blue, and her mattress was also on the floor. Her clothes were kept in a broken set of drawers located in the east corner of her room. When Devin led me to his bedroom, it was messy and disorganized. His bed was unmade, and the floor was covered with toy cars, dinosaurs, books, and action figures. Several posters were taped to the walls of his bedroom, including a poster from the Saskatchewan Literacy Network, and posters of a motorbike, Spiderman, and SpongeBob Squarepants.

**Devin’s Church and Sunday School Classroom**

On four Sundays during the study, I accompanied Devin and his family to their inner-city church. The church was housed in a small, non-descript building beside a set of abandoned train tracks. The church service generally lasted two hours, and the Sunday school program occupied one of those hours. At the beginning of the service, a group of church members played various
instruments to lead the congregation in contemporary Christian-rock hymns. During that time, Devin was often inattentive, and preferred to read the children’s books that his mother had brought with her, or draw in his notebook or on pieces of paper. After approximately fifteen minutes of singing, and an additional forty-five minutes of preaching and testimonials, the children were led by a group of Sunday school teachers to a common room where they sang several songs (e.g., *The Lord’s Army, He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands, Jesus Loves Me*) before dispersing to their individual classrooms.

In Devin’s Sunday school classroom, a bulletin board was fastened to the east wall, and a blackboard was fastened to the south wall. The bulletin board was filled with paper apples that had the children’s names on them. On the apples were stickers of Biblical characters the children received for memorizing specific Bible verses. The teacher’s chair was positioned by the blackboard, and on the floor in front of her chair, was a large, frayed rug that the children sat on at the beginning of each class. Two long tables with child-sized chairs were placed in the center of the room, and four plastic containers filled with toys (e.g., puzzles, toy cars, Lego, dolls, action figures) were stacked on a wooden shelf that was adjacent to the west wall. The Sunday school class consisted of eleven children, ranging in age from five to seven-years-old. Of the eleven children, eight were of Aboriginal descent, and three children were Caucasian. During the Sunday school session, the children were introduced to new Bible verses, encouraged to participate in drama productions modeled after certain biblical narratives (e.g., the birth of Jesus, Daniel and the Lions, Baby Moses in the reeds), and were provided with opportunities to play with toys.

**Shared Contexts of the Focal Children**

Taylor and Dorsey Gaines (1988) state that to “understand the ways in which children learn at home, it is essential that we know something of the ways in which they are taught at school” (p. 99). The following section includes a physical description of the focal children’s classroom, an aggregated portrayal of Samara’s and Devin’s daily routine at school, and a brief profile of the Grade One teacher and her thoughts on literacy and teaching. A description of the Kids Club that Samara and Devin attended is also included in this section. These descriptions are provided in an attempt to provide a contextual backdrop for Samara’s and Devin’s engagement with a range of communicative practices across multiple contexts during the study.
Grade One Classroom

The children’s Grade One classroom was located in the basement of a well-maintained inner-city elementary school. Throughout the room, mass-produced posters featuring different shapes, colours, and word groupings (e.g., rhyming words, pronouns) were fastened to the four walls, and the students’ artwork and samples of their writing were stapled to two large bulletin boards. At the front of the classroom, a large wooden bookshelf held stacks of fiction and non-fiction children’s books. The teacher’s desk was also located at the front of the room, and on the floor beside her desk was a large, worn carpet where the children congregated each morning. Beside the classroom door, several colourful, plastic crates held a number of different toys (e.g., plastic train set, cars, wooden puzzles, action figures), and situated at the back of the room was a row of metal lockers with name tags fastened to them. Six wooden tables that seated four or five students were positioned in the center of the room, and attached to the back of each student’s chair was a cloth pouch where the children kept items such as their pencil case, agenda, worksheets, and other personal items. A number of Aboriginal dreamcatchers were also suspended from the ceiling of the classroom.

Daily Classroom Routine

Every morning before school began, Devin and Samara participated in the free breakfast program funded by the school division, and prepared by the school’s nutritionist. After the children printed their names on the breakfast sign-up sheet, they stood in line to receive their morning meal, which generally consisted of toast or pancakes, fruit, and eggs. After they finished eating, they placed their dirty dishes in one of the dishwashers located in the clean and spacious Nutrition Room, and went outside to play. When Samara and Devin re-entered the school at nine o’clock, they walked down the stairs to their classroom, put their jackets and backpacks in their lockers, and made their way to the carpet in the classroom. During this period, Samara often took her time arriving on the carpet as she frequently fiddled with her pencil case or was easily distracted by a classmate. Devin also made his way slowly to the carpet, and took advantage of this unstructured time to tease his peers, or make funny faces in an attempt to get his classmates to laugh.

After singing O Canada, and listening to the morning announcements, their teacher sang an attendance song with the following lyrics: “Zoom, zoom, astronaut, can you say your name or not?” She then pointed to each child, prompting them to say their first name. The students also
participated in daily calendar activities (e.g., naming the day, month, year), and every morning the teacher printed a morning message on the blackboard with missing letters for the children to solve. The final activity at the carpet involved the teacher holding up a number of word flashcards (e.g., if, happy, off, here, then, up, when, down, get, into) that the children were to recite before going to their tables to print the morning message in their agendas.

As the children printed in their agendas, they ate their morning snack. During my eight visits to the classroom, Samara brought back her agenda from home only once, while Devin brought back his agenda during all of my observations. As Devin and his classmates busied themselves with copying the morning message and eating their snack, Samara often wandered around the room, or looked at a familiar children’s book. When the children finished printing in their agendas, they returned to the carpet to begin a lesson with their teacher. Throughout the study, I observed lessons on a variety of topics, such as nutrition, addition and subtraction, shapes, art genres, and spelling. Many of these lessons were also accompanied by worksheets. After the children participated in the lesson, their teacher often read them a story before they went outside for recess.

When the children returned to the classroom from recess, Samara spent time with the Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP), or participated in a guided Reading Group session. When Samara attended speech and language sessions, the school’s SLP took Samara and three of her classmates, two of whom acted as speech and language role models, into a small room for twenty to thirty minutes twice a week where they participated in board games and oral activities. The SLP also provided Samara with a personalized word chart (see Figure 1-1) with pictorial cues to help her formulate and practice basic words and sentences at home. The SLP mentioned that she provided a copy of this chart to Samara’s family, with the hope that they would use it to stimulate Samara’s speech and language development at home. However, during my visits to the family’s home I did not see this word chart, and when I asked Samara’s parents about it, they stated that they were unaware of this chart.

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13 Fountas and Pinnell (1996) posit that guided reading “is a context in which a teacher supports each reader’s development of effective strategies for processing texts at increasingly challenging levels of difficulty” (p. 2).
Figure 1-1: Samara’s Personalized Word Chart

On the days when Samara was not attending speech and language sessions, she participated in a guided Reading Group led by a teacher assistant. Samara attended this group with four other children, all of whom also received assistance from the SLP. I observed Samara participate in these sessions on two occasions, and both times, the teacher assistant read a book to the children to begin the session. Samara and her peers were then provided with two children’s books with a small amount of printed text that were designated by the school division to be at the children’s developmental level. The children were instructed to read these books independently, and then to each other. As I observed Samara during these sessions, it was obvious that she was unable to independently read these texts. For example, on one occasion, I watched her attempt to phonetically sound out a word and then get frustrated and give up. During these sessions, Samara often laid her head on the table and looked out the window, or asked to be excused so she could get a drink of water or go to the washroom.

As the same time, Devin attended a different guided Reading Group that was led by another teacher assistant. At these sessions, I observed Devin and his peers either assemble pattern books that followed a simple text (e.g., “Run, run, run, up…run, run, run, down”), or read a series of children’s books that were also designated by the school division to be at their ability level. When participating in the pattern book activity, the children assembled the pages in the numbered order, stapled them together, and then practiced reading their book with a partner. Once they completed these tasks, they read the book to the teacher assistant. As I watched Devin participate in three of these sessions, it was apparent that he also found these texts
challenging. For instance, during one session, I observed Devin struggle with decoding the words in a book and get frustrated with the amount of time it took him to read the printed text in comparison to his peers. During these sessions, he was much more interested in socializing than reading, and he often took advantage of the times his teacher was occupied with another student to engage in conversations with his peers. The Reading Group sessions lasted until lunch, at which time, Devin and Samara alternated between eating a packed lunch they had brought with them from home in the Nutrition Room, or attending a free lunch that was hosted by a local church three days a week.

When Samara and Devin returned to the classroom in the afternoon, they participated in a large group lesson until recess. These lessons always centered on a particular theme (e.g., rain forest, castles), and often included worksheets. After recess, the teacher provided the children with a “free play” period. During that time, the children played with the various toys in the classroom, read books, or participated in self-directed projects. This appeared to be Samara’s and Devin’s favourite time of day as they enjoyed having the freedom to choose their own activities and move about the classroom.

Teacher

The Grade One teacher in the study, Mrs. Webster14, is Caucasian, and had over twenty years of teaching experience in primary classrooms. Throughout her career, she taught in both suburban and inner-city community schools, and had been at her current school for the past two years. During my classroom visits, she often shared her thoughts on the changes she has experienced over her teaching career, particularly her view on the multiple roles (e.g., as a social worker, parent) that a teacher now assumes in a child’s life. When I asked her how she defined literacy learning for her students, she made the following comment, “Literacy is the umbrella for learning. The skills and strategies for literacy go across all subjects, like math and science…the children have to be able to read, and adopt strategies for figuring out words. Literacy really is the foundation for learning.” (personal communication, May 12th, 2008).

In addition to following the curricular resource packages (e.g., health, social studies, science), Mrs. Webster and the school staff provided the students with a number of Aboriginal-influenced experiences and events throughout the school year. These experiences included: bi-

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14 The Grade One teacher involved in this study did not want her identity to be revealed. Therefore, a pseudonym is used throughout the dissertation.
weekly visits from an Aboriginal Elder, and assemblies featuring Aboriginal dancing and drumming groups. After several visits to the children’s classroom, I asked Mrs. Webster how she felt about incorporating these events in the school and in her classroom. During our conversation, she made the following comment:

On Wednesdays, Elder StarBlanket comes into my classroom, but often they (Samara and Devin) are not here or they come late. So, he ends up talking to the ESL students. With regards to integrating their (Aboriginal students) culture, many of the children don’t even know they are First Nations. Our school has so many children from other cultures, so multiculturalism is an important part of the school.

(personal communication, March 4th, 2008)

During my eight observations at the school, Mrs. Webster and her teacher assistant, who was of Aboriginal descent, kindly welcomed me into their classroom. Throughout my visits, it was evident that Mrs. Webster and her assistant wanted Devin and Samara to be successful - both academically and socially, and assisted them in that process. For instance, during my visits I observed Mrs. Webster and the teacher assistant spend individual time with Samara and Devin for multiple purposes (e.g., to assist them in completing worksheets, to help them negotiate relationships in the classroom). During the research period, Mrs. Webster always provided me with access to the focal children, and she regularly took time out of her busy schedule to ask about the children’s out-of-school worlds. When I shared with her what I was observing in the children’s lives outside of school, she was often surprised to learn of the children’s engagement with a rich range of communicative practices in their homes, particularly those practices linked to digital technology.

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15 The student population at the focal children’s school was comprised of children from the following countries: Afghanistan, Bolivia, Burma, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Israel, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Mexico, Myanmar, Pakistan, People’s Republic of China, Peru, Philippines, and Thailand.
**Kids Club**

Every Thursday evening, the focal children and their siblings attended a Christian-based children’s program. This program was housed at a local church that was no longer being used for worship services. During the study, I visited the Kids Club on three occasions. The church was less than two blocks from Samara’s home, and was approximately eight blocks from Devin’s home. During the frigid winter months, Samara and her sisters trudged across the snow drifts and ice to get to the program, while Devin and his sisters got a ride from their father. The club was created by a husband and wife who used to live in the area with their children, and several volunteers from the couple’s church also devoted their time and skills to the program. The children were provided with a snack during the evening, and the program generally lasted two hours.

When the children arrived at the church, they were divided into two groups based on their age; the older children met in the main hall of the church, and the younger children, which included Samara and Devin and many of their peers from school, congregated in the basement of the church. At the Kids Club, the children participated in a number of activities (e.g., playing board games, beading, drawing). The children independently played and ate their snack for a large portion of the session, and the last twenty to thirty minutes were dedicated to a lesson centered on a scripture passage. During my visits to the Kids Club, I observed lessons on David and Goliath, Cain and Abel, and Moses.

Every week, Samara and Devin were also introduced to a specific Bible verse. After a volunteer read the verse, the children were asked to repeat the verse together, and were then given the opportunity to individually repeat the verse to the volunteer. If a child recited the verse correctly, he or she would receive a sticker. This task was relatively easy for Devin, but Samara found this activity challenging. However, with the volunteer’s assistance, she was able to recite passages, such as “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, Proverbs 3:5.” At the end of the lesson, the children sang Christian children’s songs, many of which had accompanying actions. Samara became visibly excited when the volunteers led them in singing, as she jumped up and down, and gregariously participated in the actions that accompanied many of the songs. Devin was less interested in singing, and was more excited about quickly finishing the songs so that he could make his way upstairs to play basketball or floor hockey with the older boys before going home.
The volunteers at the Kids Club also provided the children with flyers and information on other Christian-based organizations and events in the city and surrounding area. During the research period, Samara’s and Devin’s parents took advantage of many of the opportunities and programs outlined in these flyers. For example, during the study, both families sent their older children to a free Christian summer camp outside of the city, and both families attended a Christmas concert and dinner at an affluent evangelical church where they received food hampers and gifts.

In summary, in the previous sections, I included descriptions of the focal children, as well as descriptions of their families and teacher to provide insight into the children’s significant relationships. Although my description of the participants provides only a glimpse into the complexity of who they are, my intent was that these descriptions might offer insight into their personalities, beliefs, and values. I included descriptions of the children’s homes, Grade One classroom, and the community contexts in their lives to provide a snapshot of the children’s contextual worlds. My contextual descriptions provide a backdrop for understanding how the valued practices in these environments impacted the focal children’s meaning making and identity construction during the study.

**Significance of the Study**

The present study is relevant to the field of early childhood literacy because it provides a view into two urban Aboriginal children’s use of a range of contemporary communicative practices across different contexts, it examines the role family and community members play as supporters and influencers in their meaning making, and it also investigates the link between the children’s engagement in a diverse range of communicative practices and their identity construction, all of which are under-researched areas of study.

This study comes at a time when Saskatchewan community schools are placing a strong emphasis on integrating Aboriginal content in contemporary classrooms (e.g., Elders are spending time with students in pre-k to grade twelve classrooms, the inclusion of Aboriginal dancing and drumming groups at school-wide events). What is missing, however, are Aboriginal students’ voices on their use of communicative practices in their everyday lives, including the ways technological transformations, globalization, and popular culture\(^\text{16}\) narratives are impacting...

\(^{16}\) The term “popular culture” in relation to young children, refers to the cultural texts and artefacts that are attractive to large numbers of children, and are often mass produced on a global scale (Kenway & Bullen, 2001).
their meaning making. The current study can therefore: i) inform policy makers, administrators, and teachers about the contemporary communicative practices of Aboriginal children; ii) encourage discussions on the ways in which Aboriginal children’s interests and knowledge might be drawn on in schools to enlighten and enhance early childhood literacy curriculum; and, iii) raise key theoretical issues for pedagogy and culturally-relevant curriculum development for urban Aboriginal children in today’s complex, multimodal textual world.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation is comprised of seven chapters. In this chapter, I introduced the study, presented the rationale and research questions, and included the purpose and justification of the study. I also included descriptions of the focal children, their families, their Grade One teacher, and the children’s everyday contexts to provide insight into the children’s worlds. This was followed by the significance of the study to the field of early childhood literacy.

In the next chapter, Chapter Two, I present an overview on the shift in thinking about early childhood literacy. I also include a description of the theoretical perspectives that framed this study, and I present a review of the literature. The literature review in this chapter outlines several key concepts in relation to the current study (e.g., the role family, friends, and community members play in supporting children’s meaning making, the link between children’s communicative practices and their construction of identity, and Aboriginal education).

In Chapter Three, I present the methodologies guiding this study. This study utilizes a case study approach (e.g., Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2004), and also draws on a decolonizing approach to research (Smith, 1999). Throughout the study, ethnographic methods were employed (e.g., Geertz, 1973; LeComte & Schensul, 1999) to capture the range of communicative practices the focal children engaged in during the ten-month study. In Chapter Three, I also provide a detailed description of the data analysis procedures.

In the next chapter, Chapter Four, I present a case study of Samara’s meaning making over a ten-month period. This is followed by Chapter Five, which is also a case study, but focuses on Devin’s meaning making over the same timeframe. In Chapter Six, I conduct a cross-case analysis of the two cases, where I reveal common themes across the cases. In the final chapter, Chapter Seven, I highlight the significant findings of the current study, and discuss the study’s contribution to the field of early childhood literacy. I also highlight implications for
theory, and implications for policy makers, primary teachers, and Aboriginal children and their families. I conclude the dissertation by suggesting recommendations for further research.
Chapter Two  
Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In order to move forward, we need to mediate social practice with communicational networks to have an informed perspective on contemporary literacy education.

-Pahl and Rowsell (2006)

In this chapter, I begin by tracing the history of early childhood literacy to provide a brief overview of how knowledge in this field has evolved. This historical overview provides insight into the shift in thinking about early childhood literacy over the past few decades, and reveals how current studies in this field are being influenced. I then present an overview of the theoretical perspectives that framed this study. As previously mentioned, these theoretical perspectives include sociocultural theory, the body of work in multimodality and the New Literacy Studies, and the theory of Indigenous knowledge. I also address the complex and dynamic nature of identity as situated within a sociocultural framework, and discuss the link between identity and Indigeneity. In the final section of this chapter, I present a review of the literature that I have categorized into specific research strands related to the present study. In doing so, my intent is to situate the present study in the existing literature, and to link the findings of the present study (discussed in subsequent chapters) to the review of the literature in an attempt to create new directions for future research.

Transformations in Early Childhood Literacy

As mentioned in Chapter One, there have been significant transformations in thinking about literacy, including how it is used in different contexts (e.g., home, school). The definition of what it means to be literate is also continuously changing as new information and communication technologies are impacting our construction of meaning, and individuals are constantly coming up with new uses for the information they are encountering (Kinzer & Leu, 1997; Lemke, 1998). This perspective is linked to the shift from viewing literacy through an autonomous model, which regards literacy as an individualized skill, to viewing literacy through an ideological model, which takes into account the social nature of literacy, and acknowledges the power relationships that shape literacy uses (Street, 1984). In the field of early childhood literacy, Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) played a pivotal role in transforming and reshaping our thinking on children’s engagement with literacy. Their foundational study
explored young children’s meaning making from a print-related perspective, and discovered that talking, gesturing, dramatizing, and drawing are “an intimate and integral part” (p. 37) of the writing process for young children. Their study revealed that children naturally engage in semiotic processes during their engagement with writing, and provided insight into children’s use of print on their own terms, as opposed to being held up against adult literacy practices.

In comparison, Dyson’s (1982, 1993, 2001, 2003) studies of young children’s early writing development showed that the resources children brought to their writing were from their social worlds, and revealed that children drew on a range of semiotic systems during writing events. Thus, Dyson challenged the idea that learning to write is a straightforward matter of learning to encode and decode the written language. Although Dyson’s collection of studies and Harste et al.’s (1984) seminal work presented different perspectives on literacy from narrow theories of literacy and literacy development, Siegel (2006) posited that their research has done little to disrupt the curricular frameworks or instructional materials that continue to dominate school literacy lessons.

These studies, however, brought attention to new theoretical perspectives, and generated a renewed interest in social theories of language (Halliday, 1978) and social theories of thinking and learning (Donaldson, 1992; Piaget, 1952, 1971; Vygotsky, 1978). These theories align with the ways in which literacy is being conceived within a broader social order, and recognize that our social, cultural, and economic worlds require facility with texts and practices involving a full range of representational modes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Lankshear, 1997; Street, 1998). This understanding has made significant contributions to the discourse of meaning making that acknowledges the potential significance of all communicative modes for learning and development (Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006). However, while these perspectives are part of the discourse in the halls of universities and in literacy journals, I contend that similar to Siegel’s (2006) perspective, many contemporary classrooms, including the primary classroom in the current study, still tend to reflect a more traditional, print-focused literacy curriculum.
Theoretical Perspectives

Merriam (1998) posited that a study’s theoretical framework is the stance or orientation a researcher brings to a study. Fowler (2007) referred to the challenge of finding “a single framework to adequately explain all the data” (p. 55), and suggested that when appropriate, multiple frameworks can be drawn on in qualitative studies. The present study is guided by the overarching theoretical framework of sociocultural theory (Heath, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1994), and also draws on the area of multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001) and the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2000; Street, 1993), as well as the theory of Indigenous knowledge (Battiste, 2000; Smith, 1999).

These perspectives recognize children’s meaning making from a wider perspective, and as a collective they acknowledge: i) the importance of situated context and issues of power; ii) the agency of individuals and communities in determining their own meaning making; iii) the understanding that meaning making in local/global contexts is much wider than print-based literacy, and includes texts of all kinds; and, iv) the understanding that texts are constantly shifting and changing. These perspectives provided a comprehensive framework for analysis of this study, as each perspective brought structure to the theoretical framework, and strength was built through their interconnectedness.

Sociocultural Theory

Literacy studies informed by a sociocultural perspective recognize that literacy learning is a socially mediated process that cannot be understood apart from its context of development, the forms of mediation available, and the nature of participation across various cultural practices (Razfar & Gutiérrez, 2003). Sociocultural studies put culture “in the middle” (Cole, 1996, p. 116), and recognize that culture includes what people are producing, including their identities, aspirations, and possible futures (Eisenhart & Finkel, 2000; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996). This position does not view culture as something which is handed down by a group to individuals, but rather, reconceptualizes culture as something that is constructed against a matrix of possible social roles. These social roles are embodied and enacted by individuals through the development of what Gee (1996) calls an “identity kit” of one’s own.
Gregory, Long, and Volk (2004) and Rogoff (1990, 2003) suggested that within a sociocultural framework, young children learn as apprentices alongside more experienced members of the culture. They add that crucial to a sociocultural approach is the role mediators (e.g., siblings, parents, teacher) play in initiating children into new cultural practices, and guiding them in the learning of new skills. Vygotsky (1978) used the term *zone of proximal development* to describe the role an adult or a more experienced member of the culture plays in scaffolding a child’s experience. As the child grows more competent, this structure is gradually removed. This process highlights the notion that a child’s development cannot be understood only by the study of the individual, but also includes the external social world in which that child has developed.

Although mediators are essential to children’s learning, the extent to which the child also takes control, and is able to play an active role in his or her learning has been viewed in different ways. For example, Rogoff (1990) and Stone (1993) extended Vygotsky’s theory by proposing the concept of “guided participation” which recognizes that throughout the learning process, children take on and are given more responsibility, and are supported by others who serve as both guides and collaborators. During that process, children are able to provide their own scaffolding by learning to use the resources available to them (Bickhard, 1992). Throughout this process they also receive intermittent guidance from the family, friends, teachers, and other significant community members (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Bodrova & Leong, 1996) who are a part of their worlds. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) suggested that children’s sociocultural knowledge is what empowers them to speak from “cultural spaces and frameworks of relationships and communities” (p.123). In this study, the utilization of a sociocultural perspective also enabled me to identify both the possibility and constraint (e.g., Cole & Engestrom, 1993; Gutiérrez, 2004) of the children’s use of communicative practices as they moved across different contexts.

**Multimodality**

In this study, I also draw on the area of multimodality (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) to examine Samara’s and Devin’s meaning making across multiple contexts. The concept of multimodalities emerges from a semiotics framework (e.g., Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 1993, 1997) which recognizes that as children develop as social beings, language systems and semiotic systems (e.g., pictorial, digital) play an important
role in their lives. Pahl and Rowsell (2006) added that a multimodal perspective “stretches out meaning” (p. 6), and provides a powerful access point for understanding children’s meaning making.

Gallas (1994) posited that a multimodal approach focuses on how children make meaning using a wide range of modes that are developed within cultural contexts. As children utilize these modes it empowers them to take control of their learning and to generate new and diverse organizations of meaning (Gallas, 1994; Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988; Semali, 2002; Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000). During my own childhood, I often drew on different modes of communication to construct meaning. As a five-year-old child in 1978, I produced the following drawing and story (see Figure 2-1). My explanation of my drawing was transcribed by my father, and shows my use of dual modes during a single event, drawing and storytelling, and provides insight into my emerging understanding of fairy tales, authorship, and sense of audience as a young child.

**Figure 2-1: Researcher’s Childhood Drawing and Narrative**

> Once upon a time there was a pig who had a dream. The pig was in the corn patch with a candy cane house and an old lady that had a crooked face. In her dream there were candy canes on the roof, and there was silver snow at Christmas Eve. When she woke up there was a coloured cloud. The pig wanted to know my phone number, so I told her that it’s 6-7-8.

*Lots of hugs and kisses, from Arthur the Pig*

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17 This figure was included to provide a view into the language and semiotic systems that I utilized as a young child, and to provide insight into the role my father played as a supporter in my meaning making.
Siegel (2006) attested that in today’s world, children not only draw, sing, and dance, but are also mastering the intricacies of computer games, and are participating in numerous interactive websites. As a result, children are becoming proficient in a wide array of representational resources acquired from everyday life, the media, and popular culture (Dyson, 1997, 1999). Reid and Comber (2002) argued that early childhood educators should be alert to these meaning making systems in children’s worlds, and attempt to effectively build on their students’ interests and out-of-school communicative practices in the classroom.

From a multimodal perspective, the reality of the changing communicational landscape has therefore redefined the way we view and interact with “texts.” Kress (2003) viewed communication, whatever the mode, as text, and argued that the creation of texts is seen as the result of social action. Currently, new technologies are making available a whole range of multimodal possibilities for an individual’s production of texts, which is also enabling a new kind of “reading” of texts. Using Gee’s (1996) notion of Discourses, texts are seen as carrying different Discourses, those ways of speaking, behaving, and acting in culturally-specific ways, and are comprised of visuals, sound, movement, and gesture. Pahl and Rowsell (2005) argued that texts are artefacts that link back to people and places. When viewed from this perspective, that is, as objects with a history and material presence, they are exposed as traces of social practice, and thus, represent the intended practices and interests of the producer.

The New Literacy Studies

Building on Street’s (1984) ideological model of literacy, the New Literacy Studies acknowledge that literacy is a social practice which is constructed in everyday interactions across local contexts (Larson & Marsh, 2005). The NLS are characterized by their focus on an understanding of literacies as multiple and situated that vary within time and space, and also address issues of power and identity. Noteworthy for their attention to literacy in out-of-school contexts, these studies build on the ethnographic tradition of documenting literacy in local communities (Hull & Schultz, 2002). The link between the NLS and multimodalities is significant, as the concept of multimodality recognizes that individuals use a wide range of modes (e.g., digital, gestural, artistic) to make meaning, and the NLS brings meaning to these modes by tying them to social practice.
Initially, the strength of the New Literacy Studies was that they privileged people’s local literacies. However, as suggested by Brandt and Clinton (2002) in their influential article, The Limits of the Local, this perspective soon became the focal critique of the New Literacy Studies. They discussed the connection between local and global literacies, and argued that for many people, the literacies they engaged in were not self-invented. As a result, several researchers (e.g., Marsh, 2005; Nichols, 2006) have examined the link between local and global literacies in young children’s worlds, and argue that the investigation between the local and global is necessary to gain insight and understanding into children’s active participation in contemporary society.

Pahl and Rowsell (2006) posited that in order to appreciate the relationship between local and global literacies, it is important to understand how meanings travel across spaces and re-embed themselves. Thus, the concept of recontextualization (Dyson, 1997, 2003; Iedema, 2003), which is the lifting of particular genres, texts, and practices across sites, and their “remix” and reappearance in different genres and contexts (Dyson, 2003), is important to understanding how children make meaning as they move across spaces. Although the concept of recontextualization is significant in relation to understanding children’s construction of meaning, it is beyond the capacity of this study to provide an in-depth analysis of the focal children’s recontextualization processes over the research period. Instead, I make broad references to this concept in subsequent chapters in this dissertation.

Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is an emerging theoretical framework that is being drawn on by researchers both nationally and internationally, particularly by those interested in educational innovation (Battiste, 2000; Smith, 1999). The question, “What is Indigenous knowledge?” is usually asked by Eurocentric scholars seeking to understand a cognitive system that is foreign to them. Daes (1993) posited that Indigenous knowledge is an adaptable, dynamic system that is based on skills, abilities, relationships, and problem-solving techniques that changes over time in Aboriginal communities. Indigenous knowledge is also more than the binary opposite of western knowledge. As a theory, Indigenous knowledge benchmarks the limitations of Eurocentric theory - its methodology, evidence, and conclusions (Battiste, 2000). It also reconceptualizes the resilience and self-reliance of Aboriginal people, and underscores the importance of their own philosophies, heritages, and educational processes. Indigenous
knowledge also fills the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education, research, and scholarship. Battiste (2000) posited that our greatest challenge is how to find a respectful way to include both Eurocentric and Indigenous knowledge in contemporary education. Battiste added that by animating the voices and experiences of the cognitive “other” and integrating them into the educational process, it creates a new, balanced center, and a fresh vantage point from which to analyze Eurocentric education and its pedagogies.

**Literacy and Identity**

In this study, I also investigated the relationship between the focal children’s use of a wide range of communicative practices and their construction of identity. Moje and Luke (2009) posited that although there are “many different theories of identity, even under the same general identity banner” (p. 416), few literacy studies have explored the range of perspectives on conceptualizing identity, even when they acknowledge that identity and literacy are socially constructed. In this section, I present an overview of the dominant perspectives of identity in relation to literacy outlined by Moje and Luke (2009), all of which informed the current study.

In their review of research on the relationship between identity and literacy, Moje and Luke (2009) outlined five metaphors for identity. The first metaphor is identity as *difference*, which focuses on how people are distinguished from one another by virtue of their group membership, and how a group’s ways of knowing, doing, or believing shape the individual within a particular group. In Heath’s (1983) landmark study, *Ways with Words*, distinct differences were revealed regarding how members of three different cultural groups (the white working-class community of Roadville, the black working-class community of Trackton, and the Black and White middle-class “townspeople”) spoke, read, and wrote in comparison with each other. Heath found that the children in these diverse settings were being socialized within their local communities, and were acquiring particular ways of using language in social communication. Although Heath’s study examined the cultural differences among these groups, rather than the differences in identities, she discussed the mismatch between home and school communicative practices for the children from working-class backgrounds, revealing how not all of the children in these communities were imbued with the “ways” and discourses that would ensure them success in mainstream school.
Another metaphor acknowledged by Moje and Luke (2009) is identity as *sense of self/subjectivity* which centers on identity development, and draws on a number of theorists’ perspectives. For example, this metaphor takes into account the work of Erikson (1994), and highlights the shift from an individual perspective of identity to a perspective on “identities” as both personal and social, due to the role of social context. Bourdieu (1990) offers yet another perspective in relation to this metaphor by arguing that people are subjects at the whim of institutional structures and relations of power, and coined the term, *habitus*, which assumes that the self is acquired as an effect of embodied practices.

Closely related to the identity as *sense of self* metaphor, is the identity as *mind/consciousness* metaphor. This perspective recognizes that individuals, in activity, shape reality; and in the process of shaping reality, they shape consciousness. This perspective was then taken up through the learning theories of Vygotsky (1978). From Vygotsky’s view, literacy is a tool for the development of mind, and it is in the development of mind that the self comes into being. Some studies of “new literacies” argue that using different media creates opportunities for interacting with print and image in new ways (Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), and brings about new ways of interacting with others and with the self (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Warschauer & Ware, 2008). Although these scholars might not articulate their work as being framed by an identity as mind metaphor, the application of this metaphor suggests that the use of new tools produces new knowledge, and thereby casts people as active agents, constructing their own realities, subjectivities, and identities.

The fourth metaphor offered by Moje and Luke (2009) is identity as *narrative*. This metaphor acknowledges that identity develops over time, and that identities are the stories that we tell about ourselves (Mishler, 1999; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). The final metaphor described by Moje and Luke (2009) is identity as *position*. The research that operates from this metaphor argues that subjectivities and identities are produced not only through activity in and across spaces, but also in the ways people are cast in or called to particular positions, and how they take up or resist those positions (Butler, 1997, 1999). The concept of *figured worlds* (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) is linked to this metaphor, and helps to articulate a process of positioning and identity formation. This concept argues that as people experience certain positions, they come to imagine future positions and their future selves moving within and across these positions. Within the current study, I am attentive to these different metaphors in relation
to the link between the focal children’s construction of identity and their meaning making, while also recognizing the overlap between these dominant perspectives in the children’s lives.

**Indigeneity and Identity**

In the present study, I also explore the understanding that for urban Aboriginal people, their Aboriginal ancestry is only one part of their identity - their identities are continually being shaped and transformed. Guimond (2003) posited that the concept of identity is complex, and therefore, difficult to confine to a single definition for urban Aboriginal people, as they are heterogeneous, with increasingly fluid and multiple identities. In the past, Aboriginal identity was largely embodied in the land, stories, and songs that tied personal reality to time and place. However, contemporary, urban Aboriginal communities are often not situated in an immutable, bounded territory, but exist within a fluidly defined region, which includes niches of resources that respond to the needs and activities of urban Aboriginal people. For example, the formation of Indigenous organizations such as community centres, clubs, and friendship centres are all intimately tied to identity (Guimond, 2003).

For many outsiders, the urban Aboriginal community is an invisible population, even though, in reality, large Aboriginal populations live in urban areas in Canada. In much of the social science literature and government policies, there is a dichotomy between the rural and the urban, based on the lingering stereotype that the “authentic” Aboriginal person lives in a rural area, specifically, the reserve (Guimond, 2003). However, this is in contrast to the way Aboriginal people see themselves. For example, Guimond (2003) posited that Aboriginal people in urban areas often visualize themselves as extensions of their home territory. For Aboriginal people living in the city, even those who have lived in urban areas for several generations, they have strong linkages to “home,” and for the most part, these links are unbroken. As such, urban Aboriginal people often make return visits to their reserves to attend wakes and celebrations, family members from the reserve and rural areas visit the city, and children are taken back to the reserve on weekends and holidays.

What continues to be problematic, however, are the misconceptions of mainstream society in relation to urban Aboriginal children and youth, particularly how mainstream society sensationalizes issues related to risk-prone lifestyles. This perspective reveals how there is often very little understanding of Aboriginal children and youth, and the communal kinship that exists in urban Aboriginal settings, particularly by those who are outsiders to these settings. The
kinship among Aboriginal people centers on the understanding that although the Aboriginal people within a community may not be of the same language group or from the same reserve, they have a respect for, and knowledge of, the nuances, protocols and practices peculiar to their place of living, which contributes to their sense of belonging and community (Tupuola, 2006).

**Review of the Literature**

In this section, I present a review of the literature in relation to the current study. In the field of early childhood literacy, numerous studies have offered valuable insight into the literacy practices of young children (e.g., Cairney & Ruge, 1998; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). These foundational studies provided a view into children’s formative experiences with literacy, and revealed the different ways family members influenced and supported young children’s engagement with literacy. Although these studies revealed the literacy practices of young children in different families and contexts, there have been relatively few investigations into children’s engagement in communicative practices across multiple contexts, particularly in Canadian Aboriginal children’s lives.

In today’s complex, multimodal world, children’s use of a wide range of communicative practices can be linked to a complex interplay of factors that include their increased use of digital technologies, the impact of globalization, political and social conditions, and the contested nature of childhood itself. When children engage in digital practices, for example, these practices offer new ways of knowing and communicating, and frequently occur within a social fabric that also addresses matters of identity (e.g., construction of self and others, which is tied to positioning). Marsh (2005) contended that children’s developing knowledge around new communication technologies positions them as active participants in today’s fast-moving world, and has thereby enabled children to become significant consumers, producers, and disseminators of information across multiple contexts (Carrington, 2005).

In this chapter, the review of literature includes different types of studies (e.g., ethnographies, case studies) that assist in situating the current study in the discourse on young children’s meaning making. Due to the significant impact of digital technology in children’s contemporary meaning making, research that addresses young children’s engagement in digital forms of technology is woven throughout all of the research strands included in the literature review. The impact of popular culture narratives in children’s meaning making is also interlaced throughout several of the research strands. In this chapter, I present a review of the empirical
research findings of three research strands related to the present study: i) the role family members, friends, and community members play as supporters in children’s meaning making; ii) the link between young children’s identity construction and their use of a wide range of communicative practices, and iii) an overview of Aboriginal education and Aboriginal children’s meaning making.

_The Role of Family and Community Members in Children’s Meaning Making_

The role of parents, siblings, extended family, peers, and community members in children’s literacy learning has been highlighted in numerous studies (e.g., Baynham, 1995; Gregory, 2001, 2005; Long, 1997; Volk, 1999). Much of this research has been influenced by Heath’s study (1983), which provided a starting point for other researchers who were interested in studying the literacy practices of families in diverse communities (e.g., Kenner, 2000; Luke & Kale, 1997; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Many of these studies documented the significant role family members played in children’s literacy development, and discredited the notion that these families, many of whom were minority families of low socio-economic status, did not value or support their children’s literacy interests and development (Kelly, 2004).

_Family Members_

As previously mentioned, Heath (1983) documented the different ways families of diverse racial and socio-economic groups (Black working-class, White working-class, White and Black middle-class) living in the Piedmont area of the Carolinas in the United States, socialized their children into very distinctive language and literacy practices. This comparative, ethnographic study highlighted the rich and diverse ways literacy was perceived by these families, and provided valuable evidence about the different literacy experiences these culturally-diverse children brought with them to school.

In Heath’s (1983) study, the children from the working-class black community (Trackton) were constantly in the midst of human communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Heath noted that in this community, the adults did not simplify their language when talking to their children. They also did not sit and read to their children or direct questions to them. In this community, Trackton children learned to tell a story by inviting the community’s participation in the telling of the story. This type of group negotiation and participation was a prevalent feature
of the narrative performance of adults and children in Trackton. When these children went to school, Heath reported that they often failed to learn the content of the lessons; they also struggled with the social interactional rules at school, and did not respond well to direct questions, as there was no precedence for this interactive pattern in their home settings.

In comparison, the children who were raised in the white working-class community (Roadville) were assimilated into ways of knowing that were very different from those of the Trackton children, but that were also incompatible with the communicative forms and practices valued at school. In the children’s religiously-conservative homes there was an abundance of reading materials (e.g., magazines, newspapers, books), and the children were read to from books that emphasized nursery rhymes, alphabet learning, and simplified Bible stories. However, they were discouraged from elaborating on accounts or fictionalizing real events. At school, these children also struggled with the kinds of evaluative, decontextualizing and recontextualizing narrative practices that were valued in that context.

In contrast, Heath (1983) found that the children from the middle-class homes of both Black and White “townspeople” did well in school, as these children experienced typical middle-class literacy practices in their homes that aligned with the mainstream literacy practices promoted at school (e.g., initiation-reply-evaluation sequences, the practice of relating book knowledge to real life experience, interactive behaviour). As a result of the findings from her study, Heath (1983) suggested that teachers should find out more about the communicative practices and traditions of their students from different sociocultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds, in an attempt to build on the communicative competence these children had already successfully acquired in their communities.

Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines’ (1988) family literacy study of six low-income inner-city African-American families found that these families used literacy for a wide variety of purposes in their daily routines. However, similar to the working-class children in Heath’s study, they revealed the mismatch between school expectations and the cultural practices of these families. Although rich and meaningful literacy experiences were available to the children in their homes, the school provided mainly decontextualized skill-based types of activities that did not relate to their complex communicative abilities outside of school.

Other researchers (e.g., Gregory, 1998, 2005; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Rogoff, 1990; Williams, 2004) have focused on the influential role siblings’ play in young children’s literacy development. For example, Gregory (1998, 2005) examined the role older siblings played as
literacy teachers to their younger siblings in multilingual communities, and how they initiated the younger members of their family into whole new discourses (Gee, 1996). Williams (2004) compared and contrasted the socio-dramatic play practices of Anglo-British and Bangladeshi-British siblings in their homes, and revealed the common elements across both groups of siblings (e.g., the siblings enjoyed playing school together, and shared an abundant knowledge of school practices and scripts).

Due to the influx of popular culture and digital technologies in mainstream society, researchers in the field of early childhood literacy (e.g., Marsh, 2006; Rideout, Vandewater, & Wartella, 2003) have begun to examine the changing role family members play as guides and supporters in children’s meaning making in the new century. For example, the American parent participants in Rideout et al.’s (2003) Zero to Six study utilized the Internet to teach their children the alphabet, vocabulary, and phonics through children’s websites. Marsh (2006) reviewed a collection of studies (Marsh, 2004a, 2004b; Marsh & Thompson, 2001) that investigated preschool children’s meaning making in their homes and found that the preschool participants’ communicative practices were strongly influenced by digital and media-related forms of technology (e.g., cell phones, computers) that were a part of the landscape in their households. Marsh revealed that across these studies, the families acknowledged the link between acquisition of skills, knowledge and understanding, and new technologies in their children’s lives, and stated that they did what they could to enhance their children’s experiences in this regard (e.g., acting as “scribes” by typing specific words/phrases into search engines to access children’s websites on the Internet).

In Aboriginal families, Little Bear (2000) posited that immediate and extended family members (e.g., cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents) are collectively responsible for the education and socialization of children. However, the significant role of family members in Aboriginal children’s meaning making was severely disrupted when Aboriginal children were removed from their homes to attend residential schools. During that time, Aboriginal children attended school for most of the year, leaving parents without the responsibilities of nurturing their children (Haig-Brown, 1988). Given that children learn to parent from their caretakers, these children missed out on the modeling and teaching structures within their families, which has, in turn, impacted generations of Aboriginal children.
Paulsen (2003) posited that from an Aboriginal perspective, learning is never finished; it is a treasured part of everyday living, and a lifelong, collaborative process. In Aboriginal communities, cultural teachings and practices (e.g., making meaning of the natural environment) are spiritual and holistic, relationship-based and collaborative, and are contextualized, practical, and continuous. These teachings and practices are associated with particular stages of development, and stages of wisdom are acknowledged according to age and status in the community (Nichol & Robinson, 2000). Although these practices may not continue to occur today to the extent that they did in the past in Aboriginal families, they are a part of the culture and history of Aboriginal communities across Canada.

**Peers**

Researchers have also investigated the role peers play in children’s meaning making. For example, Long, Bell, and Brown (2004) investigated the ways Spanish and English-speaking peers scaffolded each other’s language and literacy learning in a kindergarten classroom. They emphasized the power of peer interactions in children’s meaning making, and described the expertise of both peer teachers and learners, particularly during their engagement in play. In a previous study, Long (1998) investigated the role peers played in her daughter’s learning of Icelandic over an eight-month period. She concluded that her daughter’s out of school play was the most supportive context for language learning; in school, her learning was more gradual and involved less experimentation. Datta (2004) examined the notion of friendship as a pathway to literacy for three 7-year-old boys of Turkish, Anglo-British, and Algerian French descent, enrolled in a primary classroom in London. As they shared their favourite books with each other, Datta observed them also share their linguistic expertise and cultural knowledge. As shown in the aforementioned studies, there is a strong correlation between children’s friendships in the early years (e.g., Corsaro, 1985; Datta, 2004; Rizzo, 1989) and their collaborative engagement in valued meaning making practices. Additionally, several of these studies acknowledged the importance of “belonging” in children’s worlds, specifically, the important role a set of activities, routines, and values play within the peer cultures of young children.
Teachers

Hill and Broadhurst (2002) examined the ways in which a primary teacher embraced and supported the impact of digital technology and globalized popular culture narratives in her students’ out-of-school lives. In that study, the researchers observed an Australian primary classroom teacher enhance her five and six-year-old students’ learning in the classroom by building on the funds of knowledge\(^{18}\) (Moll & Greenberg, 1990) they brought with them to school. The teacher’s goal was to link what the young learners had already acquired outside of the classroom, to what they were expected to learn and master in the classroom (Gee, 1996; Lankshear et al., 1997). By listening to the children’s conversations in the classroom, the teacher discovered the important role the Super Mario Bros. video game played in her students’ lives. To build on their interests, the teacher encouraged the children to draw video game characters or create new characters to include in a classroom game-book that incorporated the same language as the digital game. In creating the game-book, the students used their knowledge of video games, and their understanding of different text structures, to create a recontextualized, meaningful artefact in the classroom.

The students’ creation of a game-book represents an example of socially-situated learning, where various communicative skills, such as drawing and print are used alongside the children’s critical analysis of video game characters and plots. This process enabled the children to make connections between home texts and school literacy. This process also showed how the teacher not only recognized the knowledge her students brought to school, which is connected with their loved ones and personal identity (Delpit, 1995), she also understood the importance of appreciating children’s learning experiences in their full complexity.

However, not all primary teachers make links to their students’ out-of-school interests, or choose to incorporate digital technology in the classroom. For example, Becker (2000) posited that children’s likelihood of interacting with computers and other technological devices in intellectually powerful ways depends on their teacher’s expertise with digital technologies. Becker (2000) added that teachers are not likely to integrate technology into the curriculum unless it is compatible with their instructional goals. Becker’s study revealed that teachers were also three times more likely to have their students work with computers and use the Internet if

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\(^{18}\) Drawing from a Vygotskian perspective, which views the everyday practices of language and action as constructing knowledge, the funds of knowledge approach facilitates a powerful way to represent communities in terms of the resources they possess. This approach also examines how these resources can be meaningfully included in classroom teaching.
they held more constructivist beliefs about teaching in general - that is, if they believed in the importance of devoting attention to student interest rather than strictly focusing on curriculum coverage, if they valued critical thinking and focused on real-world applications, and if they used complex problem-solving to help students learn.

In relation to the concept of “funds of knowledge,” a number of studies have advocated for teachers to draw on children’s knowledge in the classroom. For example, Riojas-Cortez (2001) examined the funds of knowledge displayed by twelve Mexican-American children as they played in a bilingual preschool in rural Texas. In that study, the researcher sought to identify the cultural elements or traits exhibited by the children during their play. Some of the cultural traits identified as funds of knowledge included language, values and beliefs, and ways of discipline. As a result of her findings, Riojas-Cortez suggested that teachers can use sociodramatic play as a tool to observe children and learn about their funds of knowledge in order to implement a culturally-reflective curriculum.

Community Members

To acquire a holistic picture of children’s meaning making, it is necessary to move beyond home and school settings to understand the broader sociocultural contexts in which children construct meaning. McMillon and Edwards (2004) and Haight and Carter-Black (2004) examined the literacy learning of African-American children in African-American churches. They examined the ways in which these children developed the specific literacy skills and understandings needed to participate in their church communities, and they documented the multiple ways a group of caring and supportive adults mediated their learning. Romero (2004) investigated the ways young Pueblo children learned how to be members of the Pueblo world from their family members and community caretakers. Romero posited that from the day they are born, Indigenous children are surrounded by influential people who play vital roles in their daily care, and in shaping their individual, social, and communal beings. As children develop and mature, these caretakers provide them with connections to their past and culture, which impacts how they view and interpret the world. Kirkness (1992) posited that in Canadian Aboriginal communities, Elders and other community members also play a significant role in the socialization processes of their young children.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) The role of community members and Elders in Aboriginal children’s meaning making and identity construction will be further addressed later in this chapter.
Children’s Identity Construction

In the field of early childhood literacy, researchers such as Dyson (1997) and Kendrick (2003) have addressed the interplay between children’s meaning making and their construction of identity. Several researchers (e.g., Cummins, 2006; Kanno & Norton, 2003; New London Group, 1996) have also identified a number of concepts in relation to the link between identity construction and meaning making in people’s worlds. For example, Cummins (2006) used the term identity texts to refer to the artefacts that students produce. Students take ownership of these artefacts as a result of having invested their identities in these texts. Once produced, these texts (written, spoken, visual, musical, or combinations in multimodal form) hold a mirror up to the student in which his or her identity is reflected back in a positive light.

Kanno and Norton (2003) used the term imagined communities to refer to “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of imagination” (p. 241). This understanding is linked to the work of Benedict Anderson, who first coined the term "imagined communities." Anderson (1991) contended that what individuals think of as nations are really imagined communities, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (p. 6). Kanno and Norton (2003) posited that individuals interact with many communities including neighborhood communities, workplaces, educational institutions, and religious groups. However, they argued that these are not the only communities with which they are affiliated; individuals also belong to imagined communities. Wenger (1998) suggested that in addition to direct involvement with community practices and investment in tangible and concrete relationships, imagination - "a process of expanding oneself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (p. 176) - is an equally important source of community.

Another concept related to the notion of identity in young children’s meaning making focuses on how the discourses attached to popular movies, television programs, and toys are impacting their identities in relation to gender. The New London Group (1996) suggested that identity messages circulate through merchandise that surrounds young children as they dress in, sleep on, eat from, and play with commercial goods decorated with popular culture images, print, and logos. They posit that the immersion of media culture in young children’s worlds invites identification with familiar popular culture characters, and communicates gendered expectations about how children should play and who they should be.
The relationship among children’s meaning making, popular culture, and identity construction has been examined by several researchers (e.g., Dyson, 1997; Kenner, 2000; MacDougall, 2003; Millard, 2003; Vasquez, 2003, 2005). For example, Dyson’s foundational work (e.g., 1994, 1997, 1998, 2003) provided insight into the ways children brought their out-of-school interest in popular culture into the classroom, even when it was not officially introduced by the teacher. Despite the lack of acknowledgment of popular culture in mandated elementary curriculum, the young participants in Dyson’s studies often drew upon superhero narratives within the realm of the classroom. This resulted in the creation of figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998), where the children “cast” themselves and others in socially constructed roles (e.g., mothers, police officers) which enabled them to express their literate and social identities. Although popular culture narratives are liberating for young children, in that they provide a space in which their knowledge can be drawn upon, Dyson (1997) revealed that they can also be limiting, in that they perpetuate stereotyped roles, and they allow children to marginalize or privilege other children in relation to issues of gender, race, and class (Dyson, 1997).

Numerous researchers (e.g., Arthur, 2005; Dyson, 1997; Makin et al., 1999; Marsh, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Seiter, 1999) have also explored the dissonance that exists between children’s home and school practices in relation to popular culture, and the differing perspectives held by teachers and parents. Several of these studies also illuminated the differences among parents in relation to popular culture in their children’s meaning making. For example, the middle-class mothers interviewed in Arthur’s (2005) study criticized certain cartoons and action heroes because they believed they promoted violence. In comparison, the working-class parents did not express concerns about these issues. Seiter’s (1999) research with middle class families revealed that in addition to many class-related beliefs and values associated with popular media culture, there are also different beliefs held by mothers and fathers. That study revealed that middle-class mothers carefully monitored their children’s media exposure, and frequently engaged their children in critiques of dominant ideologies and consumerism. Fathers, however, were generally much more permissive and consumer-oriented, and were more apt to watch music videos or play video games featuring popular culture characters with their children.

In relation to the inclusion of popular culture at school, several studies (e.g., Boyd, 1997; McNaught et al., 2001) revealed that educators banned popular culture from their early childhood settings because of concerns about stereotypical gender and racial roles, and issues of violence, while others incorporated children’s popular culture interests in their classrooms in an
attempt to build on children’s imagined identities and out-of-school experiences. The latter perspective reflects the work of Alvermann and Heron (2001), Comber (1994), and Dyson (1997), who stressed that educators must not take away children’s pleasure in popular culture texts by imposing their views on children. A number of case studies have also indicated that the use of popular culture texts in early childhood classrooms can actually enhance learning and orientate students towards taking part in school literacy practices, whether that is through the use of comics featuring a range of popular culture characters (Millard & Marsh, 2001), or through the use of popular computer games, such as Super Mario (Hill & Broadhurst, 2002).

The link between children’s engagement in video gaming and their identity construction was also investigated by Pahl (2005). In her three-year ethnographic study, she examined the relationship between three British boys’ engagement in video gaming in their homes and their construction of identity. As the boys played a World Wrestling Federation (WWF) video game, they entered the imagined community of virtual wrestling characters and “escaped” real-life timescales. Once the boys finished playing the video game, they recontextualized their knowledge of the game into socio-dramatic play scripts and created drawings of the various characters and plots featured in the game. Their interactions with the video game, and their use of additional forms of communication to make sense of the game provided insight into their fascination with the imagined community the game offered, which was strongly associated with a command of fighting skills and physical power.

Hicks’ (2002) case study explored the ways the concept of identity shaped the communicative practices of a four-year-old boy who identified strongly with his father, a carpenter. At home, this child chose to engage in narratives and practices that Hicks described as being “rooted in physical action” (p. 104). However, when the child entered kindergarten, he struggled with the mainstream literacy expectations (e.g., worksheets, storybook reading) promoted and valued in the classroom. In Hicks’ study, the notion of a “third space” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997), where students are given opportunities to have agency and voice, and where children’s lived experiences and school norms meet, did not occur. As a result, the young boy conformed to the valued literacy practices of the mainstream classroom.

Several researchers have also examined the relationship between young girls’ identities and their meaning making, specifically in relation to media-related texts (e.g., Carrington, 2003; Luke, Carrington, & Kapitzke, 2003; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997; Wohlwend, 2009). For example, the role of gender-influenced toys in young girls’ lives was investigated by Carrington
(2003) in her study of girls’ interactions with *Diva Starz* dolls. These talking dolls had several exaggerated physical features (e.g., eyes, eyelashes), and their recorded narratives centered on stereotypical gendered conversational topics such as fashion, shopping, emotions, and friendships. These dolls were created for the target demographic of six to twelve-year-old girls, and blatantly reinforced powerful existing stereotypes of girlhood. In her analysis, Carrington viewed these popular dolls as complex texts that required young girls as players and consumers to coordinate messages about cultural capital and social status (Bourdieu, 1986).

Kendrick (2003) explored the relationship among play, literacy, culture, and identity in a young Chinese-Canadian girl’s world. Throughout the study, the child’s play-literacy activities were observed across multiple contexts that included her home, kindergarten classroom, and community. Kendrick’s analysis centered on ten specific play episodes that were selected from thirty home observations over the course of a year. These episodes paralleled many of the child’s lived experiences (e.g., attending school, going shopping), and revealed the child’s interest in adulthood, particularly stereotypical gendered notions of “womanhood” (e.g., getting married, childbirth, motherhood). These play episodes provided insight into the child’s complex negotiation of her own identity, and also highlighted her desire to be a part of the imagined community of womanhood. Additionally, these episodes provided a glimpse into how this child constructed understandings of the forms and functions of literacy embedded in family, school, and community contexts. The findings of that study also support the perspective of Franklin (1983) who argued that play provides a forum for children to create imaginary situations, where they are “free” from the constraints of concrete objects and their own voices. Bretherton (1984) added that when children engage in play, they frequently operate within complex scripts or schemata, reflecting the frameworks of everyday events (e.g., going to school, meal-time, cleaning).

Prinsloo (2004) also examined the relationship among play, literacy, culture, and identity in children’s worlds. In his study, Prinsloo documented the diverse range of texts used by children as they engaged in play, and he examined how their play worlds were shaped by both local and global perspectives. Prinsloo observed a group of South African children participate in versions of ball-tag and skipping games that were cross-cultural, if not global, in many of their details, including the terms used by the children. As the children played, they substantially redesigned and elaborated on these games, and their semiotic activity was seen to be multilingual in its resources, and multimodal in its blend of movement, song, dance, language, and gesture.
Their unsupervised, child-directed and choreographed play was seen as a site of meaning making for them, a space where they were provided with opportunities to develop social relationships, and a place where their identities were shaped and constructed.

Researchers have also investigated the relationship between identity construction and young children’s engagement in drawing. In their body of research on children’s drawings as a way of understanding their perceptions of literacy across contexts, Kendrick and McKay (2002, 2003, 2004, 2008) revealed the rich images of reading and writing held by young Canadian children. The children’s drawings also uncovered their understandings of gender and identity. For example, Kendrick and McKay (2002) found that in general, the girl participants in their study created drawings that centered primarily on themes of family, friends, and self, whereas the boys often drew images of popular culture (e.g., sports logos, animated characters).

Aboriginal Education

Several researchers (e.g., Archibald, 1990; Battiste, 2000; Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000; Castellano, 2000; Hare, 2005; Romero, 2006; Sefa Dei, Hall, & Goldin-Rosenberg, 2000) have advocated for the importance of creating educational approaches that are inclusive of Aboriginal languages, cultures, and traditions in contemporary classrooms, and reports on Aboriginal education (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996) have made clear the relevance of incorporating these approaches in Canadian classrooms. Hare (2005) argued that by creating spaces for Aboriginal approaches in education, Aboriginal students “would have the possibility of finding themselves among a range of cultural options and orientations, Western and Aboriginal, whether in acquiring Aboriginal languages, developing Aboriginal narrative traditions, or learning about relationships to the land and environment” (p. 261).

Several researchers have posited that Aboriginal knowledge can be included in contemporary classrooms through the sharing of oral traditions (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Myerhoff, 1992; Olmedo, 1999). Johnson (2001) argued that oral traditions are, and always have been, a vital means of education for Aboriginal people as they express their ways of thinking, and are essential for the maintenance of Aboriginal society, culture, and identity (Battiste, 2000; Cruickshank, 1994; Poff, 2006). Although stories may vary slightly as they are told, each telling is given respect because different versions simply reflect how individual interpretations of the same event may differ (Cruickshank, 1994; McIsaac, 2000). The “passing
on” of Aboriginal stories is particularly relevant to younger generations, as stated by Susag (1998):

What happens to children when they do not hear the stories of their own people? What do they learn to value, and what do they learn to reject? What do they learn about survival when they don’t even hear or read about the suffering, loss, and endurance of their own people? How do they establish positive identities for themselves when voices within their culture are ignored, twisted, and suppressed, and when voices outside of their culture decide for them who they are, and who they should become? (p. 5)

Although oral storytelling held an important role in past generations, this practice seems to have lost its centrality in contemporary Aboriginal children’s worlds. Additionally, other modes of communication, such as Aboriginal languages, dance, music, and song, which at one time occupied a significant place in Aboriginal communities (Hanlen, 2002; Petrone, 1990), have also largely been disregarded due in part to the detrimental effects of colonization, specifically, the impact residential schools had on the erosion of the Aboriginal family structure. In recent years, the inundation of westernized forms of contemporary communication has also impacted the rich meaning making systems of Aboriginal communities. In order to maintain the rich foundational aspects of Aboriginal culture for future generations, the involvement of Aboriginal community members and Elders in schools has long been seen as a contributing factor in valuing and promoting Aboriginal children’s Indigeneity and identity. Kirkness (1999) contended however, that this is often done in superficial ways:
We say they are our teachers, our libraries, our archives, yet we rarely include them in a meaningful way. We rarely ask them anything. We are great at having our Elders come to say a prayer or tell a story but surely this is not what we mean when we say we must learn from the Elders. Elders possess the wisdom and knowledge which must be the focus of all our learning. It is through them that we can understand our unique relationship to the Creator, our connection with nature, the order of things, and the values that enhance the identity of Our People. Not properly acknowledging the Elders is probably the most serious mistake we make as we attempt to create a quality education for Our People. Let's face it; we can't do it without them. How can we learn about our traditions on which to base our education if we don't ask the Elders? There is little written by our people that we can turn to for this information. If we sincerely believe that our traditions are important to us, we have no other recourse but to go to the Elders. I firmly believe that we must know the past in order to understand the present so that we can plan wisely for the future. It is up to this generation of educational leaders to tap that valuable resource, because each day, fewer and fewer Elders whose knowledge goes back at least two generations are left to teach us what we need to know. When they are gone, their valuable knowledge goes with them. It's like losing a whole library and its archives (p. 22).

However, as Couture (2000) and Hare (2001) contended, we must be careful of what we expect our Elders to provide. For example, Couture (2000) asserted that significant numbers of Aboriginal communities across Canada have lost all of their traditional Elders, and many Aboriginal communities are forced to seek out Elders in other tribal traditions, which can cause some initial difficulties because of differences in ways.

The important role Aboriginal parents can play in the education of their children in schools has also been outlined in several research reports and documents (e.g., preliminary survey report from the Canadian Council on Learning, McGill University, Université de Montréal, Government of Nunavut, Government of the Northwest Territories, Kativik School Board, and Nunatsiuvut Government, 2009; Saskatchewan Learning, 2001; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 1996). However, Friedel (1999) posited that Aboriginal parent
participation in schools is frequently viewed as a problem from the perspective of many educators and administrators, and public schools tend to remain unwelcoming to Aboriginal parents. In many communities, Aboriginal parents, therefore, often have no idea what is occurring in their children’s school. Additionally, they are rarely invited to meetings to decide on directions to be taken, and are rarely asked for their thoughts on how or what should be done in certain situations. In an attempt to address these issues in public schools, I developed a family literacy program in my previous studies that incorporated the funds of knowledge, lived experiences, and interests of Aboriginal and culturally-diverse pre-kindergarten students and their families (Streelasky, 2001, 2008).

As noted in Chapter One, Aboriginal children are frequently viewed from a deficit perspective by mainstream society, and are positioned as deficient by teachers when they do not match what is expected as the norm for children in mainstream classrooms (Fleer, 2004; Malin, 1990; Piquemal & Kouritzin, 2003). Although there is a large body of research that addresses the deficit perspectives held by mainstream society in relation to Aboriginal children, there are a few studies that have documented the ways Aboriginal children’s and youths’ out-of-school learning experiences are being sought to gain a better understanding of their lived experiences.

For example, Hohepa and McNaughton (2002) examined the different ways effective and meaningful literacy instruction for Maori children was implemented in New Zealand schools. In their study, they documented the ways in which teachers’ utilized culturally-appropriate instruction that was congruent with the children’s out-of-school language and literacies, while also facilitating Maori language learning in the classroom. In the past, meaning making in Maori society was carried linguistically through oral traditions and oral performances, and carried materially through carvings, paintings, or weavings. However, similar to other Indigenous groups throughout the world, the effects of colonization pushed these practices to the margins, in preference of traditional, westernized print-based texts. Although this process resulted in a loss that can most likely never be recovered, Hohepa and McNaughton (2002) contended that change is a part of the process of natural cultural development in societies, including those subjected to colonization. In their study, Hohepa and McNaughton (2002) concluded that ideally, schools that have a Maori student population should strive to be a site where the Maori language and other cultural texts are utilized in combination with the children’s out-of-school interests and print-based literacies.
Noll (1998) examined two American Aboriginal adolescents’ out-of-school communicative practices. That study revealed the diverse ways (e.g. reading, writing, drumming, composing, dancing) the students constructed meaning in their lives, and uncovered the multiple cultures (e.g., American Indian culture, school culture, and popular culture) that influenced their meaning-making. Through their use of different communicative practices, the students explored and expressed their sense of identity, and addressed issues of prejudice, racism, and discrimination.

Currently, researchers are examining the ways Aboriginal children and youth are blending their interest in digital technologies with their Aboriginal culture. For example, Ignace and Ignace (2005) posited that the emergence of Aboriginal hip-hop songs and videos represent the ways in which Aboriginal culture and identity in the twenty-first century is being impacted by the global culture of music. They argued that Aboriginal children’s and adolescents’ engagement with Aboriginal hip-hop music is a powerful medium for identity formation, and provides an avenue for them to discuss their interests and concerns. Many Aboriginal children’s access to hip-hop songs and videos through digital technology in their homes also disrupts the notion of the “digital divide” (e.g., Eamon, 2004; Facer & Furlong, 2001; Greenall & Loizides, 2001; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Warschauer, Knobel, & Stone, 2004), which suggests that minority families and low-income families often have limited access to, or knowledge of computers and the Internet. Kral (2010) posited that massive technological changes over recent decades have radically altered the course of everyday life and communication forms in Aboriginal communities, and thus, many Aboriginal children and youth are now firmly a part of the “digital culture.”

In the study by Igance and Ignace (2005), Aboriginal adolescents’ use of “tagging” was also addressed, and was revealed to be another way in which they expressed their identity, and shared their concerns and thoughts. Ignace and Ignace (2005) suggested that graffiti or “tagging” represents a mode of artistic self-expression, and argued that this form of meaning-making is more than a rebellious act of leaving random marks in the public landscape of a city – it is an elaborate and intricate art form, a complex layering of thought and experience in verbal and visual messages.
Summary

In this chapter, I presented the theoretical framework and body of literature that influenced the design of this study. As described earlier in this chapter, my use of multiple, theoretical perspectives provided a comprehensive framework which enabled me to conduct an investigation of the ways in which Devin and Samara constructed meaning in their lives. The review of the literature provided a synopsis of the following strands of research that were significant to situating the current study: i) the existing discourse surrounding the role family members, friends, and community members play in children’s construction of meaning; ii) the link between children’s communicative practices and their identity formation; and iii) the rich cultural expressions, alternative systems of representation, and ways of knowing of Aboriginal people. Although these empirical studies represent only a sample of the breadth and depth of studies devoted to young children’s meaning making, they allowed me to locate gaps in the research, and draw knowledge and insight from these key studies. These studies also provoked me to think critically about how the findings from the present study can make an important contribution to the field of early childhood literacy, particularly in terms of disrupting the assumptions educators may have regarding urban Aboriginal children’s and families’ meaning making.

The following chapter presents the methodology and methods of data collection and analysis utilized in this study.
Chapter Three
Method and Research Design

Children are not children for long. While they are, their rich and intimate knowledge of the world of childhood should be allowed expression; who better to do this than children themselves?
- Burke (2005)

In the previous two chapters, I discussed the theoretical underpinnings of this qualitative study, and stated my interest in examining the complexities of Devin’s and Samara’s meaning making over a ten-month period. Due to the exploratory nature of my research questions, it was important that I chose methodologies that would enable me to respectfully enter the lives of two young children, in an attempt to achieve a holistic understanding of their use of different communicative practices. Therefore, in this study, I utilized a case study methodology (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1998; Yin, 2004), as it seemed most suited for an in-depth investigation of the children’s meaning making, and I also drew on respectful and decolonizing research principles (e.g., Brayboy, 2000; Cole, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996; Smith, 1999; Steinhauer, 2002). Although I do not claim that the present study is an ethnography, I employed many of the data collection and data analysis procedures found typically in ethnographic research (e.g., Agar, 1996; Hammersley, 1991; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999).

In this chapter, I begin by presenting the epistemological positions guiding this study, followed by a discussion of case study and Indigenous research methodology. Next, I present my position as the researcher, I address the concept of reflexivity (e.g., an awareness of the researcher’s contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process), and I discuss the children’s involvement in the study. I then present the data collection and data analysis procedures. Following, I address issues of trustworthiness in terms of the confirmability, dependability, credibility, and transferability of the study. Finally, I end the chapter with a description of the ethical procedures that I undertook throughout this research.
Epistemological Questions

To be able to evaluate the extent to which a study using a specific methodological approach has met its own objectives, Willig (2001) suggested asking the following questions to help identify a methodology’s epistemological roots: i) What kind of knowledge does the methodology aim to produce?, ii) What kinds of assumptions does the methodology make about the world?, and iii) How does the methodology conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

In response to the first question, the methodology in this study aims to produce knowledge surrounding the study’s unit of analysis - the communicative practices utilized by Samara and Devin in home, school, and community contexts. In order to gain insight into the focal children’s use of communicative practices, I utilized a variety of ethnographic methods. These methods enabled me to acquire knowledge about the ways in which Devin and Samara engaged with communication in the widest sense (Kress, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006), including what they were learning about communication as they moved across contexts.

The second question addresses the notion of “ontology,” which is a specification of a conceptualization (Gruber, 1993). Lave (1992) contended that studies that are framed within a sociocultural perspective are generally grounded in a “social ontology” (Searle, 1995). A social ontology is a shared or collective perspective about what something means. This meaning is perceived to be our reality, and is created in collaboration. In order to gain insight into the children’s engagement in a range of communicative practices, I took the stance of Blumer (1969), who posited that the more immersed we become in the contexts in which our participants attribute meanings to practices and events, the more accurate our descriptions of those meanings become. In this study, I combined my interpretive account on the ways in which Devin and Samara constructed meaning in their worlds with their own accounts on their meaning making (e.g., their explanations of their drawings and photographs). I also involved the focal children’s parents in the research process by sharing the collected data and my interpretations of the data at various points throughout the study, and by engaging in conversations with them about their perceptions on their children’s meaning making.
The third question recognizes the role of the researcher. Collins (2000) offered four criteria researchers need to follow for interpreting truth and knowledge claims in their studies: i) primacy of participants' lived experiences; ii) dialogue; iii) an ethic of care; and, iv) an ethic of responsibility. This framework privileges participants’ lived experiences and values (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002). Throughout the research, I drew on these principles in an attempt to build a collaborative, reciprocal, trusting, and mutually accountable relationship with the participants involved in the study. Denzin (2003) contended that researchers who adhere to these principles value the sacredness of life, human dignity, community, empowerment, and transformation.

Case Study

Merriam (1988) characterized qualitative case studies as having three qualities: they are particularistic, focusing on a particular phenomenon; they are descriptive, examining events or phenomena; and they are heuristic, illuminating the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study and extending the reader’s experience. Case studies are often used to produce or build on theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995, 2000; Yin, 2004), but may also be used to test theory (Eckstein, 2002; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Merriam, 1988). A significant feature of case study is that it can “take” us to places where we otherwise would not have had an opportunity to go, by revealing an understanding of the participants as they engage in action and interaction within the contexts of situations and settings. This provides readers with an opportunity to look at the world through the researcher’s and participants’ eyes, creating a virtual reality for readers (Stake, 1978). Case studies are often carried out so that certain audiences will move toward further understandings and advancements (Stake, 1978).

VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007) extend our thinking about case studies by offering seven common features of a prototypical case study: i) the deep investigation of a study’s unit of analysis (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2002; Yin, 2004); ii) the contextual detail of a case and its ability to provide readers with a highly detailed, contextualized analysis of “an instance in action” (MacDonald & Walker, 1977, p. 182); iii) the importance of conducting an investigation in a natural setting where there is relatively little control over behavior, organization, or events (Yin, 2003); iv) the importance of “bounding” a case by providing a detailed description of a specific temporal and spatial boundary (Merriam, 1998); v) the relevance of creating a space where researchers can generate working hypotheses and learn new lessons based on what is revealed or constructed during the data collection or
analysis (Eckstein, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 2002); vi) the need for *triangulation*, which can be achieved by exploring the perspectives of research participants through multiple sources of data, such as observations, interviews, and the collection of documents (Tellis, 1997; Yin, 1998); and vii) the importance of extendibility, which can provide rich and holistic accounts of a phenomenon, offering insights and illuminations that expand its readers’ experiences. As a result, case studies have the potential to play an important role in advancing a field’s knowledge base, proving to be particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating programs, and for informing policy.

In the context of this study, Devin’s use of communicative practices across different sites represents one case, and Samara’s use of communicative practices across the significant contexts in her world represents another case. My rationale for using two cases is grounded in Barone’s (2004) argument that through the use of more than one case a stronger understanding and a more compelling argument can be made, resulting in increased credibility. Although this study focuses on a relatively small number of participants, and therefore, makes no claim that it can “represent” or generalize to a total population, its effectiveness lies in what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call its “trustworthiness.” Brooker (2002) asserted that such trustworthiness derives from the careful presentation of a logical, well-evidenced argument, supported by documentation from field recordings or observation notes, and strengthened by the researcher’s own systematic scrutiny of his or her own theorizing as it develops. In this study, I attempted to understand and develop accounts of the “complex webs of significance” in the children’s meaning making, and develop the type of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) needed to represent the beliefs, values, and actions of the participants (e.g., Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). While the number of participants in this study was small, I argue that it was diverse enough to encourage broader applicability.
Case Study and Generalizability

Although there are many advantages associated with case study, there are also limitations connected with this type of research methodology. A limitation of case study is the assumption that case studies are an account of the “whole” when in fact they are a part – a slice of life (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Flyvbjerg (2001) posited that although the knowledge acquired from case studies cannot be generalized, this does not mean that it cannot enter into the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or society. Flyvbjerg suggested that a purely descriptive, phenomenological case study without any attempt to generalize can be of value, and has often helped “cut a path toward scientific innovation” (p. 76).

In case study research, positivist notions of generalizability have been largely abandoned (Donmoyer, 1990; Guba & Lincoln; 1981; Schofield, 1990). This reasoning is outlined by Lincoln and Guba (2002), who argued that “it is far easier, and more epistemologically sound, simply to give up on the idea of generalization. If generalizations are accepted, they should be as indeterminate, relative, and time and context bound” (p. 32). Instead of positivist notions of generalizability, new concepts involving comparison of cases have been applied to case study research to extend and amplify the impact of a single case beyond the case itself (Becker, 1990; Smaling, 2003; Yin, 2003). Goetz and LeCompte (1984) proposed the concept of “comparability” to address the issue of generalizability from case study research. Comparability is the degree to which the parts of a study are sufficiently well described and defined, enabling other researchers to use the results of the study as a basis for comparison.

A Decolonizing Approach to Research with Aboriginal Families

The present study seeks to privilege the voices, experiences, and lives of two, urban Aboriginal children, and has the potential to contribute to the body of research (e.g., Archibald, 1990; Battiste, 2000; Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000; Castellano, 2000; Hare, 2005; Romero, 2006; Sefa Dei, Hall, & Goldin-Rosenberg, 2000) that has focused on matters that are significant to Aboriginal families and communities, and that respects the reality of Aboriginal people’s existence and survival (Dunne, 2000). Smith (1999, 2005) asserted that although Indigenous populations “are the most researched people in the world” (p. 3), they have not seen the benefit of all this research. Piquemal (2000) suggested four principles that can guide research in collaborative ways with Aboriginal participants: i) establish a partnership with the participants or community before seeking consent; ii) consult with the relevant authorities, which
includes both the individual and the collective; iii) continually confirm consent to ensure that consent is ongoing; and, iv) provide participants with the data prior to the completion of the final report. Throughout the study, I merged these principles with Collins’ (2000) criteria, which were previously outlined in this chapter (e.g., recognizing the primacy of participants’ lived experiences, engaging in dialogue, developing an ethics of care and responsibility). The combination of these principles enabled me to build a collaborative, reciprocal, trusting, and mutually accountable relationship with the participants involved in the study.

**Researcher Position**

The position a researcher takes in the research community, whether it is an “insider” (emic), “outsider” (etic), or a combination of both perspectives, has both advantages and disadvantages. Historically, researchers who conducted studies in Aboriginal communities have been outsiders, who observed without being implicated in the scene. This perspective is related to positivism, and notions of objectivity and neutrality. From a positivist perspective, understandings of the world are reduced to issues of measurement, which is detrimental to Aboriginal communities, the investigator who conducts research in an Aboriginal context, and the data which may be biased (Smith, 1999). Smith added that from this perspective, researchers also have the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate, and to draw conclusions based on assumptions, hidden judgments, and misunderstandings. Therefore, a researcher has to be aware of the constant need for reflexivity and collaboration, and understand that as a researcher one is in receipt of privileged information.

As a Caucasian woman, I am an outsider to both families’ worlds. Therefore, I sought to understand and adhere to the principles of an Indigenous approach to research, which recognizes and respects Aboriginal families’ cultural protocols and values. Throughout the study, I also recognized that it would be inaccurate to assume that I fully understood the participants’ realities, values, and beliefs. During the research period, I was also cognizant of van Manen’s (1990) perspective on the importance of researchers’ acknowledging and accounting for the way their presence and decisions about observing, recording, and interpreting data may alter the natural setting.

As mentioned in Chapter One, before this study began, I had developed relationships with Samara’s and Devin’s parents and siblings in my role as a pre-kindergarten teacher, and as a researcher. During the six-year period that I taught at the children’s school, I was also
welcomed into the families’ homes through a home visiting program that was a mandated component of Saskatchewan pre-kindergarten classrooms. When my tenure at the children’s school ended, I continued to see both families sporadically at multi-school events, community gatherings, and at local shopping malls. These encounters provided me with opportunities to get to know the two focal children in a range of informal contexts, and take note of their personalities. Although my long-standing relationship with both families enabled me to forgo the nuances that often exist in the beginning stages of partnerships, my relationship with the focal children did contain an element of newness as I had never taught these children, and I was unfamiliar with their interests, friends, and favourite activities.

Corsaro and Molinari (2008) posited that when conducting research with young children, developing the trust of a range of adult gatekeepers, acquiring a working knowledge of the social structure of the children’s lives and daily routines, and gaining the acceptance of the children, their families and teachers, and other members of their worlds, is crucial. Whenever I observed the children at school, the school staff (e.g., principal, teachers, nutritionist, teacher assistants, playground supervisors) graciously welcomed my presence as a researcher in their school. Many of my former colleagues also still taught at the school, and they would often approach me in the hallway or on the playground to inquire about my graduate studies, discuss school board policies, and at times, complain about the overwhelming demands that were placed on them due to new curriculum and assessment strategies put forth by the school division and the Ministry of Education. These professional and personal conversations with the staff provided me with a level of comfort, and made me feel like a valued and trusted colleague in the school.

Many of the students whom I previously taught also still attended the school and they enjoyed approaching me to reminisce about their carefree days as pre-kindergarten students, and to complain about the amount of homework they currently had as senior students. A handful of families from the school had also continued to keep in contact with me (e.g., through phone calls, e-mails, or text messages), and would often stop me in the hallway after school or on the playground for a quick chat. My presence as a researcher in the additional contexts (e.g., Kids Club, inner-city church) in which I observed Samara and Devin was also positively accepted by the adults and children in these settings due to our shared history. 20

20 During my undergraduate studies several years prior, I volunteered at an afterschool program for ESL children living in the inner-city. This experience evolved into a three-year summer term position with Immigration Canada where I worked with four to six-year-old immigrant and refugee children. During that time, I met many adults and children, who now, several years later, either attended the Kids Club or were involved with the Kids Club as
Reflexivity

Reflexivity has been accepted as a method that researchers can use to legitimize, validate, and question their research practices and representations (Pillow, 2003). There are multiple ways that reflexivity is defined in research. A reflexive approach to research that supports working with Aboriginal children, families, and communities is focused upon developing reciprocity with research participants – hearing, listening, and equalizing the research relationship – doing research “with” instead of “on” (Smith, 1999). In this study, I have drawn on reflexivity to redefine my authority in the research process. This understanding of reflexivity attempts to let the data and the participants speak for themselves (Pillow, 2003).

Minh-ha (1991) suggested that reflexivity always occurs out of an unequal power relationship, and argued that the act of reflexivity actually perpetuates a colonial relationship. Due to this claim, I made every attempt to follow Farquhar’s (1990) position on the several ways that “power relations” can be somewhat equalized between researchers and participants, particularly when the focal participants are young children. Farquhar (1990) advocated for open-ended research methods which enable children to set their own agendas and talk about their daily lives and views. In Aboriginal communities, Ruttan (2004) and Visweswaran (1994) argued that reflexivity is not about better methods, or about whether we can represent people better, but whether researchers can be accountable to Aboriginal people’s struggles for self-representation and self-determination.

Children’s Involvement in the Present Study

Several researchers advocate for children’s “voices” and viewpoints to be taken into account in educational research (e.g., Christensen, 2004; Clark, 2004; Dyson, 2001, 2003; Gregory, 2001; Gregory & Williams, 2000; O’Kane, 2008; Rabiee, Sloper, & Beresford, 2005; Veale, 2005), and have utilized a variety of ethnographic methods, such as participant observations and conversations to learn more about children’s experiences. In her research with young children, Clark (2004) used a mosaic approach, which is a flexible, adaptable, multi-method technique in which children’s photographs, drawings, or other modes of communication are combined with talking and observing to gain a deeper understanding of children’s perspectives on their worlds. Clark added that when children are allowed to express themselves,
they can become empowered as experts on their own lives, and become communicators of intimate knowledge (Mason & Urquhart, 2001).

In the current study, my goal was to gain insight into the “ordinary, everyday aspects” (Dyer, 2002) of Samara’s and Devin’s lives, in an attempt to glean information about their meaning making across contexts. To achieve this, I recognized the children as active participants in the research, who can report valid views and experiences (Alderson, 2008; Greene & Hogan, 2005). For researchers who want to include children’s perspectives in research however, the challenge is how to best enable children to express their views to an adult researcher in meaningful ways (Punch, 2002). James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) stated that it is not simply a question of choosing the right methods in seeking out the authentic voices of young children, but rather, a matter of engaging with the underlying and pre-existing values and assumptions that researchers hold about children and their capabilities within the research process.

Numerous researchers (e.g., Clark, 2004; Farquhar, 1990; Mauthner, 1997; Mayall, 1994) have suggested that children can be meaningfully involved in studies by asking them to describe events from their daily lives through storytelling, photographs, or anecdotes. In the present study, I asked Devin and Samara about the drawings and writings they produced during the research period, and I frequently participated in their play narratives in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of their meaning making. In addition, the children were provided with digital cameras to take photographs of the objects, people, or practices that they valued in their lives. These experiences enabled the children to actively participate in the study, and provided a space in which their thoughts, ideas, and theories were taken seriously. In this study, I contend that including the focal children as active participants in the research was not only appropriate, it was methodologically powerful.
Data Collection Methods

In case study research, the methods of data collection should be adequate for an in-depth investigation of the problem, and enable the researcher to acquire rich data (Merriam, 1998). Ethnographic methods are often utilized in case study research, and Merriam (1998) posited that utilizing a range of ethnographic data collection methods results in something more than an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a social unit or phenomenon; it provides a sociocultural analysis of the unit of study. Data gathering techniques may include methods such as interviews, participant observations, field notes, and the collection of artefacts (Merriam, 1988), or, as suggested by Dicks, Soyinka, and Coffey (2006) may include a broader range of techniques, such as video documentation, photographs, or audio-recordings. In the current study, I utilized data collection methods such as observations and the collection of artefacts, similar to those used by language and literacy researchers (e.g., Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) in their classic family and community literacy studies. Throughout the research period, I also used audio recordings, video documentation, and digital photographs.

Observational Field Notes

Throughout the research period, the goal of my observations was to acquire insight into the focal children’s use of communicative practices across contexts. During the study, my observations in the children’s homes were scheduled to coincide with each family’s accessibility, and the length of each observation varied. Throughout the ten-month study, I visited Samara’s home sixteen times. These visits occurred after school, in the evenings, and on weekends, and each visit generally lasted two to three hours. These observations were occasionally lengthened or shortened in time to accommodate the family’s other activities and commitments. During the research period, I visited Devin’s home on fourteen occasions. These visits followed the same general schedule as Samara’s visits (e.g., after school, weekends), and also lasted approximately two to three hours. These observations were discussed with the focal children, their siblings, and their parents before and during the study. During these discussions, I informed each family that my observations would always take place within the everyday routine activities of their family.

When visiting the focal children’s homes, I often assumed the role of a participant-observer. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) argued that critical to the success of field research is the special role researchers develop and maintain as participant-observers. Yin (1994)
contended that participant-observations are frequently used in anthropological studies of different cultural groups in everyday settings, and several researchers (e.g., Beaumont, 1999; Dyson, 1997, 2003; Fassler, 1998; Kendrick, 2003; Matthews & Kesner, 2003; Mauthner, 1997) have utilized participant-observations when conducting research studies with young children.

Although I was initially concerned that Devin and Samara would tire of my presence in their lives, this did not appear to be the case, as they seemed to view my visits to their homes with as much enthusiasm as I did. During these visits, both children initiated the themes and topics of play, or chose other modes of communication for us to engage in; at times, the children also independently engaged in their own valued forms of communication. When I was invited to join in the children’s meaning making, my role was always determined by them. During the study, I also recognized that my presence in the children’s worlds provided an audience for them. As a result, I recognize that this may have motivated them to create play narratives or engage in other forms of meaning making that might not otherwise have been produced or used by them in their solitary play (Kendrick, 2003).

Similar to other examinations of children’s meaning making (e.g., Kendrick, 2003; Pahl, 2007), my observations occurred in multiple contexts, including the children’s school. The nature of my school visits was also discussed with the focal children and their parents, as well as the school principal and classroom teacher before and during the study. During these discussions, I encouraged the children, parents, principal, and teacher to voice any questions or concerns they had about the study. At that time, I also informed the participants that my observations would take place within the naturally occurring daily routine of the Grade One students. Throughout the school year, I made eight visits to Devin’s and Samara’s school. These visits included observations of the children in their classroom, and in additional spaces in the school (e.g., library, gymnasium, Nutrition Room, playground). In addition to conducting observations in the children’s homes and school, I also conducted observations at an after-school Kids Club that Devin and Samara attended. I made three visits to the local Kids Club, and each visit generally spanned two hours. I also made four visits to the inner-city church Devin attended with his family; each visit occurred over a two to three hour period.

In the children’s school, my initial intent was to be an observer so that I would not disrupt the established routines of the classroom and the other school settings (e.g., gymnasium). Throughout the school day, however, I was often called on by Mrs. Webster and the children to be an active participant in their Grade One room. Although Mrs. Webster had a full-time teacher
assistant, working with 25 six-year-old children was at times challenging for the teaching team, and they frequently asked me to read to small groups of children, help the children get their outdoor gear on in the winter months, and assist students as they worked on worksheets or art projects. As the Grade One students became more comfortable with my presence in their classroom, they approached me to read books or sing songs with them, and they appeared to view me as another teacher in the classroom.

My presence as an observer and participant-observer was also welcomed by the adults and children at the local Kids Club, as well as the congregation members at the inner-city church Devin and his family attended. Due to my shared history with a number of people in these settings, a sense of mutual trust and respect had already been established, and their support of the study was evident as they warmly welcomed me in these settings and answered any questions I had about their programs. In addition to observing and interacting with the focal children in these contexts, I also interacted with the children’s peers in a number of ways (e.g., helping with snack, playing games). These interactions seemed to add to my trustworthiness as a researcher from both the focal and supporting participants’ perspectives. In relation to possible questions that may arise in regards to my subjectivity as a participant-researcher, I draw on Kendrick’s (2003) position that “when we research human lives, our own lives as researchers inevitably become entangled in the lives of our participants, just as their lives become entangled in ours; it is the complexity and subjectivity of that entanglement that enhances and promotes the richness and authenticity of qualitative research” (p. 56).

During the study, I made extensive field notes on the children’s meaning making each time I observed in their homes, classroom, or in community contexts. Hoepfl (1997) posited that field notes are running descriptions of settings, people, activities, and sounds, and may also include drawings or maps. Throughout the study, I recorded my observations of the children’s meaning making in their homes immediately after I left each participant’s house. When observing in the focal children’s classroom, I recorded the majority of my notes following these visits, and only occasionally jotted down notes at the children’s school. My reasoning for recording brief notes in this setting was so that certain practices related to the study’s research questions would not be forgotten amongst the flurry of activity in the Grade One classroom, or outside on the playground.
When observing in other sites (e.g., Sunday school class, Kids Club), I used the same procedure of intermittently jotting down notes that were particularly significant to the research questions. I then recorded the majority of my notes after I left these contexts. This practice parallels the perspective of Lofland and Lofland (1984) who posited that writing extensive field notes during an observation is difficult, and suggested jotting down notes that will serve as a memory aid when full field notes are constructed. By either abstaining from note taking, or by only recording key phrases during my observations, I was also able to maintain the general ambience of the significant environments in the study. After each observation, I typed the field notes onto my computer using a double-sided template; on one side I documented my observations, and on the other side, I often formulated additional questions or made notes on ideas that I wanted to investigate in further observations. I then printed and inserted the pages in a binder. In total, the field notes were comprised of 110 single-spaced pages.

**Audio Recordings**

During the study, I also made audio recordings of the focal children’s interactions with their parents and siblings to gain insight into their meaning making at home (five recordings occurred in Samara’s home; six recordings occurred in Devin’s home). I made transcriptions of these recordings, and each recording was approximately eight to ten minutes. Although Samara and Devin were initially intrigued by the compact audio recording device, the novelty of this data collection tool quickly subsided, and proved to be an unobtrusive way to collect data in each child’s home. This form of data collection also provided another way in which the focal participants’ reality could be recorded and examined (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 1998). I also received consent from the Grade One teacher, Mrs. Webster, to record a conversation we had about how she defined literacy learning for her students, and she allowed me to audio record my interactions in the classroom with the focal children and Gabby. Throughout my visits to the classroom, I made three audio recordings of my exchanges with the focal children.
**Video Documentation**

Plowman (1999) suggested that the advantages of video-based data are its permanence as a record, its retrievability, and its availability to confirm findings. Video data also reveals the multimodal dynamism of children’s interactions, and provides insight into how children coordinate different modes as they negotiate and jointly construct meanings in social settings (Flewitt, 2006). Bogdan and Biklen (1998) argued however, that the presence of a video camera inevitably intrudes on the “natural” environment being studied. They suggested that an extinction time needs to be considered in a study’s design, and that enough time must be allowed for this period, enabling the novelty of a filmer in the research environment to minimize. In the current study, I began to videotape the children’s use of a range of communicative practices in their homes and neighbourhood several weeks into the study. Although Devin, Samara, and their siblings were intrigued by the video camera, the novelty of my use of video was significantly reduced after a few visits to their homes.

Data were collected on three videotapes, all of which were carefully labeled (e.g., focal child, context, date), and each recording generally lasted ten to fifteen minutes. I reviewed the content of these videos several times, and transcriptions were made of nine of thirteen recordings that best represented the focal children’s meaning making in their homes and neighbourhood during the research period. Portions of some of these transcripts are included in Chapters Four and Five. Since I was not conducting a fine-grained discourse analysis on these video clips, details such as length of pauses or overlapping speech were not included in the transcripts. However, I did take note of the children’s non-verbal communication (e.g., gesture) and acknowledged these forms of communication in the transcripts.

**Digital Photographs**

In the present study, I took digital photographs of the children’s engagement in a range of communicative practices, as well as photographs of the multiple contexts that were a part of the children’s worlds (e.g., the children’s homes, Kids Club, classroom, church). These photographs provided me with easily retrievable images of these contexts, and assisted me as I developed written descriptions of each setting.

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21 It seemed that after a few visits to the children’s homes they were no longer interested in the video camera and audio recorder as they did not ask to hold the devices or experiment with their different functions, and they did not pay attention to my use of these recording devices.
Several weeks into the study, I gave each child a digital camera to take photographs of the objects, people, or practices that they valued in their lives. Although I informed them that their use of the camera was not a requirement of their participation in the study, I stated that if they chose, they could use the camera to document what they deemed as significant in their lives over the course of the research. During the research period, my intent was not to influence Samara’s and Devin’s decisions on what or whom they would photograph during the study. My reasoning was grounded in Alderson’s (2008) perspective on the authenticity children can provide as informants in studies in which they are involved. Alderson posited that when given the opportunity, children can increase others’ understanding of their lives and interests within the contexts of their family, community, and environment. During the study, Samara took 121 photographs, and Devin took 143 photographs.

Many of Devin’s and Samara’s photographs were also accompanied by brief explanations that they impulsively shared, or that I requested during the study. This occurred when the children and I reviewed their photographs on the screen of the camera, or when I uploaded their photographs onto my computer during a home visit. Although I did not engage in a visual analysis of the children’s photographs, Devin’s and Samara’s explanations of their photographs enabled me to elicit their thoughts and feelings about the toys and objects they valued, and acquire insight into the role different mediators played in their meaning making. In the following chapters, I include samples of the children’s photographs that best represent the consistent practices, people, or objects that were significant to them during the study.

Although providing young children with digital cameras to document their lives enables them to personally and meaningfully contribute to research studies in which they are involved, placing a camera in the hands of young children is not without its challenges. Burke (2005) contended that in familial contexts, ownership and control of a camera usually belongs to a parent. Therefore, an important early stage in this study was to work towards an acceptance with both families that Devin’s and Samara’s knowledge of their worlds was owned by them, and that they were the experts in knowing and recording what was significant in their worlds (Burke, 2005). Thus, when I provided each child with a digital camera, I had discussions with the focal children, their siblings, and their parents about the importance of Devin and Samara.

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22 At the conclusion of the study, I gave each focal child an album of photographs that pertained to his or her family.
23 Once the children received their digital cameras, I uploaded their photographs onto my laptop computer during every subsequent visit to their homes.
retaining control of the camera so the photographs were representative of their viewpoints and interests (Sharples, Davison, Thomas, & Rudman, 2003).

Conversations
Throughout the study, I had many informal conversations with the children’s parents, their Grade One teacher, Mrs. Webster, and the volunteers at the Kids Club and inner-city church. These conversations centered on the focal children’s meaning making, and also revealed the values and beliefs these individuals held about literacy. Within the context of Samara’s home, my conversations with her parents frequently occurred while we sat around the kitchen table in the colder months, or as we sat on the front steps of their home in the late spring and summer. My conversations with Devin’s parents generally occurred in the family’s living room. My chats with Mrs. Webster occurred in the classroom and were also informal; on one occasion, however, I received her permission to audio-record our conversation. As mentioned previously, the purpose of that conversation was to gain an understanding of how Mrs. Webster viewed literacy learning in her classroom. My conversations with the volunteers at the Kids Club and the ministry team at the church always occurred at the end of the formal programs. These open-ended conversations enabled me to acquire a deeper understanding of the culturally-valued communicative practices promoted and valued in these contexts.

Collection of Artefacts
Throughout the study, I collected artefacts (e.g., drawings, writings) that Samara and Devin produced across multiple contexts. During the research period, I collected all of the artefacts they created in their homes during my visits; six artefacts were collected from Devin in that context, and five were collected from Samara. The children willingly parted with their drawings and writings, and both children often provided spontaneous explanations of these artefacts, which I also recorded. At times, I also asked the children questions about their artefacts, in an attempt to gain additional insight into the meanings embedded in the images or print texts they produced. During my visits to the school, I made a total of eleven photocopies of the children’s artefacts that best represented the range of texts they engaged with in that context (e.g., teacher-directed writing samples, self-initiated drawings, self-portraits). These texts offered valuable insight into the types of communicative practices that were promoted and valued in the children’s classroom. At the Kids Club, and at the inner-city church Devin
attended, I also collected artefacts produced by the children. In these contexts, I collected eight
drawings and writings; four from Samara, and four from Devin.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The process of data analysis should not be seen as a distinct stage of research; rather, it is
a reflexive activity that should inform data collection, writing, and further data collection. Coffey
and Atkinson (1996) posited that analysis is not, then, the last phase of the research process. It
should be viewed as part of the research design and data collection. The research process, of
which analysis is one aspect, is a cyclical one. The recursive nature of qualitative data analysis
is also a highly interpretive act, and Wolcott (1994) posited that the qualitative researcher should
in essence, be a storyteller. In the following sections, I outline the phases of data analysis that
occurred in this study. As I analyzed the data, I strived to present an authentic and holistic
“story” through my analysis of the focal children’s meaning making.

**Phase One of the Data Analysis**

In this initial phase of data analysis, I began the process of analysis by addressing the
study’s first research question: What are the types and purposes of communicative practices used
by young urban Aboriginal children at home, at school, and in the community? This question
required an identification and examination of the focal children’s communicative practices
across the significant contexts in their worlds. These contexts included their homes and
neighbourhoods, their Grade One classroom, and an after-school Kids Club. An inner-city
church service that Devin attended with his family provided another context in which I observed
Devin construct meaning in his world. To determine the types of communicative practices used
by Devin and Samara, I observed numerous communicative events in their lives across contexts.
I coded and categorized these events through my use of a constant comparison method of
analysis (Glaser, 1978). A constant comparison method of analysis requires the researcher to: i)
look for key issues, recurrent events, or activities in the data that can become categories for
focus; ii) collect data that provides many instances of the categories, and reveals the diversity of
the dimensions under these categories; and, iii) write about the categories in an attempt to
describe and account for all the instances in the data, including the discovery of social processes
and relationships. The process of identifying, defining, and refining the codes and categories
enabled me to develop a strong conceptual understanding of observable communicative events.
and their relationship to ideological communicative practices that are grounded in social structures and power relationships. As an example of this coding, I draw on the following excerpt from my observational field notes:

When I arrived at Devin’s house tonight he was sitting outside on the curb. When he saw me, he began to wave, and excitedly told me to follow him to one of his secret clubhouses. He then began to lead me around the neighbourhood to show me where his other clubs were located. Tammi and Niki soon joined us, and the play took a different turn, as Devin became a crime scene investigator, turned rocks and sticks into “dinosaur teeth and bones”, and assigned his sisters secondary roles in his play. Tammi and Niki eagerly participated in his play, and became drawn into his imaginary world of crime scenes, police investigations, and “evidence.” At one point, Devin held an imaginary walkie-talkie to his mouth, and made a request for other police officers to join him at a make-believe crime scene.

In that excerpt, Devin’s engagement in play enabled him to form social relationships with others, and he also utilized play for enjoyment purposes. After coding this excerpt from my field notes, I employed the triangulation of data sources (e.g., transcripts from video recording, photographs) in order that the information from one data source corroborated the information coming from other sources.

Phase Two of the Data Analysis

In this phase of data analysis, I addressed the study’s second research question: What role do family and community members play in supporting and influencing Aboriginal children’s communicative practices? To illustrate how I accomplished this, I draw on the previous data excerpt. From that excerpt, I coded the individuals (Tammi and Niki) who participated in Devin’s meaning making, as well as the nature of their support as Devin constructed meaning. In this phase of the analysis, I return to the sociocultural theoretical perspective that guided this study. For example, Gregory, Long, and Volk (2004) and Rogoff (1990, 2003) suggested that within a sociocultural framework, young children learn as apprentices alongside more experienced members of the culture. The researchers added that crucial to a sociocultural approach is the role mediators (e.g., siblings, parents, teacher) play in initiating children into new cultural practices, and guiding them in the learning of new skills. I also addressed the extent to which each focal child took control of his or her meaning making and learning.
Phase Three of the Data Analysis

In this third phase of analysis, I sought to answer the final research question of the study: What is the relationship between Aboriginal children’s use of communicative practices and their construction of identity? Within this phase of analysis, I drew on the work of several researchers (e.g., Dyson, 1997; Guimond, 2003; Hannon, 1995) who have investigated the connection between literacy and identity, and I made links to the dominant perspectives of identity in relation to literacy as outlined by Moje and Luke (2009). In addition, I examined the relationship between identity and Indigeneity in the focal children’s meaning making. For example, in the previous data excerpt, Devin positioned himself in a powerful and competent role and assigned his sisters menial tasks in his play (identity as position), and Devin also constructed a story about himself as a crime scene investigator (identity as narrative). In relation to the link between identity and Indigeneity, I contend that there is a general lingering stereotype that Aboriginal children do “nothing” or are “at-risk” due to their home lives. The aforementioned data excerpt negates that misconception of Aboriginal children, as Devin engaged in creative and complex play that drew on global narratives, and engaged in meaningful social relationships with his siblings in his play.

Due to the large corpus of data I collected in this study, I engaged in the process of data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming data from transcriptions or field notes. After engaging in that process, I selected seventeen narratives (in the form of communicative events) that best represented the focal children’s meaning making during the research period. These communicative events revealed the role a range of mediators played in their meaning making, and also highlighted the ways in which their identities were being constructed. These events characterized the complexity and richness of the focal children’s meaning making, and were selected from a combined total of forty-five observations of the focal children’s meaning making over a ten-month period. Each event occurred over a sustained period of time during the study. Although I do not address a specific length of time that I am defining as “sustained” (e.g., 15, 20, 30 minutes), these events generally lasted anywhere between fifteen to thirty minutes.
Phase Four of the Data Analysis

In this phase, I utilized Yin’s (1998, 2003) concept of *pattern matching*, which recognizes the unique patterns or themes of each case (within-case analysis) before themes across cases are presented. For Eisenhardt (1989), an important aspect of within-case analysis is the detailed write-ups a researcher prepares for each case. In this phase of the analysis, I outlined the dominant, overarching themes I was noticing in the data from each case. In this dissertation, within-case analyses are presented in Chapters Four and Five, and provided a starting point for the final phase of analysis.

Phase Five of the Data Analysis

In the final phase of analysis, I engaged in a cross-case analysis of the two case studies included in this dissertation. Khan and VanWysberghe (2008) posited that when investigators utilize a cross-case analysis technique, they can accumulate case knowledge, compare and contrast cases, and ultimately produce new knowledge. An advantage of drawing on more than one case is that it can help clarify whether or not a finding is simply idiosyncratic to a single case or is consistently replicated across several cases. The analysis of more than one case also creates more robust theory because the propositions are more deeply grounded in varied empirical evidence (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 1994).

When conducting a cross-case analysis, the aim is to become intimately familiar with each case as a stand-alone entity. This process allows the unique patterns or themes of each case to emerge before themes across cases are presented. As stated previously, this process is referred to as *pattern matching* (Yin, 1998, 2003). Yin (1998) added that researchers must also continually judge the quality and validity of their case study design. He outlined four ways that this can be accomplished: *construct validity* (e.g., using multiple data sources, establishing a chain of evidence, utilizing a member check), *internal validity* (e.g., developing categories and themes), *external validity* (e.g., drawing on more than one case), and *reliability* (e.g., using the same data collection procedures across cases). Yin contended that following these recommendations will "increase the quality of your case study tremendously, and overcome traditional criticisms of the weakness of case study research" (Yin, 1998, p. 242). In this phase, I also designed three visual matrices of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) which allowed me to highlight the children’s meaning making in home, school, and community contexts across both
cases. The findings from the cross-case analysis will be explicitly discussed in Chapter Six of the dissertation.

**Issues of Trustworthiness**

To assess the trustworthiness of this study, I used Lincoln’s and Guba’s (1985) model of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. This model addresses issues of Confirmability, Credibility, Dependability, and Transferability. I also addressed the relationship between trustworthiness and reciprocity in qualitative research by asking: “What questions about trustworthiness arise when we view qualitative research through the lens of reciprocity?”

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the degree to which a study’s results can be confirmed or corroborated by others. In this study, a detailed account of the methods of data collection was presented (e.g., observations, field notes, collection of artefacts), and to confirm the accuracy of the data, a member check process was utilized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A member check process is viewed as a technique for establishing the validity of an account. Although there are several advantages to the member check process (e.g., provides participants with an opportunity to summarize preliminary findings, gives participants a chance to correct errors and challenge a researcher’s interpretations), there are also drawbacks associated with this process, such as relying on the assumption that there is a fixed truth of reality that can be accounted for by a researcher, and confirmed by a respondent.

While there are limitations to using a member check approach, I utilized this approach in an attempt to provide the families with a voice in the interpretation of data, to establish a sense of trustworthiness with the participants, and to involve the families in a reciprocal exchange and sharing of information. I also continually kept both families informed of my observations and interpretations by engaging in ongoing, informal conversations with them throughout the study. In order to confirm the accuracy of my recorded portrayals of the children’s meaning making, each family also received a copy of the field notes and transcriptions that were relevant to their child and family. This occurred midway through the study (January, 2008), and at the end of research period (June, 2008). This process enabled the families to share their thoughts on the data, and to make any changes due to misinterpretations. Although both families verbally
expressed their appreciation of this act, they assured me that they held a deep level of trust in regards to my interpretations of the data.

In the present study, the concept of “reciprocity” played a key role throughout the research. Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton (2001) posited that reciprocity involves “give and take”. They add that when researchers think about the interrelatedness of trustworthiness and reciprocity, they need to also consider issues of rapport, safety, honour, and obligation. Harrison et al. (2001) argued that in an effort to honour our participants, we may find ourselves refusing to deal with the “hard stuff” and romanticizing our participants and their actions. From the inception of the study, I was cognizant of these issues, and attempted to present an authentic representation of the focal children’s lives in this dissertation.

Dependability

Dependability relates to the consistency and stability of a study over time. In the current study, I spent a school year observing the focal children in their homes, Grade One classroom, and in multiple community contexts. This length of time allowed for a comprehensive collection of data, and enabled me to acquire insight into the children’s communicative practices. In this study, dependability was also established through the presentation of the methodology and theoretical framework, and my use of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) to describe Devin’s and Samara’s meaning making across contexts.

Credibility

Credibility involves establishing that the results of a study are credible or believable from the perspectives of the participants involved in the research, and from the perspectives of the individuals who are reading the study. In this study, substantial descriptions of the focal participants and the contexts they inhabited were presented in order to create an in-depth portrayal of the children’s worlds. This information was included to provide the reader with pertinent background information through which to interpret the findings and conclusions of the study. To add to the validity of the study, the triangulation of multiple data sources (e.g., field notes, conversations, collection of artefacts) occurred to reduce researcher bias, and the potential limitations associated with a particular method.
Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of a study can be transferred to other contexts or settings. In terms of this study, transferability can therefore enable researchers who are interested in studying the communicative practices of children from similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to draw comparisons, and look for issues that resonate with them. In the case of transferability, readers need to know as much detail as possible about a research situation in order to accurately transfer ideas or issues from a study to their research.

Ethical Procedures

Permission was sought and granted by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board in September 2007. The Superintendent of Curriculum and Support Services for the school division in which the focal children were enrolled also provided written permission to conduct the study in the children’s elementary community school. The principal of the participating school provided his verbal consent to have the study take place in the school, and the children’s Grade One teacher provided her signed consent to participate in the study. The children’s teacher chose to keep her identity private, and asked that her actual name not be revealed in the study. To protect her anonymity, I adhered to this request throughout the dissertation.

I contacted both families through letters of invitation to participate in the study in September 2007. The first time that I met with each family, I also verbally explained the study to them. A significant methodological position of this study focused on the notion of collaborating with children in research studies. Therefore, when I initially visited each family’s home, I also spent time with both Devin and Samara, telling them about the study and asking if it would be alright if I visited and played with them throughout the school year. Samara reacted to my request by nodding her head and grabbing my hand, and Devin verbally agreed. At these initial visits, I also informed the families that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

The following week, I had a dinner in my classroom where I provided the parents with consent forms to participate in the study. One of the consent forms requested their permission to participate in the study. That form also contained a section where they could provide their consent to include their actual names and the actual names of their children in this dissertation. The families also received another consent form in which I requested the inclusion of their visual
images (including the children’s artefacts and photographs) in this dissertation and in lectures and PowerPoint presentations at local, national, and international conferences. The parents of Samara’s best friend, Gabby, were also provided with a letter of invitation to participate in the study, and were given consent forms (permission to participate in the study, to use actual name, to use visual images), which they agreed to and signed. They were also informed that they could withdraw Gabby from the study at any time without consequence. All of the other participants who were peripherally involved in the study (e.g., volunteers at the after-school Kids Club, classmates) had their anonymity protected (their names and images are not revealed in the study).

The research families and additional participants (e.g., classroom teacher) were informed that only the principal investigator and co-investigator would have access to the raw data. In addition, the participants were made aware of the possibility of the study’s findings being published, and being shared with local Aboriginal community members. Discussions with the families on how best to share the research findings, and whether they wanted to be involved in this process were also conducted during the study. Although neither family expressed a desire to be a part of the dissemination process, both families requested a copy of the dissertation. Copies of this dissertation will also be distributed to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and the school division.

Several scholars who have worked with Indigenous communities have discussed the importance of returning the data to the participants in forms that can be used by them (Gibson, Gibson, & Macaulay, 2001; Lapadat & Janzen, 1994; Smith, 1999). Ruttan (2004) stated that this means not simply sending a copy of the final report to the participants or community, but developing research summaries and reports in user-friendly language. In the current study, the families were provided with the final draft of this dissertation, and were also given an album of photographs taken by me and their child during the research period. Each family was also provided with a condensed version of the dissertation, which included descriptions of their family, home, and neighbourhood (Chapter One), the findings that related to their child’s meaning making (Chapter Four or Five), and the conclusion (Chapter Seven).

In the following two chapters, case studies are presented of each focal child’s meaning making across contexts.
Chapter Four
Samara’s Meaning Making across Contexts

Children are believed to make meaning as a result of being stimulated by their environment, which includes their families, their teachers, other children, the community, and any other experiences they might encounter in their world. It is also assumed that children actively make meaning for themselves; they are not passive absorbers of meaning conveyed by agents external to themselves.
-Schiro (2008)

In this chapter, I present the findings from a case study of Samara’s meaning making over a ten-month period by addressing the research questions that framed this study: i) What are the types and purposes of communicative practices used by young urban Aboriginal children at home, at school, and in the community?; ii) What role do family and community members play in supporting and influencing Aboriginal children’s communicative practices?; and iii) What is the relationship between Aboriginal children’s use of communicative practices and their construction of identity?

As outlined in the literature review, children engage with a wide range of multimodal communicative practices (e.g., drawing, singing, playing), and many young children also have extensive experience of print media, computer games, cellular phones, and the Internet from birth. As children engage with a range of texts they are frequently supported by mediators who scaffold and support their learning. In relation to children’s identity construction, the formation of their identities is a social process, in which family and community members play an important role. As outlined in Chapter Two, the notion of identity in relation to urban Aboriginal children is a complex concept, and takes into account the understanding that their identities are constantly being shaped and transformed. For instance, Aboriginal children, similar to all other children, are continually casting themselves in particular positions, whether real or imagined, and are also being called to particular positions by others. This last point addresses issues of power in relation to children’s identity construction due to their positioning in an adult-dominated world. For Aboriginal children, racism and low expectations held by mainstream society also impact the ways in which they are being positioned.

In the following sections, I outline Samara’s meaning making at home, school, and the Kids Club. I also address the salient themes that emerged from the data, and I discuss how all three contexts compare and contrast in relation to Samara’s meaning making. This allows the reader to: i) draw parallels or notice differences between the types and purposes of
communicative practices utilized by Samara as she moved across multiple contexts; ii) develop an understanding of the role family and community members played as supporters and influencers in her world as she constructed meaning; and, iii) develop an understanding of the ways in which Samara was constructing her identity and positioning herself as a meaning maker, and the ways in which she was being positioned by others in relation to her use of communicative practices. To illustrate Samara’s meaning making, I also include transcriptions of her interactions with others, as well as samples of her drawings, writings, and digital photographs.

As outlined in the previous chapter, I utilized a constant comparison method of analysis to determine the range of communicative practices Samara engaged in during the research period. At home, I observed Samara engage in the following practices: i) digitextual practices\(^{24}\), such as video gaming, uploading YouTube™ videos, engaging in websites on the Internet, and reading on-line storybooks; ii) playing; and, iii) drawing. At school, I observed Samara engage in: i) print-based practices, such as reading storybooks and leveled books, journal and agenda writing, engaging in worksheets, and producing storybooks; ii) playing; and iii) drawing. At the Kids Club, I observed Samara construct meaning through: i) print-based practices, such as storybook reading, Bible reading, and producing storybooks; ii) playing; iii) singing and dancing; and iv) drawing. Over the course of the research, I also identified the following purposes for these practices in Samara’s meaning making: i) to form social relationships; ii) for enjoyment; iii) for skills development; iv) for a sense of belonging; v) for entertainment; and vi) for knowledge acquisition.

As Samara engaged in a range of communicative practices across contexts, two prominent overarching themes emerged in her meaning making. These themes centered on: i) the importance of membership in her world, which included the significance she placed on being viewed as a competent meaning maker across sociocultural contexts; and, ii) the notion of agency, specifically the ways in which Samara exercised agency as a meaning maker across multiple contexts. Within these overarching themes I also identified a number of sub-themes that were particular to each context. For example, at home, Samara’s parents and sisters valued competency with digital technology. Thus, Samara was scaffolded by family members to achieve a level of competency with a range of digitextual practices. Within that context, she was also able to exercise agency by engaging in other communicative practices that she valued (e.g.,

\[^{24}\text{Everett (2003) defined “digitextual practices” as the literacy practices that are related to digital technologies.}\]
playing, drawing), and by drawing on popular culture narratives that piqued her interest (e.g., *Dora the Explorer*) and shaped her identity construction. As outlined in Chapter One, the culturally-valued practices in Samara’s Grade One classroom centered predominantly on print-based, teacher-directed learning activities. In that context, I often observed Samara strive to be viewed as a competent meaning-maker by her teachers and peers. For example, one way she attempted to achieve this was by incorporating her out-of-school experiences into self-initiated, personalized storybooks. At the Kids Club, Samara also endeavoured to be viewed as a competent member of her peer community, and did so by positioning herself as a model and mentor to her peers through her engagement in singing and dancing.

Street (2001) posited that an understanding of how individuals use literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practices in different cultural settings. Street (2001) added however, that it is not sufficient to simply extol the richness and variety of practices made accessible through ethnographic detail; instead, we need to draw on theoretical models that also recognize the central role of power relations in people’s meaning making. To achieve this, I drew on specific theoretical perspectives, as outlined in previous chapters, which address and explore issues of power in relation to an individual’s meaning making.

*The Importance of Membership*

*The Pasap Home*

Whenever I entered the Pasap home, regardless of the time of day, one or more of Samara’s family members were engaged in some type of digitextual practice. Some of the family’s practices included: checking their cell phones for text messages, composing text messages, playing Xbox and Nintendo Wii® video games, browsing the Internet, and uploading music onto their iPods®. During my visits to their home, I also observed six-year-old Samara engage with a wide range of digitextual practices with assistance from her family members (e.g., navigating popular children’s websites, utilizing a social networking website, uploading *YouTube™* video clips, playing video games).

The following communicative event outlines Samara’s engagement with a Nintendo Wii® Sports bowling game. Throughout my sixteen visits to the family’s home, I observed Samara engage in video game playing with her family on ten visits. During my observations, I did not participate as player; instead, I assumed the role of an audience member and supporter. During the study, I also made three audio recordings and two video recordings of Samara’s video...
game playing with family members. Further, 23 of Samara’s 121 photographs were of digital technologies in her home or documented her family members’ engagement with digitextual practices. The following event reveals the supporting role Samara’s family members assumed as she engaged in video game playing, as they encouraged, supported, and cheered her actions, and addresses the notion of identity in her meaning making.

Communicative Event 4-1: Samara Playing a Nintendo Wii® Bowling Game (transcript: October 4th, 2007) (data sources: observation, field notes, transcription from audio recording, digital photographs)

Samara is standing in her family’s living room, clutching a Wii remote that enables her to manipulate the actions of a virtual Wii bowler on the television screen. Three of Samara’s sisters are sitting on the floor, her oldest sister is standing in the doorway of the living room, and her parents are sitting on the couch. Samara is aware that she has an audience, starts to giggle, and casts a quick glance at her mother. On the television screen, the Wii bowler stands in front of a bowling lane. Samara looks at the screen and moves her arm that is holding the remote to cue the bowler to pick up the bowling ball. Samara moves her arm again, this time in a throwing motion, and the ball travels down the lane and goes into the gutter.

Beatrice: Good try, Baby!
Samara: No! (she giggles, and covers her face with her hands)
Renae: Samara, do you want me to help you?
Samara: No, I do it!
Angel: Samara, you have to move your arm fast and straight. You’re going too slow!
Savanna: Yeah, Baby. Here, let me do it.
Samara: No, go away!
Renae: Okay, get ready to throw the ball again….watch the girl on TV.
Samara: Okay (she makes an exaggerated motion with her arm, and the bowler throws the ball down the lane. The ball knocks down three of the pins. Samara’s parents and two of her sisters, Natasha and Savanna, begin to laugh and clap. Angel smiles at Samara, and Aasia scowls at her sister, and asks her parents if she can play next).
Beatrice: Okay Baby, now you have a couple more tries to knock them (pins) all down.
This time move your arm the same way, but more towards the things (pins) that are still standing up.
Natasha: You’re doing good Samara!
Samara: Okay (she smiles, and swings her arm towards the standing pins on the television screen. The bowler throws the ball down the lane and knocks all of the remaining pins down.)

Beatrice: (laughing) Good job, Baby!

Renae: (laughing) Holy, Samara!

Samara: That good! (she giggles and looks slightly embarrassed over all the attention. She turns toward her mother and nestles her face in her mother’s neck. All of her sisters are clapping, aside from Aasia, who is still sullen as she waits for her turn. Angel immediately begins to provide Samara with tips on how to succeed at the next level of the game.)

During that event, Samara’s sisters and parents scaffolded her learning as she engaged with the complexities and nuances of the video game. As they interacted with Samara, and supported her progress, their collective investment in helping Samara succeed appeared to inspire a sense of camaraderie in their family. As I observed Samara play the Nintendo Wii® bowling video game, it was apparent that the game also offered her a rich, multimodal space within which she could explore with two different identities. One of these identities was her real-life identity as a flourishing gamer within her family. Her identity as a gamer enabled her to develop a strong sense of social identity as she participated in the digitextual practices that were valued in the culture of her family. During her video game playing, Samara also assumed a virtual identity as a bowler where she was able to position herself in an imaginary, on-line community of virtual characters and contexts. As Samara played, she seemed to oscillate between her own identity as a gamer and the identity of the virtual bowler who was moving through a number of “levels” in order to succeed in the game. As Samara become more confident with her video gaming skills, I observed her develop an increasing level of self-efficacy which enabled her to feel a sense of belonging in her family, and feel like a significant member of the “digital kinship” in her home.

In the Pasap family, playing video games together was a consistent part of their meaning making. As I observed the family engage in video game playing on multiple occasions it was evident that they valued competency with digital technology, and that their engagement in video gaming provided them with a valued source of entertainment and enjoyment. This type of family practice seems to reflect a new type of “family literacy” that is occurring in many
contemporary families, regardless of their ethnicity or socio-economic status. Although the Pasap family lived well below the poverty line, their accumulation of a wide range of digital technologies was well-known by the children in the area, and enabled them to hold a prominent status in the community, particularly among the children and youth. During the research period, the family’s home was often a gathering place for the neighbourhood children, many of whom were friends with Samara and her sisters. When these children spent time in the family’s home, I observed them play Xbox and Wii® video games and watch movies. These gatherings support the notion that in Aboriginal communities, children are not just cared for or supervised by their parents, they are also cared for by members in the community. The following conversation occurred early in the study, and was initiated by me after I arrived at the Pasap home to find a large group of children playing video games.

Jodi: You have lots of kids in your house today!
Renae: Yeah, we got a new Wii® game. It just came out today, so I went and got it at Wal-Mart.
Beatrice: When the big girls got home (from school), they texted their friends to tell them, so now we got lots (children) over.
Jodi: Do you like having lots of kids over?
Beatrice: Yeah, it’s good that they feel good here….and we know where our kids are. Sometimes the neighbourhood is shady, and the cops are always around, making trouble most of the time, so it’s better if they (their daughters) just stay home. Baby really likes when they come, she likes when big kids are here.

(personal communication, November 30th, 2007)

These group gatherings were frequently captured by Samara through her use of digital photography. For example, on a subsequent visit to the family’s home, I observed Samara’s sisters and a friend playing an Xbox video game in the family’s living room. When Samara asked her sisters if she could play the game too, they told her that she would have to wait until after their friend had left. Samara was not deterred by this, and instead took several photographs of their video game playing (see Figure 4-1).
Samara’s sisters also used digitextual practices in other ways, such as when they utilized the social networking site, Bebo™²⁵, to make connections with their friends, and develop social relationships with other individuals and groups who shared their interests. After I observed Samara make several requests to family members to help her utilize this site, one of her sisters created an account for her by submitting her personal information (e.g., age, gender, birthdate), which was a requirement of the website. Samara was then given access to join the site’s on-line chat rooms where discussions often centered on contemporary videos, songs, or movies. Other people on the site could view her profile, and in turn, Samara could view their profiles. Users of this website also had the ability to inquire about being someone’s on-line friend based on his/her personal profile.

During one of my visits to the family’s home in late April, I observed a friend of the family (a thirteen-year-old girl who lived in the neighbourhood) help Samara locate and login to the Bebo.com™ website. When Samara entered her password (her first name) to login to her personal profile, and join this online community, a website user with a male name asked to be her friend. The teenage girl who was sitting with Samara asked, “Do you know him Samara, is

²⁵ Bebo.com™ and similar sites, such as Facebook™ and MySpace™ are social networking sites designed to create on-line affinity networks. These sites enable users to produce personal profiles, and create networks of connections across a range of domains and modes. These websites are rapidly evolving, and Bebo.com™ in particular, continually develops an expanding range of add-on features (e.g., quizzes, image slide shows, polls, photo albums, fan links, videos) available for individuals to utilize on their personalized webpages.
he your friend? That’s the same guy who asked to be my friend, yeah, that’s the same name. Who is that guy?” Samara shook her head, and hastily dismissed the user’s request by logging off the website. During this interaction, it seemed that although Samara had the functional knowledge to locate (with assistance), and engage with this social networking website, she did not have the critical cognitive skills required to interpret, critique, and manage the information presented to her on the site.

Although Samara’s personal webpage was relatively blank (aside from her personal information – gender, birthdate, first name), her sisters’ webpages were more developed. For example, their pages focused on their knowledge of popular culture narratives that were of interest to adolescent girls at the time of this study, and they also posted personal photographs of themselves and their friends on their individual webpages. These multimodal webpages represent identity texts (Cummins, 2006) in their worlds as the webpages provided them with a space in which they could display and share their evolving self-narratives, and provide their peer groups and others with information about their favourite music, films, activities, and other interests.

The link between digital technology and Aboriginal cultural knowledge was also evident in the family’s life. For example, during several of my visits to the family’s home, I observed Samara’s family members upload the music of Canadian Aboriginal hip-hop groups, such as War Party and the Poetic Wazziorz. They also used the YouTube™ website to watch the music videos of these groups, and their favourite songs were Feelin’ Reserved and On My Rez. Renae introduced his family to these songs and videos, and he indicated that he liked these songs because the lyrics “talk about real things” in Aboriginal communities (personal communication, February 9th, 2008). Issues that were addressed in these songs included the demoralizing impact of residential schools for Aboriginal families and communities, the spirit world, and racism.

During the study, I asked Samara and her older sisters why they enjoyed listening to Aboriginal hip-hop music and watching these videos. Their answers focused primarily on the aesthetics of the videos (e.g., their interest in the singers’ jewelry and clothes, the cars in the video, hair and make-up), and Samara vehemently nodded her head in agreement to their answers. Although these are valid reasons, the girls’ explanations of why they liked the hip-hop music do not seem to reflect researchers’ and theorists’ perspectives on the potential of this medium. For example, hip-hop music has been noted as representing the “vernacular ethos” of the struggle for voice among urban Aboriginal and African-American communities in North
America (Ignace & Ignace, 2005). As such, this music represents a form of communication in which marginalized groups can address their perceptions of alienation from social and political power.

Although Samara and her siblings did not seem to understand the meanings embedded in these songs, I speculate that these texts may become more important to the girls as they mature, and become more knowledgeable about their people’s history. As I listened to these songs, and observed Samara and her family members sing or hum along to the lyrics, it appeared that while the songs’ themes of colonization, marginalization, and lack of respect did not resonate with the girls, these injustices paralleled some of their lived experiences. Although Beatrice and Renae did not make direct links from these songs to their own lives or their children’s lives, on several occasions throughout the ten-month study they shared their concerns about their children being targets of racism at school, at stores, and at other public places, such as local swimming pools and community centers.

Due to the dominant role of digitextual practices in the family’s world, the following question, “What does it mean to be ‘literate’ in the twenty-first century?” is relevant in relation to the Pasap family’s meaning making. Since the beginning of recorded history, being “literate” meant having the skill to interpret symbols on a piece of paper as letters which, when put together, formed words that conveyed meaning. In Aboriginal communities, being “literate” was at one time strongly related to one’s ability to read landscapes (Hare, 2005). However, current understandings of what it means to be “literate” recognize the increasing role the powerful images and sounds of multimedia culture now occupy in Aboriginal people’s meaning making (Deger, 2006; Gibson, 2007; Kral, 2010). Although several research reports related to the concept of the “digital divide” (e.g., Eamon, 2004; Facer & Furlong, 2001; Greenall & Loizides, 2001; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Warschauer, Knobel, & Stone, 2004) suggest that low-income families often have limited access to, or knowledge of digital technology, this was not the case in Samara’s home.

During the study, I observed the Pasap family value and embrace the potential of technology in their homes, choose to spend their money on current models of technology, and constantly engage with different technological devices. This afforded them with the opportunity to keep pace with today’s technologically-saturated global network, and enabled them to open the doors of their home to the neighbourhood children so they could also engage with these different forms of technology. The family’s ownership and use of digital technology seemed to
provide them with a sense of importance in their local community, and a sense of belonging in mainstream society as opposed to feeling “left behind,” excluded, or disenfranchised as the pace of technology adoption and integration increases. Thus, their engagement with a range of digitextual practices allowed them to be active, literate meaning-makers in today’s multimedia world.

The School Context

Similar to many primary classrooms across Canada, the learning program in Samara’s inner-city Grade One classroom was guided by monthly thematic units that included a range of materials such as worksheets, storybooks, and flashcards. As Mrs. Webster implemented these units, she skillfully integrated the comprehensive curricular resource packages that serve as the Grade One curriculum framework (e.g., Math, Science, Language Arts, Health, Social Studies), as well as the learning objectives outlined by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education for these different curricular strands (e.g., students should be able to listen to, read, and view a range of grade-level appropriate print texts). Mrs. Webster spent the last several years in a Grade One classroom and due to this consistent teaching assignment, her September to June unit plans were prepared and packaged in cardboard boxes that she kept in the classroom. Each month, Mrs. Webster also asked the school librarian to provide her with a container of books that related to each theme.

During my eight visits to the school, the culture of the Grade One classroom seemed to be largely teacher-directed, with little agency being given to Samara and her classmates. As I observed Samara in that context, it appeared that she was often frustrated by the worksheets that were a part of the learning program as the content of the worksheets seemed to be beyond her zone of proximal development. Samara also had difficulty writing in her journal and reciting words on flashcards – all of which occupied a large part of her school day. Although Samara found these particular activities challenging, she enjoyed storybook reading, which was also promoted and valued in the classroom. It was during the unstructured, “free play” period at the end of each school day however, that Samara became animated and focused in the classroom. During that time, she engaged in her own valued forms of meaning making, and interacted almost exclusively with her best friend, Gabby.
During my classroom visits, I did not observe Mrs. Webster integrate digital technology in the learning program, even though other primary teachers in the school used a variety of digital devices in their classrooms (e.g., SMART boards, digital cameras, computers, printers). During an informal conversation with Mrs. Webster, she confided that she was neither confident with, nor knowledgeable about technology, and that she often felt overwhelmed by the curricular and assessment demands of the school division and Ministry of Education which left little time for her to learn how to effectively integrate digital technology in her classroom. Although Mrs. Webster had a collection of toys in the classroom, toys or artefacts that linked to young girls’ popular culture interests (e.g., *Barbie, Dora the Explorer*) were not a part of the classroom landscape. However, there were popular culture toys in the classroom that catered to the interests of young boys (e.g., *Spiderman, Transformers*). When I asked Mrs. Webster about this, she stated, “All the toys that are here (classroom) are from garage sales. I just choose toys that aren’t cracked, broken, or soiled!” (personal communication, December 4th, 2007).

During my time at the school, I also observed four Aboriginal-influenced events. These events were provided to the students in an attempt to provide Aboriginal children with connections to their Aboriginal identity (e.g., powwow dancers and drummers were invited to perform at assemblies, Aboriginal consultants shared Aboriginal-authored storybooks with the students). The most consistent way that Aboriginal knowledge was shared with Samara and her Grade One peers was through bi-weekly classroom visits by an Aboriginal Elder. When the Elder visited the classroom he shared stories from his culture with the children. Although Aboriginal content was included in the learning program in different ways, I did not observe any structured follow-up, discussion, or reflection on possible links from these events to the children’s contemporary lives.

During one of my home observations, I asked Samara’s parents if they knew that an Elder visited Samara’s classroom on a bi-weekly basis. They replied that they were unaware of this, but stated that teachings from Elders are “good,” and that it was better that Aboriginal teachings were coming from Elders, as opposed to “white teachers” (personal communication, November 21st, 2007). However, Renae added that it would be difficult for an Elder to address the stories, beliefs, and values of all the Aboriginal communities represented at the school because there were many differences among the local bands. For example, he shared that he was raised with the belief that women and girls were not allowed to touch the drum at powwows and other cultural events, which differs from the beliefs of other local bands in the area. This anecdote
came up when I was visiting the Pasap home in early December and Savanna told her father that she played an Aboriginal drum at school that day during a school-wide round dance in the gymnasium.

As shown in Chapter One, Mrs. Webster strongly believed in the importance of providing her students with numerous opportunities to develop their literacy skills. As a result, she offered learning opportunities for her students that supported a particular “type” of literacy (e.g., storybooks, worksheets, leveled reading books). Although the Grade One Language Arts curricular resource package includes traditional approaches to developing reading and writing skills, such as phonics instruction, guided reading instructional approaches, and the use of other print-based activities, it also promotes the use of multimodal forms of learning in primary classrooms (e.g., engaging with websites and blogs, drawing, drama). However, Mrs. Webster chose to focus on a more autonomous model of literacy in the classroom.

As previously articulated, storybook reading was a valued practice in Mrs. Webster’s classroom, and during my eight visits to the school, I observed Samara “read” storybooks on fourteen different occasions. On four of these occasions she read independently, four times she read with me, and on six occasions I observed her read with Gabby. I therefore acted as both an observer and participant-observer as she engaged in that type of practice. I also made four audio recordings of Samara’s book reading. In the classroom, Samara and her peers were encouraged to read storybooks or non-fiction books during the transition periods, or when they finished an activity. Every morning before recess, Mrs. Webster also read a storybook to the class. As Mrs. Webster read, she frequently asked the children questions about the printed text and illustrations, and encouraged them to predict what would occur next in the story. The following communicative event revealed one of several times that Samara read the storybook, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin Jr. in the classroom.

*It is the beginning of December, and Mrs. Webster has brought several Christmas and winter-themed books from the school library into the classroom. The books have been prominently placed on the bookshelf in the front of the room. The students have just finished their morning activities on the carpet, and have returned to their tables to print the morning message in their agendas. Samara has forgotten her agenda at home, so both Gabby and Mrs. Webster tell her to get her snack, and find a book to read on the carpet. Samara grabs her favourite book from the shelf, ‘Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?’ and comes and stands beside me.*

Mrs. Webster: Samara, would you like to show Ms. Streelasky how you can read that book?
Samara: Yeah! (smiling)
Jodi: That would be great, Samara! Do you want to go to the carpet with me? Maybe we should read it there?
Samara: Yeah, good! (she quickly finishes her cookie and grabs my hand to lead me to the carpet).
Jodi: Okay Samara, should we start? (Samara and I sit on the floor, and she points to my lap)
Jodi: Samara, do you want to sit on my lap?
Samara: Yeah! (smiling, she settles onto my lap)
Jodi: Okay, are you ready to start the book?
Samara: Yeah, “Brown bear, brown bear, what you see?” (glances at me and starts to smile)
Jodi: Wow, good!
Samara: “I see red bird, look at me!”
Jodi: Oh my goodness! Excellent reading, Samara!
Samara: (turns the page) “I see yellow duck!”
Jodi: That’s right, there is the picture of the yellow duck (Samara nods her head in agreement). I wonder what animal will be next.
Samara: (giggling, as she quickly turns the page of the book) “Blue horse!”
Samara continues to read the rest of the book to me. The illustrations appear to assist her with the printed text, and as she becomes more confident, she taps into the rhythmic pattern of the print. When Samara finishes, she hands me the book, starts to giggle, and covers her face with her hands. She gets off my lap, and grabs another familiar book off the bookshelf, “Franklin Fibs” from the Franklin the Turtle series by Paulette Bourgeois. She sits on my lap again, and points to me. I ask Samara if she would like me to read the book, and she replies by smiling and nodding her head.

During that event, the notion of literacy as an inherently social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) was evident. As Samara read the book to me, our social interactions and practices paralleled the discourse routines valued and modeled by her teacher, such as questioning, predicting, and conversations about the book. Samara’s choice of familiar books to read, as opposed to the Christmas and winter-themed books from the school library also revealed her need to feel both safe and successful with print texts, particularly in the public space of the classroom. During that event, Samara seemed to enjoy the predictability of these books, and as I read the Franklin book to her she was able to read most of the opening text with me - “Franklin could count by twos and tie his shoes. He could zip zippers and button buttons. But there were certain things Franklin could not do.” My sense was that Samara’s competency in reading these familiar books enabled her to feel a sense of belonging and expertise in the classroom, which was a rare occurrence as she made her way through the school day. This was supported by the majority of my classroom observations, as I frequently observed her struggle with many of practices that were a part of the Grade One learning program (e.g., math worksheets, spelling tests).

Although Samara enjoyed the social nature of storybook reading, another aspect of reading is linked to code-breaking, semantics, and grammar. These aspects of reading are often promoted in primary classrooms, and in the context of this study, these concepts were included as learning objectives in the Saskatchewan Language Arts Grade One curriculum. The following event occurred in mid-April, and drew primarily on these aspects of storybook reading during a leveled Reading Group that Samara attended. As stated in Chapter One, I observed two of these sessions during the study. These sessions were a part of Samara’s school day three times a week, and always followed a consistent pattern. During both Reading Group sessions I assumed the role of an observer.
Communicative Event 4-3: Samara Reading a Leveled Book during a Guided Reading Group Session (transcript: April 11th, 2008) (data sources: observation, field notes)

Samara has just arrived back in the classroom after playing outside during the morning recess. Her cheeks are pink, and she is smiling and breathing heavily. She spent the entire recess rolling a large mud and grass-filled snowball across the school playground with Gabby, and Gabby’s older sister, and her pants are wet and muddy. Samara’s teacher tells her to quickly get ready for guided Reading Groups, and to line up at the door with several of the other children in the class. As the children wait at the door, a number of different teacher assistants arrive to take the children to various Reading Group sessions throughout the school. When the teacher assistant arrives for Samara’s group, Samara and another girl from the class follow the assistant to another classroom, where they add two boys and a girl to their group. When they arrive at the small, empty classroom where their Reading Group session will occur, the teacher assistant gives each child a photocopied book with a picture of a cat on the front cover. She reads the story to the children, and then tells them to practice reading the book independently and with each other, before coming and reading the book to her. Samara does not attempt to independently read the book, and instead sits beside the girl from her class who reads the book to her. After Samara has finished listening to the story, the teacher assistant asks her to come to her desk.

Teacher Assistant: Samara, are you ready to read with me?
Samara: Yeah.
Teacher Assistant: Okay, let’s start. What does this say? (pointing to the cover of the book that reads My Cat)
Samara: Um, me don’t know (shrugs her shoulders).
Teacher Assistant: Yes, you do! What is this a picture of? (pointing to the image of the cat)
Samara: A cat.
Teacher Assistant: Yes, it says “My Cat”! (she turns to the first page of the book). Okay, what does this say? Sound it out.
Samara: Um, “It my cat”.
Teacher Assistant: Yes, it says, “This is my cat.” (she turns to the next page). Now what does it say? Sound it out. The first word starts with a “muh” sound.
Samara: “Me cat…”.
Teacher Assistant: Close. It says, “My cat likes to play”.
Samara: Yeah (nodding her head and smiling).
Teacher Assistant: Okay, let’s turn the page. What does this say? It starts the same way as the other page.
Samara: “My”
Teacher Assistant: And now what?
Samara: “My cat…”
Teacher Assistant: Good. Okay, the next word starts with “i” and then has what letter?
Samara: “i”.
Teacher Assistant: Yes, now put the sounds together. “Li…”
Samara: “like”
Teacher Assistant: Good! It says, “My cat likes to sleep.” See how the cat is sleeping?
Samara: Yeah.
Teacher Assistant: Okay, let’s do the last page. It has a picture of a cat, and then a picture of a child with no face or hair. So, you can draw a picture of what you look like. Okay, Samara? You can make a picture of you, sitting beside the cat on this page. Alright, what does this last page say? It starts the same way as the other pages.
Samara: My cat, um, li, like, me!
Teacher Assistant: Yes, good Samara! Did everyone hear Samara read? Really good!
Samara: Good! (grinning)

During that session, the teacher assistant provided Samara and her peers with whole-group instruction, and she also engaged in isolated skills instruction with each individual student (e.g., letter recognition, phonics skills). Reading instruction approaches, particularly guided or leveled reading programs that accommodate small groups of children, are a staple of North American primary classrooms. However, oftentimes teachers, or in this case, teacher assistants, do not take advantage of these small group sessions, and the reading process becomes unrelated to externally indexed meanings and experiences in the children’s worlds.

Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp (2000) posited that young children need to be engaged in literacy experiences that are meaningful and build on their prior learning. They added that it is vital for all children to have meaningful literacy experiences in school, and they argued that it is even more critical for children with limited home experiences in literacy. Even though I did not observe the teacher assistant make links between Samara’s out-of-school world and the leveled book (unlike the SLP who referenced Samara’s out-of-school world in a word chart), she did provide Samara with regular and active interactions with print at school. Mrs. Webster and the teacher assistant in the Grade One classroom also provided Samara with regular interactions with
print; however, Samara naturally received a limited amount of one-on-one literacy instruction from them due to several reasons (e.g., the large number of children in the classroom, several children were ESL, students with behaviour issues).

As previously shown, during my visits to the classroom, traditional print texts (e.g., storybooks, leveled books), or what Lankshear and Knobel (2003) referred to as “school literacies,” played a dominant role in the learning program, as opposed to a multimodal model of literacy learning. This was not surprising, as the socially powerful institution of school typically includes practices that reflect middle-class values and attitudes (e.g., storybook reading). It would also be illogical to think that “school literacies” do not need to occupy a significant place in early childhood classrooms, as these literacies have provided the foundation for school-based learning across centuries, and these literacies are necessary for children to succeed in today’s world. However, by primarily focusing on school literacies, at the expense of broader notions of literacy in children’s out-of-school worlds, Knobel (2001) posited that we are invalidating the fluent and resourceful ways that children make meaning in their worlds, and thus valuing only a narrow view of what counts as effective language and literacy education for young children.

At school, the importance of being a “good student” seemed to matter to Samara. During my visits to her classroom, I observed Samara make attempts to participate in the valued, print-based practices promoted in the classroom, and she often relied on her best friend, Gabby, to help navigate her day and complete learning activities (e.g., worksheets). Although Samara’s home communicative practices did not include traditional notions of storybook reading or writing activities, she seemed to understand that reading and writing, specifically, books, played an important role in the identity of a successful Grade One student.

The Kids Club

The inner-city Kids Club that Samara attended was grounded in Christian-based principles and beliefs. The Kids Club promoted Christian values to Samara through a range of multimodal practices (e.g., conversation, song, storybook reading, Biblical readings). In that context, Samara was also provided with opportunities to play with toys, board games, and puzzles, and engage in different art activities (e.g., beading, colouring, drawing). The Kids Club occurred every Thursday evening during the school year. At the Kids Club, the focus was not on academic achievement or educational attainment; instead, the Kids Club promoted a relaxed and informal environment where Samara was free to move between drawing, playing, reading, or
singing at her own pace. Samara’s attendance at the club was not a part of the Pasap family’s child-care arrangement, but rather, provided a social outing for Samara and her sisters. The goal of the founders of the Kids Club was to create a safe place for the neighbourhood children to come to on a weekly basis, and to instill in the children the importance of placing God first in their lives.

When I asked Samara’s parents about the role Christianity played in their family’s life, and their thoughts on the Christian beliefs and practices that were promoted at the Kids Club, they stated that learning about God was “good” for their daughters, but that the primary reason they sent their children to the Kids Club program was because it was provided at no cost, and it “got the kids out of the house” (personal communication, November 28th, 2007). They also shared that they had stopped by the Kids Club at different times to check on their daughters, and felt that it was a welcoming, friendly, and safe environment for their children. During my three observations at the Kids Club, it was obvious that the volunteers played a positive role in Samara’s life, and that Samara flourished within that community. For example, I observed the volunteers hug Samara when she arrived at the Kids Club, extend the allotted singing time to accommodate Samara’s interest in song and music, and praise her efforts when she attempted to recite a Bible verse. At the Kids Club, Samara was particularly fond of singing Christian children’s songs which often had accompanying actions. The following event is representative of one of several times that I observed Samara utilize a combination of semiotic systems (e.g., song, gesture, body movement) within that context.

26 Although there was a semi-structured routine at the Kids Club (e.g., free play, snack, singing, storybook reading, Bible verse activity), the children were given a significant amount of choice in the activities they chose to participate in at the club.
It is a frigid winter evening, and as the wind howls and the temperature hovers at -30°C, a small, inner-city church is filled with local children attending a Christian-based Kids Club. Inside the church, youth are playing floor hockey on the main floor, and in the basement, young children are engaging in a variety of activities, such as making beaded necklaces or playing board games. Samara and Gabby are sitting beside each other at a table in the basement where they are eating a snack of oatmeal cookies and bananas, and playing a Dora the Explorer card game. A volunteer approaches the table and tells the girls that it is almost time to sing songs and listen to a Bible story. Samara smiles at the volunteer and the volunteer smiles back and gently touches the top of Samara’s head. Several minutes later, the volunteer asks everyone to join her on the carpet.

Volunteer: Okay everyone come to the carpet, we’re going to sing now!
Samara: Okay, Gabby come! (Samara turns to Gabby, and grabs the sleeve of her shirt)
Gabby: I’m coming Samara, wait a minute!
Samara: Gabby, hurry!
Volunteer: What song should we sing? How about My God is so Big?
Samara: Yeah! (she starts to jump up and down and laugh)
Gabby: Yeah, that’s a good one.
Volunteer: Everyone ready? Okay, let’s start, (singing) My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do! The mountains are His, the valleys are His. The stars are his handiwork too. My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do!
Volunteer: Okay, what song would you guys like to sing next?
Samara: Army!
Volunteer: Great! Okay everyone, let’s sing, I’m in the Lord’s Army. Ready, let’s go, (singing) I may never march in the infantry, ride in the Calvary, shoot the artillery. I may never fly o’er the enemy, but I’m in the Lord’s Army! Yes sir! I’m in the Lord’s Army! Awesome, guys!
Samara: Yeah! Again! (she starts to giggle, and brushes the hair out of her eyes with her hand).
Unidentified Boy: I don’t want to sing another one (several of the other children agree, including Gabby).
Samara: No!
Volunteer: Okay (looking at Samara), one more! Then I’ll read you guys a book. What song should we sing?
Samara: Apple!
Volunteer: What, Samara?
Samara: Um, apple.
Volunteer: Oh! Johnny Appleseed?
Samara: Yeah! (she jumps up and down again. Gabby turns to look at Samara with a scowl on her face. However, her expression quickly softens, as she sees Samara’s happy reaction to singing another song.)
Volunteer: Okay – everyone sing really loud! (singing) Oh, the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord. For giving me, the things I need, the sun, and the rain, and the apple seed; The Lord is good to me! Johnny Appleseed, Amen!
Samara: Good! (she starts to clap and laugh)

As the volunteer led the children in singing, Samara eagerly tried to keep up with the lyrics, and she actively participated in the accompanying gestures (e.g., raising her arms during My God is so big, flexing her arm muscles during the lyric, So strong and so mighty, moving her arms in a flying motion for the lyric, Fly o’er the enemy). It has been argued that this type of music and song experience - where a group of children are learning to perform a repertoire of songs under the leadership of an adult - carries with it a number of associated practices, assumptions, and ideas about what music is, and how children are musical, and detracts attention from children’s self-initiated musical activity (Young, 2006). For Samara, however, this type of engagement provided her with a sense of belonging, competency, and enjoyment, and the Kids Club provided her with a space where she could explore her love of music, song, and movement in an uninhibited way.

Samara’s use of gesture and movement in that context also provided her with an opportunity to position herself as an “expert” member of a group, which rarely occurred at school or in her home context. Although Samara had difficulty keeping up with the lyrics of the songs because of her delayed speech, she excelled at the actions, and as I observed her in that setting, I noticed that many of the other children watched her in an attempt to replicate her movements. I also observed Samara eagerly assist different children with the hand gestures and
body movements by slowly modeling the movements for them, and at times, she also physically helped them move their fingers, hands, and arms in the correct movements.

Agency and the Meaning Maker

The Pasap Home

As shown earlier in this dissertation, the culturally-valued practices in the Pasap household were largely digitextual. In addition to Samara playing video games and uploading videos, I also observed Samara ask her parents and sisters to locate the Dora the Explorer website. Once they located the website, I watched Samara independently play matching and vocabulary games that included both English and Spanish printed text\(^\text{27}\), and complete mazes where Dora had to find an object or an animal that was missing. During those times, there seemed to be a “blurring of the boundaries,” or what Buckingham and Scanlon (2001) referred to as the emergence of “edutainment” between developing skills, and entertainment and enjoyment in Samara’s meaning making. The following conversation about Samara’s interest in the Dora the Explorer website occurred between her father and me in late January:

Jodi: Samara really likes the Dora website, hey?
Renae: Yeah, she likes the games. She goes on the computer a lot, and she learns there. Some of the games are educational.
Jodi: Yeah, she seems to enjoy spending time on the computer.
Renae: There’s some good stuff on there. I don’t really help her with her homework or with reading, but all the things that she needs to know, like letters and reading and stuff like that, she can learn on the computer.

(personal communication, January 31st, 2008)

As Samara’s father indicated during our conversation, he rarely helped Samara with her homework (e.g., worksheets) or read the Franklin storybooks she brought home from the school library. In the Pasap home, storybook reading in the traditional sense did not occur, and aside from Samara’s library books from school, I did not notice any children’s books in the home during the study. During one of my observations in mid-March, however, I observed Samara

\(^{27}\) The Dora the Explorer website included Spanish words with visual images beside the printed text to assist children decode the words.
navigate the *Dora the Explorer* website where she located a webpage that contained a story about *Dora’s* adventures. Samara pointed to the printed text on the screen and asked her sister Savanna, who was sitting beside her, to read the story. This multimodal, digital storybook was comprised of thirteen pages, and although Savanna seemed embarrassed to read the story about *Dora*, she begrudgingly read the words on the screen. The storybook was entitled *Little Star’s Wish*, and the following table shows the printed text and visual representations according to page.

**Table 4-1: “Little Star’s Wish”: On-line Story on *Dora the Explorer* Website**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed Text</th>
<th>Visual Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>One day Boots and I were waiting for the stars to come out. I spotted the first star, Little Star.</em></td>
<td>Dora is standing beside Boots on a hill. Dora is looking through binoculars at a star in the sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I wish! I wish! I wish!”Little Star said. Boots and I asked Little Star what she was doing.</td>
<td>Star in the sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Little Star was wishing for a best friend. Boots and I told her we would find her one.</em></td>
<td>Dora and Boots are looking at the star. Above their heads are “thought bubbles” that contain images of different animals that could be Little Star’s friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>First, we went to ask Isa if she would like to be Little Star’s best friend.</em></td>
<td>Dora and Boots meet Isa (dinosaur) on a path.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Isa wanted to be the star’s best friend, but Little Star stays up too late and Isa wakes up early to water her flowers.</em></td>
<td>Dora, Boots, and Isa talk, while Little Star watches.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Savanna read the on-line story, Samara pointed to the different characters on the screen, and giggled at the dancing images on the last page of the story. The content of the story was significant to Samara as the concept of friendship, particularly a “best friend,” played an important role in her real-life, personal identity. Even though my observation of the girls reading an on-line story about Dora was an isolated event, I contend that this type of text and this form of reading has the potential to become even more prevalent in Samara’s world as she becomes more technologically competent, and as her ability to decode print develops. During the study, Samara took 23 photographs of the different ways she interacted with the Dora.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed Text</th>
<th>Visual Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Mommy Bugga Bugga wanted to be Little Star’s friend, but she was too busy with her baby Bugga Buggas.</em></td>
<td>They stop and talk to the Bug.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Little Star was very sad. It was getting dark, and the Moon was starting to come out.</em></td>
<td>Dora and Boots look at the star who is sad. The Moon begins to rise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Moon asked why Little Star was so sad. We told the Moon about Little Star’s wish for a best friend. “Oh, I wish I had a best friend too!” the Moon said.</em></td>
<td>Dora and Boots stand on a hill and talk to the Moon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Boots and I shouted to Little Star. The Moon could be her best friend!</em></td>
<td>Dora and Boots raise their arms in celebration and tell Little Star that they have found her a friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Little Star was so excited, she raced across the sky!</em></td>
<td>Little Star streaks across the sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Little Star and the Moon became best friends. Little Star was so happy her wish came true that she wanted to help others with their wishes.</em></td>
<td>The Moon and Little Star position themselves beside one another in the sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>So now everyone tells their wishes to Little Star, and sometimes those wishes come true.</em></td>
<td>Little Star and Moon start to dance in the sky.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
character in her home. The following photograph represents one of several photographs Samara took of *Dora the Explorer* on her family’s computer.

**Figure 4-2: Samara’s Photograph and Explanation of a *Dora* Video Clip on YouTube™**

![Figure 4-2: Samara’s Photograph and Explanation of a *Dora* Video Clip on YouTube™](image)

“It my Dora!” (February 11th, 2008)

For Samara, the *Dora the Explorer* narrative was a consistent part of her meaning making, and also entered into her play at home. Although *Dora* is commonly associated with preschoolers, the *Dora* character is actually portrayed as a seven-year-old, Latina girl. Early in the study, Samara’s mother indicated why she thought her daughter might relate to this fictional character. During our conversation, Beatrice stated, “Baby (Samara) likes *Dora* so much; they look a little bit the same too. Plus, Baby loves animals, just like *Dora*” (personal communication, October 30th, 2007). On the day of Samara’s seventh birthday party in mid-January (which was attended by her immediate family members, and included invitations to Gabby and myself), her parents hosted a *Dora*-themed birthday party for her in their home. On that day, the gifts from her parents included a *Barbie* laptop computer, a *Dora* paint set, and a *Dora the Explorer* digital camera.

What is noteworthy about *Dora* is that her creators have developed, and continue to develop storylines that present *Dora* as an independent and practical girl who enjoys going on adventures with her animal companions to find something that has been lost, or to help someone. Although this narrative differs significantly from the identity messages that persist in many

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28 When Samara received the *Dora the Explorer* digital camera, she promptly returned the camera that I gave her, and used her *Dora* camera for the remainder of the study.
fairytale and animated female characters that cater to young girls (e.g., female characters are portrayed as damsels in distress, as femme fatales, as blond-haired, blue-eyed princesses waiting to be married), gendered notions of “girlhood” or “motherhood” (e.g., caretaking, nurturing) are frequently embedded in *Dora* storylines, and often entered into Samara’s play. The following event outlines Samara’s interactions with her puppy, and reveals the link between play, identity, and popular culture in her world. This play text occurred a few minutes after Samara watched a *Dora the Explorer* episode on television that highlighted the caring relationship between *Dora* and her animal friend, *Boots* (monkey). In that episode, *Dora* and *Boots* were going on an adventure when *Boots* got his foot stuck in a rabbit hole, and had to be consoled by *Dora*. During that scene, *Dora* affectionately patted *Boots* on his back, and then told him to “get up and walk” so they could continue on their adventure. Although Samara did not make a verbal reference to *Dora* and *Boots* as she interacted with her puppy, her play script had parallels to the caretaking storyline in the television episode.

**Communicative Event 4-5: Samara Playing with her Puppy (transcript: March 29th, 2008)**
(data sources: observation, participant-observation, fields notes, transcription from video recording, digital photographs)

*Samara is sitting on one of the chairs in her family’s dining room. Her father and mother are sitting on the other two chairs. They are drinking coffee and discussing Beatrice’s work hours for the upcoming weekend. Cradled in Samara’s arms, wrapped in a thin, worn blanket is her puppy. Samara is tenderly bouncing the puppy on her lap and patting his back. The puppy begins to squirm, and Samara puts him down on the floor.*

Samara: Puppy, you go walk. (Samara looks intently at her puppy, waiting for a sign from him to show that he understands). Okay, go puppy! (she points to the living room, and the puppy obediently begins to walk towards that room)

Jodi: Samara, what’s your puppy’s name?

Samara: Him name, Puppy.

Jodi: You are really nice to him.

Samara: Yeah, him my baby.

Jodi: You take really good care of him too!

Samara: Yeah, him good baby.

Jodi: You have kittens too, right?

Samara: Yeah, them small.

Jodi: Do you take care of all your animals?
Samara: Yeah.
Beatrice: She is kind of like the Mom to our pets.
Samara: Mommy, no! (giggling, and covering her face with her hands)
Beatrice: That’s okay, Baby. You’re a good Mom.
Samara: Yeah, okay! Me Mom! (giggling, and looking at her dad)
Renae: (laughing) Yeah Baby, you’re like a big dog Mom!
Beatrice: (laughing, covering her mouth with her hand) Renae, quit teasing her!
Samara: (giggling, and playfully hitting her dad) Dad, no!

During that event, Samara appeared to recontextualize parts of the Dora television episode and appropriate it into a play text with her puppy. She most likely also drew on her lived experiences (e.g., being taken care of by her older siblings and parents, being called Baby by her family members). Throughout the event, Samara identified with a caretaking role, which is often associated with motherhood, and her actions revealed her anticipated identity in the imagined community of caretakers or mothers. This play text, which I viewed as an identity text, also provided insight into her views on female roles in social contexts - primarily as ones who nurture and take care of others.

During my visits to the family’s home, I frequently observed Samara engage with her pets in this type of caretaking play. For example, on eight of my visits, I observed Samara swaddle her pets in blankets, and bounce them on her knee as she simultaneously watched television, or watched her siblings play video games. Although I never observed Samara’s sisters acknowledge this type of play in her world, her parents supported her actions, and often told her what a good “mother” and “friend” she was to all of their pets. As shown in the previous event, Samara often responded by giggling, and seemed to be somewhat embarrassed by her parents’ support, praise, and good-natured teasing. The gendered theme of caretaking and nurturing played a significant role in Samara’s meaning making during my observations in her home, and seemed to provide Samara with a sense of empowerment, as her pets generally followed her commands, and she was able to position herself in a powerful and agentic role without having to compromise or alter her play scripts to meet the demands of others. Samara also took 18 photographs of her puppy and kittens throughout the research period. Samara took the following photograph shortly after she told her puppy to go to the other room. After she took the photograph, she commented, “He look sad! Come puppy!” She proceeded to pick up her
puppy, wrap him in the same blanket, and carry him around the house for the remainder of my observation.

**Figure 4-3: Samara’s Photograph of her Puppy**

![Image of Samara’s Puppy](image)

(March 29th, 2008)

During the research period, I also observed Samara engage in drawing\(^{29}\) to make sense of her world and exercise agency. Similar to imaginary play, drawing was not a valued practice of her sisters. Through drawing, Samara was able to articulate her ideas and experiences through a mode that differed from the dominant view of oral knowledge as the primary representation of what individuals “know.”

On four of my sixteen visits to the Pasap home, I observed Samara draw pictures of her house in a blank lined notebook that her teacher had given her\(^{30}\). Samara’s engagement in drawing was supported by her parents, who bought her the tools (e.g., pencil crayons, markers, paper) necessary to pursue her interest and enjoyment in drawing. The following event occurred in mid-October, and reveals how Samara used her surroundings as resources for her meaning.

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\(^{29}\) All of the drawings Samara produced in her home during my visits were self-initiated.

\(^{30}\) During the study, Samara took visible pleasure in putting her drawings in my bag when she thought I wasn’t looking, or when I was engaged in conversation with her parents or sisters. In order to prompt me to look into my bag, she would point to the bag, start to giggle, and cover her face with her hands.
making. Through this form of meaning making she was also able to identify herself as a member of a family living in an inner-city neighbourhood.

**Communicative Event 4-6: Samara Drawing her House (transcript: October 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2007)**

(data sources: observation, participant-observation, field notes, collection of artefacts, transcription from audio recording)

*Samara is standing in her family’s dining room, holding her backpack. Samara’s mother is sitting in a swivel chair beside the computer desk, and her father is sitting at the dining room table. Samara reaches into her backpack to take out a notebook that her teacher has given her, and turns to one of the middle pages in the book. She reaches into her backpack again to retrieve her plastic pencil case (filled with pencil crayons, markers, pencils, and crayons). She sits down at the table beside her dad, takes out a pencil from her pencil case, and begins to draw. She immediately erases what she has started to make and starts over, drawing the outline of her house.*

Jodi: Samara, what are you making?
Samara: A house. (she smiles, and brushes her hair out of her eyes with her hand)
Jodi: Is that your house?
Samara: Yeah. (she reaches into her pencil case in an attempt to find a specific pencil crayon)
Beatrice: What are you looking for, Baby?
Samara: This. (points to her drawing of the family’s home)
Beatrice: What colour is our house?
Samara: Red.
Beatrice: No.
Samara: Yeah, it is.
Beatrice: Where…outside?
Samara: Yeah.
Beatrice: What colour is our house? It’s white and blue! (Angel and Aasia walk by the table and briefly look at Samara’s drawing. Angel teases Samara by saying “Yeah, our house is red.” The girls leave to go into the living room. Samara continues to search for a pencil crayon. She finds a blue pencil crayon, looks at her mom who is smiling at her, and begins to colour. Samara quickly tires of colouring, and begins to add features to her house using her pencil).
Jodi: Samara, I like the windows you made. They’re awesome! What rooms are up there?
Samara: Sleep!
Jodi: Yeah, your bedroom!
Samara: Yeah.
Jodi: What’s this? (pointing to a square shape she drew in front of the house)
Samara: Step.
Jodi: Oh, that looks really good. You’re a great drawer!
Samara: Yeah, me know.

**Figure 4-4: Samara’s Drawing of her House**

(October, 16th, 2007)

The drawing Samara produced of her house represents a realistic portrayal of her family’s house and yard, as there were not any shrubs, trees, or flowers near her home. A significant feature in this drawing was the front steps of her home. That was a favourite place for her to sit during the summer and fall months, and was also a favourite place of her parents, siblings, and the children from the neighbourhood. During the warmer months of the study, Samara or one of her family members would often be sitting on the front steps when I arrived at their home, engaged in a variety of activities (e.g., listening to music on their iPods®, talking, eating sunflower seeds).
The topic of Samara’s drawing supports the work of several researchers (e.g., Kendrick & McKay, 2002; Millard & Marsh, 2001) who have outlined clear gender differences between the drawings produced by boys and girls. For example, in those studies, the girl participants tended to draw stylized images of people, houses, and flowers, and were interested in themes of family and friends, whereas the boys predominantly embedded scenarios containing cartoon figures and violent action sequences in their drawings. During that event, I viewed Samara’s drawing as an identity text, as it represented her local surroundings, and symbolized her interpretation of her contextual world. As such, this text enabled me to acquire a deeper understanding of Samara’s sense of identity as a young child living in an inner-city context as it provided a “snapshot” of her everyday world from her own perspective.

During that home visit, I also observed Samara draw a picture of graffiti (see Figure 4-5). Many of the garages in her neighbourhood were covered with graffiti, so it seemed only natural that the local environmental print, signs, and symbols that she encountered on a daily basis would also enter into her meaning making. As Samara drew her picture, I asked her what she was making. Although she could not verbalize what she was creating, she pointed to a tagged garage outside and nodded her head. She then patted the seat of the chair that was beside her, signaling me to sit down with her as she drew. Similar to Samara’s previous drawing, I also viewed this artefact as an identity text as it represented her understanding of her local environment, specifically her awareness of the graffiti-covered garages and buildings in her inner-city neighbourhood.
Samara’s engagement in drawing appeared to provide with her with a freedom and agency as the endless possibilities of a blank piece of a paper and an assortment of writing tools enabled her to produce drawings that represented her thoughts and revealed her sense of belonging in a family and community. During my visits to the Pasap home, this type of meaning making practice was rarely utilized by Samara’s sisters (on one occasion I observed Aasia draw in a notebook; this was primarily antagonistic however, as Samara wanted the book, and Aasia kept the book as far away from Samara as possible). Due to Samara’s sisters’ lack of interest in drawing, specifically, the lack of value they attached to this practice, Samara did not have to compete with them for access to pencil crayons, markers, paper or notebooks, and as stated previously, this enabled her to freely engage in this type of communicative practice without any interference.
The School Context

When Samara was given the opportunity to participate in her own choice of activity during the free play period at school, she and Gabby often chose to extend the dominant role print texts, particularly storybooks, played in the classroom by producing their own storybooks. On six of my eight observations to the classroom, I observed the girls rummage through a large box of scrap paper that was beside their teacher’s desk, searching for specific pieces of paper to create their books. They constructed their books by stapling together a collection of their drawings and writings. The theme of their books always centered on their friendship and their perceptions of play, and they occasionally included drawings of their family members and Samara’s pets. The production of these stories allowed Samara to develop a meaningful and authentic connection with a peer in the classroom, and her engagement in bookmaking was also open-ended enough to let her experiment with print at her own level. The following event outlines one of six times that I observed Samara and Gabby collaboratively produce storybooks in the classroom.

Communicative Event 4-7: Samara and Gabby Creating a Personalized Storybook in the Classroom (transcript: November 6th, 2007) (data sources: transcription from audio recording, observation, field notes, collection of artefacts)

Samara and her peers are noisily filing into the Grade One classroom from recess. Mrs. Webster is standing at the door welcoming them back in from the cold and telling them that they can have “free play” until the end of the day. Samara quickly throws her jacket in her locker, kicks off her boots, and begins to look around the room.

Gabby: Samara, I’m over here already! (Gabby is crouching beside Mrs. Webster’s desk, rummaging through a cardboard box of paper)
Samara: Oh! (rolling her eyes, covering her mouth with her hand, and giggling)
Gabby: Samara, I found some good pink paper, I’m going to use that. Do you want white paper, pink paper, or paper with lines in it?
Samara: This. (points to a piece of white paper and lined paper)
Gabby: Okay, I’m gonna make a picture of me and you at your house.
Samara: Okay, I make you, me, outside!
Gabby: Okay, that sounds good (the girls retrieve their pencil cases from their pouches, and sit at an empty table in the classroom)
Samara: Oh, stapler!
Gabby: Yeah, we need it, but we have to wait until we’re done all the pages of our book before we staple it.
Samara: Oh yeah! (both girls begin to create their drawings, and work in silence for several minutes)
Gabby: Oh, Samara! I like the picture you’re making – but who is that? (points to the third person in Samara’s drawing)
Samara: It her. (Samara points to me)
Gabby: Oh, cool! This is you and me playing at your house with your cat (pointing to her drawing). One my other page, I’ll write the story.
Samara: Good! (giggling and pointing to Gabby’s drawing of her cat)

Samara and Gabby spend the rest of the free play period drawing their pictures and creating words and invented spellings on additional pieces of paper that correspond to their drawings. Once they complete the pages of their book, Samara skips to Mrs. Webster’s desk to get the stapler. Gabby carefully put the pages in order, and holds them together while Samara staples the corner of their book. Gabby tells Samara that she can keep this book, and that she will keep the one they make tomorrow. Samara nods her head and smiles.

In that event, Samara and Gabby drew on the process of recontextualization to transform their play texts into a different type of text through their use of a combination of communicative practices (e.g., drawing, printing). Miller and Mehler (1994) posited that when children begin school they are confronted with trying to understand who they are in relation to their teacher and classmates, and with merging their home identity with their school identity. This understanding was particularly evident during Samara’s production of personalized books in the classroom as she frequently negotiated “school literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) with her out-of-school experiences. As Samara produced multiple storybooks with Gabby, these identity texts revealed aspects of their friendship, including their common interests.

Although I observed Samara and Gabby engage in bookmaking on several of my visits to the classroom, these self-made storybooks, which referenced their lived experiences, were not acknowledged by Mrs. Webster and the teacher assistant. Even though these books were not recognized by the teaching team for several reasons (e.g., during the free play period the teaching team helped children who had been absent get caught up on work, Mrs. Webster conducted individual assessments and marked children’s assignments), Samara’s contribution to the production of these storybooks was validated by Gabby, Samara’s collaborator and best
friend (e.g., Gabby would verbally praise Samara on her contributions to their books, or pat Samara on the top of her head). The following artefacts represent Samara’s contribution to the book she and Gabby created, and include her verbal and gestural descriptions of her drawing and writing.

Figure 4-6: Page One of Samara’s and Gabby’s Book

“It Gabby. Her play on slide and monkey bar! (pointing to her drawing of the girl with short hair on the playground structure). That you (pointing to the taller figure) and me (pointing to the smaller figure) outside!”
As shown on the second page of Samara’s and Gabby’s book, it was evident that Samara understood that print conveyed a message, and was an integral part of storybooks. Although storybooks were not a part of Samara’s meaning making at home, other types of print-texts were valued by her family members and were a part of the textual landscape in their home (e.g., printed text on websites and video games, playlists on the family’s iTunes® account, coupon books and flyers).

As noted previously, in addition to the inclusion of storybooks and other types of books (e.g., non-fiction, information books) in the Grade One learning program, I also observed Mrs. Webster utilize a range of print-based learning activities with the children (e.g., workbooks, worksheets, agendas, flashcards). During one of my visits to the classroom, I observed an activity where Samara and her peers were instructed to fill out a lined piece of paper with personal information (see Figure 4-8), and were asked to think of one word that best described them. During that activity, Mrs. Webster printed several different words and numbers on the blackboard that the students could use to complete the “I am” statements on the worksheet (e.g., girl, boy, 6, 5, friendly, kind, funny). Although this assignment provoked Samara and her peers
to think about their “identity”, and their worksheets were later attached to their school photographs and stapled to a classroom bulletin board, the rules around this activity were very structured, as the children had to complete the task in a small time period, and could only utilize print to represent the many complex layers of their identity. This type of engagement with print differed significantly from the ways in which Samara engaged with print during the free play period in the classroom, and represents an activity that provided Samara with little agency.

**Figure 4-8: Fill-in-the-Blank Worksheet used in the Grade One Classroom**

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I am 6.
I am a girl.
I am in grade 1.
I am kind.
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“I am Samara, I am 6, I am a girl, I am in grade 1, I am kind.” (October 19th, 2007)

During the school day, the morning and afternoon recess periods also provided Samara with opportunities to exercise agency as a meaning maker. During my first few visits to the school, Samara often stayed by my side during the recess periods. Although she never articulated her reasons for staying close to me, it seemed as though she wanted to make sure that I was comfortable on the playground with all of the other students. However, as the school year progressed, and the winter thawed into spring, Samara, Gabby, and Gabby’s older sister often played together outside, and I was often called on by Gabby to be a part of their play scripts.

Some days, I observed the girls play on the monkey bars or roll snowballs across the playground, which had them giggling and enjoying each other’s company. On other occasions, Samara, Gabby, and Gabby’s older sister created play scripts about *Hannah Montana* being held prisoner in a castle (monkey bars), or about the characters from *High School Musical* singing and
dancing on a stage (picnic table in the schoolyard). The following event occurred in mid-May and highlights the link among play, identity, and popular culture in the girls’ world.

**Communicative Event 4-8: Samara Playing with Gabby and Gabby’s Sister on the School Playground (transcript: May 12\(^{th}\), 2008)** (data sources: field notes, observation, participant-observation)

*It is a warm, spring afternoon, and Samara and Gabby are outside for the afternoon recess. The girls are sitting on top of one of the picnic tables in the schoolyard, patiently waiting for Gabby’s older sister to come outside with her class. When they see her, they jump off the picnic table and Gabby frantically waves at her sister to motion her over. Gina\(^{31}\) begins to run towards them, but pauses halfway to pick up two small sticks on the playground. After the girls greet one another, they immediately begin to negotiate roles and ideas for their play.*

Gina: Okay, I’m Gabriella! (the main female character in the *High School Musical* movies)

Gabby: No, I want to be her! You got to be her last time!

Gina: No, I’m the oldest, so I get to say!

Gabby: Okay, this time I’ll be Sharpay (a supporting female character in *High School Musical*) because she’s really pretty. Who do you want to be Samara?

Samara: Me don’t know.

Gabby: You can be Troy again (one of the male characters in *High School Musical*) because we always need someone to be a boy, and you’re bigger than me.

Samara: Okay.

Gabby: Okay, let’s pretend we’re in the gym, and we’re singing and practicing for a play that has to be for the Talent Show.

Gina: Okay, what song do you want to sing?

Gabby: The one by Beyonce. What’s it called?

Gina: *Crazy Love!* Samara, can you dance to that song and sing?

Samara: Yeah, okay! (she starts to jump up and down).

Gabby: Okay, get on the picnic table. That will be the stage.

Gina: I have microphones for me and Samara (she hands one of the sticks that she has been holding to Samara). Gabby, you have to go and find your own!

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\(^{31}\) The name of Gabby’s sister has been changed.
Gabby: (starts to sulk and stomps off to find a stick on the playground; within seconds she finds a stick and happily returns to the picnic table). Okay, now I’m ready! (The girls all get up on the picnic table. Gabby tells me that I can be the teacher in High School Musical, and that when they are done singing I have to let them know if they are good enough to be in the Talent Show. I enthusiastically nod my head).

Gina: Okay, I’ll say 1-2-3, and then we’ll start. 1-2-3!

Gabby and Gina: (singing) I’m crazy, so crazy, yeah crazy in love! Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh!

Samara: (simultaneously) Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh! (Samara is holding the microphone to her mouth, and cautiously moving her hips and feet, aware that she is on top of a picnic table, with little room. The girls continue singing the same lyric several more times, and then stop to get my reaction).

Jodi: Wonderful! You’re in the Talent Show!

Gabby: Yes! (she pumps her fist in the air)

Samara: Yes! (she starts to giggle)

Gina: We probably need to practice more though. Can you practice after school Samara?

Samara: Yeah, okay!

As the girls engaged in play, they negotiated roles and props, and changed and adapted the storyline of a popular culture narrative to meet their personal needs in their own local context. They accomplished this by positioning themselves within the imaginary community of High School Musical, and by drawing on the music of Beyonce to produce a meaningful play text. Through their production of this identity text, they were able to create a figured world where they assigned themselves imaginary identities which related to issues of popularity and competency.

As the girls played, they also used symbolic meanings for objects that were consistent with the imagined setting they created. For instance, the sticks represented microphones, and the picnic table acted as a stage in the school gymnasium. As the girls engaged in play, I was also drawn into their script, as Gabby cast me in the role of the “teacher,” whose task was to decide whether the girls would be part of a Talent Show. When Samara and Gabby returned to the classroom for the “free play” period, I observed them recontextualize their play script into another personalized storybook. The following artefacts (see Figures 4-9 and 4-10) were
produced by Samara, and represent her perceptions on the social and imaginative nature of her play with Gabby and Gabby’s sister.

**Figure 4-9: Page One of Samara’s and Gabby’s Book**

“It Gabby and me by table outside, and me sing! (pointing to the picture of the two people). It say (pointing to the letters), *We play High School Musical!*”
Similar to a previous communicative event outlined in this chapter, in the classroom context, it appeared as though the girls were attempting to establish themselves as competent meaning makers by recontextualizing their play texts into a recognized and valued print-based text in the classroom. However, the teachers’ lack of acknowledgement of the girls’ books represents what I perceive to be a missed opportunity for them to build on the funds of knowledge and interests Samara and Gabby brought to school. Thus, the girls’ use of literacy was largely ignored by their teachers at school as their books did not fit with the ways in which literacy was produced, taught, or assessed in the Grade One classroom. Surprisingly, this did not deter Samara and Gabby, as they continued to create books in the classroom throughout the school year.

The Kids Club

Samara and Gabby also brought their interest in bookmaking to the Kids Club, as they continued to create storybooks within that setting which centered on their friendship and previous lived experiences. As the girls created their books they frequently consulted and negotiated with each other (through conversation and gesture) about what they should draw or write. These books provided Samara with an opportunity to proclaim her identity as a friend and
playmate in yet another context. Similar to her engagement in singing at the Kids Club, and the enjoyment and pride she felt as she expertly participated in the action songs and mentored others, Samara also felt confident with her drawing skills, particularly since Gabby continued to positively support and comment on her work (e.g., “Samara, good work!”, “You’re a really great drawer!”). Although these books were not recognized by the volunteers in that setting, this did not discourage Samara and Gabby, as they continued to create storybooks during each of my observations at the Kids Club.

Figure 4-11: Page One of Samara’s and Gabby’s Book

“It me and Gabby!”
“It say, Gabby and Samara at Kids Club!” (April 10th, 2008)

At the Kids Club, Samara also played games, such as the *Dora the Explorer* matching game, and made beaded necklaces and bracelets with her sisters and Gabby. Samara enjoyed these activities, and seemed to appreciate the fact that she could engage in these activities at her own leisure, and that there was not a “right” way of completing a task. This was particularly evident when she and Gabby played the *Dora the Explorer* game. The instructions for the game stipulated that it was to be played by two to four people (aged four to eight), and that the players were to place the cards of the various characters in the *Dora* series (e.g., *Dora*, *Boots*, *Swiper*) face-down on a playing surface. The girls were aware of these rules, and had been shown how to play the game by the volunteers; however, they chose to play the game in a “card-game” style. For example, I observed each girl choose six cards that they held in their hand, and then ask each other if they had a card that matched one of the cards they were holding up. Both girls often pretended that they were not holding one of the cards that was being requested (even though they were), which provoked much laughter and good-natured teasing between the girls. In that
context, the girls were able to exercise agency within and against the rules of the “game,” which was in contrast to many of the inflexible practices of school that were either “right” or “wrong.”

Unlike Samara’s classroom, popular culture narratives that catered to young girls (e.g., Barbie board game, Disney Princess puzzles) were a part of the culture at the Kids Club. Many church-goers from different congregations throughout the city donated popular culture toys and games to the inner-city Kids Club, and the volunteers included these toys in the program. When I asked one of the volunteers about the popular culture toys at the Kids Club, she stated, “They (children) love it! So, why not (include popular culture toys)? Of course, we want to talk about God with the children, but we also want them to have a good time, and do things that they like to do” (personal communication, January 10th, 2008). The volunteers’ understanding and insight into the interests of the children at the Kids Club revealed their desire to not only promote Christian values to the children, but to also provide a setting that respected and celebrated children’s popular culture interests and pleasures. While at the Kids Club, Samara and her peers were therefore able to draw on, and engage with different forms of popular culture in their interactions. This allowed them to build and maintain relationships with each other, and pursue competency and agency as they shared their knowledge of popular culture characters and storylines with each other in that setting.

Discussion

In this chapter, I looked at the ways in which Samara constructed meaning over a ten-month period, and I outlined the dominant themes that were evident in relation to her meaning making across contexts. These themes centered on the significance Samara placed on being a valued and competent member in the significant contexts in her world, and the ways in which she was able to exercise agency as a meaning maker within these contexts.

During the study, I observed Samara engage in a wide range of communicative practices (e.g., drawing, playing, video gaming) for multiple purposes (e.g., enjoyment, skills acquisition). I also observed numerous individuals (e.g., siblings, parents) support her meaning making. As Samara moved across these contexts she was continually learning about communication, that being that communication is a social and cultural practice which centers on issues of exchange. Tierney (2009) posited that these exchanges occur within a social fabric which involves the pragmatics of communication (who is doing what to whom and why), and matters of identity,
status, and power, which are linked to the construction of self, community, and others, and is also tied to positioning.

For example, in this case study, it was apparent that at times, Samara’s use of communicative practices empowered and enabled her to take control of her own learning, and provided her with opportunities to generate new and diverse organizations of meaning (Gallas, 1994; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). This was evident when she developed personalized books with Gabby at school and at the Kids Club. However, the data from this case study also enabled me to identify the ways that Samara’s communicative practices were constrained, or went unacknowledged by the different individuals in her world as she moved across contexts (e.g., Cole & Engestrom, 1993; Gutiérrez, 2004). This frequently occurred at school, as her personalized books were not acknowledged by her teachers, many of the worksheets and themes that she was introduced to had little connection to her external world, and her out-of-school interests (e.g., *Dora the Explorer*, digital technology) were not built on in the classroom.

During my visits to Samara’s home, I observed the important role digital technology occupied in her family’s meaning making. Competently manipulating digital forms of technology (e.g., video games, computers) was a culturally valued practice in the Pasap home, and because of this, Samara was being taught through modeling, direct instruction, and observation how to engage with these different forms of technology. In the Pasap home, I also observed Samara and her family members act as both consumers and producers of multimedia culture. For example, the girls’ creation of personalized webpages on the *Bebo.com™* website enabled them to connect with their peer group, and a wider global network. This finding supports the notion that the link between production (that is, the creation and dissemination of cultural artefacts) and digital technology is an increasingly significant part of everyday life for most people. This understanding builds on the work of Carrington (2005); namely that the rise of digital technology in children’s world has enabled them to become significant producers and disseminators of information across multiple contexts.

Through the use of digital technology, Samara was also able to build on her interest in popular culture narratives, specifically, the *Dora the Explorer* narrative. This global narrative played an important role in Samara’s world and identity construction, and for the most part, her family supported her interest in this narrative (e.g., helping her navigate the *Dora the Explorer* website, helping her locate *Dora* video clips on *YouTube™*). Samara’s exposure to *Dora* through an array of multimedia texts supports the work of Kinder (1991), who coined the term
“transmedia intertextuality” (p. 3) to describe the ways children often meet the same narrative in different forms, which can, in turn, enhance their “narrative satisfaction” (Hilton, 1996, p. 42).

In regards to the link between Indigeneity and identity, Samara’s family did not attend powwows, Samara and her sisters were not part of an Aboriginal dance group, and the family rarely returned to their reserves. However, as noted in Chapter Two, the concept of Indigeneity goes much deeper than attending traditional cultural events – it is grounded in relationships. Several foundational aspects of Aboriginal culture, particularly aspects related to the importance of family and community, were evident in the Pasap family’s meaning making during the research period (e.g., the family opened their home to children in the community, they shared their resources with others, they supported each other’s learning). As I observed Samara and her family engage with a range of communicative practices in their home, I was reminded of Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines’ (1988) study, and the myths surrounding African-American inner-city families’ literacy practices, particularly the notion that little was occurring in their homes. This is often the perspective mainstream society holds of Aboriginal families; thus, my interpretation of Samara’s meaning making in her home may have the potential to dispel the stereotypes that are also frequently included in the literature on poor, inner-city Aboriginal children and their families (e.g., Geller, Joel, & Moryski, 1993; Jette, 1994).

In Samara’s Grade One classroom, the majority of practices that were valued and promoted by Mrs. Webster and the school staff were print-based. Although the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education suggests that teachers should draw on a range of multimedia texts in the early years, Samara’s teacher primarily used worksheets, workbooks, and journals in the classroom, reflecting Marsh’s (2005) argument that the discourse surrounding digital texts has “yet to permeate the early years curricula” (p. 35). Marsh added that it is as if the developments in young children’s lives outside of the classroom are occurring within a self-contained, virtual bubble that has little to do with the “stuff” of the first years of schooling. In relation to the inclusion of Aboriginal content in Samara’s learning program at school, Aboriginal events were sporadically included in the classroom. For example, an Aboriginal Elder made bi-weekly visits to Samara’s Grade One classroom, and Samara and her peers were exposed to intermittent, rudimentary Aboriginal events (e.g., round dances, drumming circle) throughout the school year.

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32 Even though Samara’s oldest sister Natasha spent the majority of the school year on the reserve with her aunt, cousins, and other extended family, Beatrice and Renae only visited the reserve one time, when they initially took her to the reserve to live. For the remainder of the year, Natasha visited her family the last weekend of every month, and she was always brought into the city by her aunt.
Although the school staff included Aboriginal events in the learning curriculum, these experiences appeared to be superficial “add-ons” as I did not observe these practices, or the meanings embedded in these practices being expanded on by the teachers or other school staff.

As I observed Samara at the Kids Club, it was obvious that the volunteers in that setting played an important role in introducing her to new communicative practices (e.g., Christian children’s songs, reciting Bible verses). In that context, Gabby continued to play a significant role in Samara’s meaning making, as they continued to recontextualize their play texts and interests into storybooks. Samara was also provided with opportunities to extend her interest in popular culture narratives in that context. Although the tensions surrounding popular culture in school contexts have been widely discussed, the volunteers at the Kids Club chose to include popular culture toys and games in their program, recognizing that popular culture narratives are part of young children’s social worlds.

As Samara travelled across the multiple contexts in her world, the notion that who a person becomes depends on the meaning making systems that he or she participates in, and what support and assistance he or she receives from family, peers, and community members (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) was apparent, as was the understanding that as individuals meet new situations with new demands, opportunities for learning and further development occur. As I observed Samara move across contexts, it was apparent that the values and knowledgeable skills that were a part of who she was were formed through her active participation with different individuals (e.g., family members, Gabby, volunteers) who introduced her to specific communicative practices, embedded within new and different learning opportunities. At the same time, I also observed Samara frequently play an agentic role in her meaning making (e.g., producing meaningful play texts and drawings).

The following chapter presents the ways in which Devin made meaning throughout the ten-month qualitative study. That chapter is also presented as a case study, and highlights the types and uses of communicative practices Devin engaged in as he navigated his way across multiple contexts. The role a range of mediators played in Devin’s world, and the interplay between his use of communicative practices and the shaping of his identity is also addressed in the following chapter.
Chapter Five
Devin’s Meaning Making across Contexts

Young children are highly creative meaning makers who draw on a range of resources to represent their personal experiences and understandings of the world.
- Bruner (1996)

In this chapter, I present the findings from a case study of Devin’s meaning making over a ten-month period by addressing the research questions that framed this study: i) What are the types and purposes of communicative practices used by young urban Aboriginal children at home, at school, and in the community?; ii) What role do family and community members play in supporting and influencing Aboriginal children’s communicative practices?; and iii) What is the relationship between Aboriginal children’s use of communicative practices and their construction of identity?

In the following sections, I outline Devin’s meaning making across home, school, and community contexts. I also address the prominent themes that emerged from the data, and I discuss how all of the contexts compare and contrast in relation to Devin’s meaning making. Similar to the previous case study, this allows the reader to: i) draw parallels or notice differences between the types and uses of communicative practices Devin engaged in as he moved across multiple contexts; ii) develop an understanding of the role family and community members played as supporters and influencers in his meaning making; and iii) develop an understanding of the ways in which he was establishing his identity across contexts, and was being positioned by others in relation to his use of communicative practices. To illustrate Devin’s meaning making, I also include transcriptions of his interactions with others, as well as samples of his drawings, writings, and digital photographs.

During the research period, I observed Devin engage in the following communicative practices in his home context: i) digitextual practices, such as video game playing and using his iPod; ii) playing; iii) drawing; iv) singing and dancing; and v) book reading. At school, I observed Devin engage in: i) print-based practices, such as reading storybooks and leveled books, journal and agenda writing, and engaging in worksheets; ii) playing; and iii) drawing. At the Kids Club and in the Sunday school classroom, I observed Devin utilize: i) print-based practices, such as storybook reading and Bible reading; ii) singing and dancing; and iii) playing. Over the course of the research, I also identified the following purposes for these practices in Devin’s meaning making: i) to form social relationships; ii) for enjoyment; iii) for skills
development; iv) for a sense of belonging; v) for entertainment; and vi) for knowledge acquisition.

As Devin engaged in these communicative practices over the course of the research, two overarching themes emerged in his meaning making. These themes are the same prominent themes that emerged in the previous case study, and include: i) the importance of membership in his world, and the significance he placed on being viewed as a competent meaning maker across contexts; and, ii) the notion of agency, specifically the ways in which Devin exercised agency as a meaning maker across sociocultural contexts. I also identified a number of sub-themes that were particular to each context. For example, at home, Devin’s parents and sisters valued competency with digital technology. Thus, Devin was scaffolded by family members to achieve a level of competency with a range of digitextual practices in that context. Within that setting, he was also able to exercise agency by engaging in other modes of meaning making (e.g., playing, drawing, storybook reading) and engaging in narratives (e.g., Spiderman, dinosaurs) that were of interest to him and that shaped his identity.

As stated in previous chapters, the culturally-valued practices in Devin’s Grade One classroom focused primarily on print-based, teacher-directed learning activities. During my observations at school, Devin appeared to be generally disinterested in, and frustrated by, the worksheets and other types of activities valued in the classroom as they often appeared to be beyond his ability and did not relate to his out-of-school world. In that context, however, I observed Devin assume a leadership role among his peer group by engaging in communicative practices (e.g., producing and directing play texts), and drawing on popular culture narratives (e.g., Pirates of the Caribbean, Spiderman, Superman) that were of interest of him and the other boys. At the Kids Club and in his Sunday school classroom, Devin also assumed a leadership role among his peers through play and drawing, and strived to be viewed by others as a competent meaning maker in those contexts.

Similar to the previous case study included in this dissertation, the current case is not simply a description of the ways in which Devin used multiple communicative practices in different sociocultural contexts. Instead, I draw on multiple theoretical frameworks to develop a strong conceptual understanding of Devin’s meaning making, particularly the relationship his meaning making had to an ideological model of literacy grounded in social structures and power relationships. In the following sections, I outline the overarching themes that emerged from
Devin’s meaning making across contexts, and reveal how he was establishing his identity, whether real or imagined, across different contexts.

**The Importance of Membership**

**The Pepper-Machiskinic Home**

During my observations in the Pepper-Machiskinic home, I observed Devin fluidly and intuitively move between different semiotic systems, revealing his resourcefulness and flexibility as a meaning maker. As Devin moved between these systems, I observed his parents and sisters play an influential and supporting role in his meaning making. I also examined how his use of a wide range of communicative practices and his interactions with others impacted his identity construction.

Marsh (2005) posited that for contemporary children, the textual landscape in which they are developing particular skills, knowledge, and sense of self, is increasingly comprised of new technologies, which in turn, enables them to engage in new digitextual practices. Throughout the research period, this understanding was apparent in Devin’s family as digital technologies occupied an important place in their meaning making and social interactions. For instance, during the study, I observed Devin’s father scaffold his children’s use of a range of digitextual practices (e.g., playing video games, operating iPods®). The following event illustrates one of seven instances in which I observed Devin, his sisters, and their father engage with the Xbox 360 Lego Star Wars video game. I also made one audio recording and two video recordings of Devin’s video game playing with his family. Further, 31 of Devin’s 143 photographs were of digital technologies in his home.

**Communicative Event 5-1: Devin Playing a Lego Star Wars Video Game (transcript: April 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2008) (data sources: observation, field notes, transcription from video recording)**

*It is a warm afternoon in mid-April, and Devin and his sisters have just arrived home from school. Carol, the children’s mother, is home early from her job, and is washing dishes in the kitchen. The children’s father, Ollie, is sitting on a couch in the living room, playing a Lego Star Wars video game. Devin and his sisters quickly join their father on the couch, and intently watch the television screen as their father uses the hand remote to manipulate the virtual character, Luke Skywalker.*

Devin: Daddy, I think I know how to do this.

Ollie: Okay, if you think you know, here you go (hands the remote to Devin).

Devin: But, I don’t know if I can pass through that door back there!
Tammi: Go that way, Devin! (Tammi points at the television screen. Devin uses the remote to direct *Luke Skywalker* through the door).

Ollie: Good job!

Devin: (happily singing) *Run, run, as fast as you can! You can’t catch me, I’m the gingerbread man!*

Ollie: Can you shoot that guy (*Storm trooper*) now?

Devin: No….oh, yeah, I can! Oh, dad, here, can you help me? (hands the remote back to his dad)

Ollie: This is an awesome game. I’ll help you guys with this one.

Tammi: Daddy, can I do it now?


Tammi: Can I play it?


Devin: No! Mommy said it was my turn to play.

Carol: (yelling from the kitchen) Yeah, it’s Devin’s turn!

Ollie: Devin, watch me, okay? This is how you do it. (Devin anxiously watches his dad, and begins to make “shooting sounds”)

Devin: Okay, I’m gonna go and get that guy (*Storm trooper*)!

Ollie: Okay, good (he hands the remote back to Devin)

When Devin finishes playing the Star Wars video game, he decides to extend this popular culture narrative by recreating the storyline of the game in his living room. He casts himself in the role of Luke Skywalker, and casts his sisters as Storm troopers. Devin imagines that he has a light saber in his hand, and enthusiastically and dramatically moves around the room, swiping his light saber at his sisters. This play episode does not last long, however, as Niki and Tammi quickly start to complain to their parents that Devin is bothering them. Although this play episode was cut short, this did not deter Devin, as he happily made his way up the stairs in his home, holding his imaginary light saber, and using gesture and sound effect to replicate the sounds and actions of the video game.

As Devin interacted with the video game, he had conversations with his father and sisters about the game, he engaged in self-dialogue, and he also used sound effect and gesture to correspond with the character’s actions on the television screen. Devin’s engagement in the video game also provided him with opportunities to develop skills in reading images and in utilizing and manipulating two-dimensional representations of hypothetical spaces. During my
observation of the family’s engagement in the Lego *Star Wars* video game, it appeared that the game offered them a rich, multimodal space in which they could communicate with one another, take turns assuming the role of either expert or apprentice, and accomplish shared goals.

Once Devin finished playing the video game, he drew on recontextualization processes to create a play text about the video game where he assumed the imagined identity of *Luke Skywalker*. Devin’s textual response to video gaming revealed how he exercised agency in his meaning making, and supports the work of Pahl (2005), who argues that video games allow children to explore their interest in specific narratives and multiple identities, and often stimulates them to create a number of new textual forms. As Devin played, he actively moved around his living room, jumping and swiping his imaginary light saber at his sisters. His actions also corresponded to the notion of gendered play, which has been investigated by several researchers (e.g., Millard, 2003; Paley, 1984) who contend that boys’ play narratives abound in dynamic superhero themes with “good guys” and “bad guys.”

Devin took the following photograph in early February; it was one of fifteen photographs he took of the *Star Wars* video game in his home. This photograph also parallels the play text that he produced in his home, where he cast himself in the principal role of *Luke Skywalker* (who is holding a light saber in the photograph), and cast his sisters in the roles of *Stormtroopers* (who are running away from *Luke Skywalker* in the photograph).

**Figure 5-1: Devin’s Photograph of his Xbox 360 Star Wars Lego Video Game**

“It’s my cool game. *I (Luke Skywalker character) got Darth Vader with my light saber, and then I won the game!*”

(February 6th, 2008)
During the study, Ollie was also teaching Devin how to use the different functions on an iPod® that he recently purchased for him. As a result, Devin was acquiring knowledge and developing skills in how to recognize and navigate the functions of a range of symbols (e.g., arrows, pause and play symbols), numbers (to locate different tracks), and letters (to encode and decode words) on the iPod. The following event reveals how Devin merged his interest in digital technology and popular culture as he made meaning in his home context.

**Communicative Event 5-2: Devin Listening to the Superman Song by the Hip-Hop Group Soulja Boy (transcript: March 21st, 2008) (data sources: field notes, participant observation)**

*It is the first day of spring, and as I open the gate and walk up the muddy front path to Devin’s home, I notice that the door is wide open, and Devin is standing in the doorway. He is holding his iPod®, and is obviously listening to a song, as the iPod® earphones are in each of his ears, and he is rocking his body back and forth to the rhythm of the music. He excitedly waves at me, and ushers me quickly in the door.*

Devin: I’m listening to an awesome song that my dad got for me!
Jodi: That’s great! Can I listen to the song too?
Devin: Sure (he hands me one of the earphones)
Jodi: (I place the earphone in my ear) Cool song! What’s the name of it?
Devin: Um…I think it’s just called Superman. It has really cool dance moves too. I can’t do it, but Tammi can do it. Her’s gonna teach me how to do it!
Jodi: That’s awesome! I think I saw a group of dancers do the moves to this song on TV.
Devin: Yeah, me too!
Jodi: Do you have other songs on your iPod?
Devin: Yeah, my other favourite song is I Like to Move It, Move It! (Devin starts to sing the song, and begins to move his body to the rhythm of his singing. He quickly scrolls the playlist of his iPod to find the song, and presses the play button).
Jodi: I love this song! It’s from a movie, right?
Devin: Yeah, it’s on Madagascar! I love that movie. Have you seen it?
Jodi: Yes, it’s a great movie!
Devin: Yeah, I know! I seen the video for this song too. I saw that movie at the theatre with my mom, and Niki and Tammi.
That event represents one of four times that I observed Devin use his iPod® throughout the study. Devin’s choice of music to listen to, and songs to sing, were strongly influenced by the soundtracks of popular culture movies that were particularly attractive to young children at the time of this study (e.g., Madagascar, Cars). Many of the hip-hop songs that Devin listened to also included specific dance steps and body movements. During the home visit that followed that episode, I observed Devin’s sisters patiently teach him the dance steps to the Superman song. As Devin practiced the steps, Tammi and Niki offered encouragement and support, thus creating an environment where Devin felt safe and comfortable rehearsing, displaying, and experimenting with the different movements. As I watched Devin interact with his sisters, the notion that older siblings play an important role in scaffolding or guiding their younger siblings’ learning was apparent. In relation to identity construction, Devin’s use of this type of digital technology was not only enjoyable and entertaining for him, his engagement with his iPod also provided him with a sense of belonging in his family and mainstream society as his father and older sisters all owned iPods, as did some of the boys at school. Devin’s knowledge of the lyrics of popular culture songs also provided him with an important currency as these songs were popular with his peer group at school.

The School Context

As discussed in the previous chapter, the learning program in the Grade One classroom Devin shared with Samara was guided by monthly thematic units. In that context, Mrs. Webster primarily utilized worksheets, flashcards, and spelling tests that related to monthly themes. Throughout my eight visits to the school, I observed Devin prefer the social nature of school (e.g., the morning and afternoon recess periods, the “free play” period at the end of the school day), as opposed to the structured portions of the school day. During those times, Devin positioned himself as a leader among the boys in his classroom by producing play scripts based on the boys’ common interests and which often included their shared knowledge of popular culture narratives (e.g., Transformers, Spiderman, Pirates of the Caribbean).

Although digital technology was non-existent in the Grade One classroom, popular culture toys that were of interest to Devin and many of the boys (e.g., Spiderman, Transformers) were evident in the room. Although toys associated with popular culture narratives that cater to young boys have been perceived by many educators to exert a negative influence on boys’ identity formation and behaviour (e.g., promoting dominant and oppressive discourses of racism,
gendered roles, and violence), these toys were a part of the classroom. As revealed in the previous chapter, however, these toys seemed to be unconsciously chosen by Mrs. Webster as she purchased these toys from garage sales, and based her selection on toys that were in good condition, as opposed to the gendered messages embodied in specific toys. She also did not appear to have a problem with the boys’ engaging in what might be conceived as aggressive play with the toys during the free play period (e.g., the boys’ production of play texts that involved “fighting”).

As stated previously, an integral part of Devin’s world at school was his engagement in print-based texts, including his participation in a guided Reading Group. During these sessions, a teacher assistant worked with Devin and three other children who were assessed to be at the same reading level. Although Devin struggled with different aspects related to reading (e.g., code-breaking, grammar), he enjoyed the social nature of storybook reading. During my visits to the school, I attended three of Devin’s Reading Group sessions. During these sessions, I assumed the roles of both observer and a participant-observer. The following event occurred in early February, and shows Devin’s engagement with storybook reading during a Reading Group session at school.

**Communicative Event 5-3: Devin at his Reading Group Session (transcript: February 5th, 2008) (data sources: observation, field notes)**

Devin has just returned to the classroom from recess. Mrs. Webster is instructing everyone to line up at the door for Reading Groups, and Devin quickly throws his jacket in his locker and grabs his pencil case. Devin stands in line, and begins to poke the other children who are near him. Seconds later, a teacher assistant arrives to take Devin and three of his classmates to a small room on the top floor of the school. When they arrive at the classroom, the assistant gives them photocopied pages of two different books that they are to assemble and read during the session. One of the books is titled, “Up and Down,” and has a picture of a dog chasing a rabbit up a hill on the front cover; the other book is titled “Boys Run!” and has a picture of a boy running beside a dog on its cover. The teacher assistant tells the children to put the books together by placing the numbered pages in the correct order and stapling them together. She then tells them to practice reading the books independently or with each other, before coming and reading the book to her. Devin quickly assembles the books, and makes an unenthusiastic attempt to independently read the text in one of the books. The teacher assistant tells Devin to come and read the book to her, and the following exchange occurs.
Teacher Assistant: What does the front cover say, Devin?
Devin: So easy! It says “Up and Down”!
Teacher Assistant: Good (flipping the page).
Devin: Um, “Run, run, run, up! Run, run, run, um, what does that say? (pointing to the word “down”)
Teacher Assistant: Well, let’s sound it out, but look at the picture too, what are the dog and rabbit doing?
Devin: Oh yeah! Running down the hill, so it says “down”, right?
Teacher Assistant: Yes, good!
Devin: (flipping the page) “Go fast, bunny!”
Teacher Assistant: No, not “bunny,” but close. Let’s sound it out, “Ra”
Devin: Oh, “rabbit”!
Teacher Assistant: Yes!
Devin: Um, now what does it say?
Teacher Assistant: Let’s look at the letters to figure it out. What sound does the “w” make?
Devin: I don’t know! Like, “wuh”?
Teacher Assistant: Yes, now put it together, with the other letters.
Devin: “Watch out, bunny!”
Teacher Assistant: Yes, but remember, it doesn’t say “bunny”.
Devin: Oh yeah, I meant “rabbit”!

Another child in the room is upset that the stapler isn’t working, and she asks the teacher assistant for help. The assistant tells Devin that she needs to go help this student, and tells Devin to finish reading the last page of his book to one of his classmates. Devin agrees, and he goes and sits at a table next to a boy who is colouring a picture in one of his books. Instead of reading the last page of his book, Devin asks the boy next to him to read it, which he does. The boys then begin to chat about a Scooby Doo episode they both watched in their homes the previous evening.

During that session, the teacher assistant provided Devin and his peers with whole-group and individual instruction. As described in Chapter Four, the teacher assistant who led Samara’s guided Reading Group utilized the same instructional strategies. When I asked both teacher assistants about the similar nature of these sessions, they shared that they had attended a professional development workshop with the school division’s Language Arts consultant where
they were provided with a number of strategies to help children decode and encode alphabetic print (e.g., phonics, pictorial cues). They also shared that the consistency of these sessions was significant for the students because of the transient nature of many of the students’ families. Since many of the students often moved from one inner-city neighbourhood to the next during the school year, all of the teacher assistants across the thirteen elementary community schools in the school division attended the same workshop, and were provided with the same texts and teaching strategies. Although this provided the students with much-needed consistency, the generic nature of these print texts did not relate to Devin’s out-of-school world. Therefore, he took every opportunity to go “off-topic,” and engage in conversation with his peers about ideas that were of interest to him (e.g., popular culture narratives, television episodes). These sessions provided Devin with much needed individual time, however, where he was able to practice a range of skills and strategies as he read with the teacher assistant.

In addition to the Reading Group sessions, Devin and his classmates engaged in multiple learning activities in the Grade One classroom that included print-based texts (e.g., worksheets, leveled reading books, workbooks, flashcards). During my visits to the classroom, I often observed Devin engage in these activities in a lackadaisical way. However, Devin enjoyed engaging with specific print-based texts, such as storybooks and non-fiction books that included storylines that were of interest to him (e.g., storylines that included monsters, superheroes, and “good guy/bad guy” scenarios). Although these narratives were not a part of the thematic worksheets in the classroom or the leveled books he encountered at the Reading Group, these topics occasionally surfaced in the books that were a part of Mrs. Webster’s personal collection.

As previously mentioned, Devin enjoyed the social aspect of school, and always seemed to be “in the center” of the action in both his Grade One classroom and on the school playground. For example, Devin often had a group of boys huddled around him during the transition periods in the classroom as they engaged with books that were of interest to them. In the Grade One classroom, Devin’s teacher had a large collection of books that she changed every month to coincide with the specific themes the children were studying (e.g., castles, pioneers). Mrs. Webster also had a personal collection of books that stayed in the classroom throughout the year. Although many of the boys in Devin’s classroom (nine of fifteen boys) were English as Second Language learners with diverse backgrounds, these boys shared common interests, such as animals, superheroes, and popular culture narratives. During each of my observations, I observed Devin and several different boys actively participate in storybook reading in the
classroom. These books appeared to offer the boys a point of connection through which they could communicate their expertise and interests to one another. For instance, Devin and several of his peers enjoyed reading a book about jungle animals. The book contained photographs of jungle animals (e.g., monkeys, snakes, orangutans) and had a short “facts” list at the bottom of each page describing a particular animal (e.g., where it lived, what it ate). As Devin and several of the boys in the class looked at the book, I observed them examine the animal pictures, make comments about the pictures, point at interesting physical features of the animals, and make different animal “sounds.” The following conversation occurred between Devin and two of his peers as they looked through the jungle book in the classroom in late February.

Devin: Oh guys, look at this! (pointing to a gorilla pounding his chest) So cool, right guys? Have you seen *George of the Jungle*?
Peer One: Yeah, I seen it. It’s a good movie – remember that song?
Devin: Oh yeah! (singing) *George, George, George of the Jungle, watch out for that tree!* Then he swings on the rope and slams into the tree! So funny! (turning the page of the book). Some of these animals are really disgusting! (pointing to a tarantula)
Devin: Yeah, disgusting, but I wouldn’t be scared of them. Would you?
Peer Two: Never!
Devin: Oh guys, looks at this snake! What kind is it? A king cobra or a boa constrictor? Oh yeah – it says, B-O-A, so it’s a boa constrictor. They can wrap around you and then squeeze your guts right out of you.

(February 26th, 2008)

As the boys looked through the book, they accessed new information from the printed text and illustrations. As Devin participated in that literacy event, he became animated and excited, and developed a strong social connection to his peers through their engagement in shared storybook reading.
The Kids Club and Sunday School Classroom

During this study, the community contexts that revealed themselves as significant in Devin’s world were an inner-city Kids Club that was grounded in Christian-based principles and beliefs, and an evangelical inner-city church. These settings had similar children’s programming, so twice a week, Devin was exposed to the same general songs, stories, and Bible verses. In both of these contexts, Devin was also provided with opportunities to play with toys, games, and puzzles, and participate in art activities. The Kids Club occurred every Thursday evening during the school year, and Devin attended the club with his older sisters and several of his classmates from school. During the study, Carol stated that she felt the Kids Club was a friendly place, and had a “good message” for her children (personal communication, March 10th, 2008). Similar to Samara’s family, Devin and his sisters’ attendance at the club provided them with a weekly, social outing. When I asked Carol about her family’s membership at the inner-city church, she shared that the ministers and congregation were welcoming to her and her children, and that she liked the mission work they did in Mexico (e.g., building houses for underprivileged families). She also hoped to go on a future mission with members of the congregation. Carol also indicated that she took advantage of the time that her children were at the Kids Club to work on their scrapbooks at home, or attend scrapbooking workshops at the local community centre.

Throughout the research period, it was apparent that Devin viewed his time at Sunday school and the Kids Club as social outings, similar to how he viewed the purpose of school. These contexts provided him with opportunities to engage in self-directed, meaningful communicative practices with his peers, and also offered him substantially more freedom than the structure of his school day. The following communicative event occurred in Devin’s Sunday school classroom in late November. This event is representative of the three other observations that I made in the Sunday school classroom of Devin’s play with his peers.

Communicative Event 5-4: Devin Creating a Lego City at Sunday School (transcript: November 25th, 2007) (data sources: observation, field notes)

Devin and his peers have just finished listening to their Sunday school teacher read a storybook about Noah’s ark. Their teacher tells them that they can now have “free time” until the church service is over and their families come and get them. Devin quickly gets out the bucket of Lego, and two other boys huddle beside him as he begins to outline a play scenario.
Devin: Okay guys, let’s make a Lego city!
Peer One: Okay, I’ll make a skyscraper!
Devin: No, I’m gonna make a skyscraper, but you can make where the Riders play.
Peer One: Yeah, okay, I’ll make the football place!
Devin: Hmm, what should you make? (looking at the other boy who is playing with him). Oh, I know! Can you make Toys R Us?
Peer Two: Yeah, okay! Awesome!
Devin: Okay, don’t watch when I make my skyscraper, because it’s gonna be a surprise!
Peer One: Yeah, don’t watch me either, because mine’s gonna be a surprise too!
Devin: No, no, no. I have to see what you’re making, just to make sure you’re doing it right.
Peer One: Okay!
Peer Two: Hey guys, I’m gonna go get a paper and marker so I can write “Toys R Us” on my building, and then tape it on (to the building). Just cause it really does have a sign that says “Toys R Us”.
Devin: Good idea! You should make a sign too that says “Riders” (looking at the other boy) just so everyone knows to go there for football games. Because the Rider place is next to the Lawson (swimming complex) and they’re both big and beside each other, so you don’t want people going there to see the football guys. Okay, I have to get back to work! Don’t look!
Peer One: Okay, I won’t look! Maybe I’ll make a sign too.

Several minutes pass, in which they boys work in silence. They constantly move their bodies in different positions in an attempt to shield one another from their buildings. Devin tells the boys that they have one more minute to make their buildings, and then they have to show them to him. Less than a minute later, Devin yells, “Time’s up!” The boys show Devin their buildings, and Devin verbally praises their constructions. Devin shows them his skyscraper, and the boys enthusiastically start to question Devin about how he got the structure so tall without it falling over.

During that event, Devin organized the play, and his actions followed a consistent pattern where he positioned himself in a powerful and agentic role when engaging in play, regardless of the context or the participants. As Devin engaged in play with his peers in that context, the overlap between the importance of membership in his world and the exercising of agency was evident. Devin’s knowledge of his environment was also evident in the included transcription.
For example, the football stadium where the Saskatchewan Roughriders play was located close to Devin’s inner-city church, and the Toys R Us store was situated on the other side of the abandoned train tracks that ran parallel to Devin’s church. The boys’ use of a combination of semiotic systems (e.g., playing, printing) also enabled them to convey meaning to each other in multiple forms.

*Agency and the Meaning Maker*

*The Pepper-Machiskinic Home*

As outlined in the literature review, play is a powerful social text for young children. As children play, they frequently bring their own cultural and historical experiences and understandings to their meaning making. During the research period, I also observed Devin exercise agency at home and in his neighbourhood by producing multiple play texts. During my fourteen visits to Devin’s home, I observed him engage in play on each visit. As he played, he frequently drew on his lived experiences, his interest in popular culture narratives, and he utilized his large collection of toys. He also combined different modes of communication (e.g., drawing, writing, reading) with his play. As Devin engaged in play, I drew on a variety of data sources to capture the similarities and nuances of these play texts (e.g., three observations, five participant-observations, twelve photographs of Devin engaged in play, two video recordings, two audio recordings, and the collection of three artefacts). The following event illustrates how Devin drew on a meaningful lived experience in his play, combined with his exposure to, and interest in, globalized popular culture narratives. Two nights prior to this communicative event, Devin attended a Monster Truck Show with his father, and traces of his experience with his father are evident in the event.

**Communicative Event 5-5: Devin’s Spiderman Show (transcript: April 28th, 2008)** (data sources: observation, participant observation, field notes, collection of artefacts, transcription from audio recording)

> As I walk up the front steps of Devin’s home, Carol meets me at the door and tells me that Devin has been anxiously waiting for me upstairs. When I enter Devin’s room, he is sitting on the floor, surrounded by his action figure toys. He tells me to sit down on the floor, and to “get ready” for his Spiderman Show. He excitedly informs me that he is going to make a poster for the show so that I will know what it is about. He quickly gets up from the floor and starts rummaging through a container of toys and books, searching for paper, pens, and crayons. When he finds what he is looking for, he sits back down and uses a red pen to meticulously draw a poster of the “monster” that is trying to kill
Spiderman. As he is drawing, Devin tells me that he likes using a red pen when he makes monster pictures because it looks like blood. Once he finishes, he tapes the poster to his bedroom door, and uses a purple crayon to make me a ticket to attend the show. Devin hands me the ticket, and informs me that I have to pay him money for the ticket, so he quickly makes a one million dollar bill. He hands me the money, and then immediately asks for it back. He climbs up to the top bunk bed (a new purchase by his mom), and begins preparing for the show. Suspended from the metal frame of the bunk bed is a wire hanger with a piece of string dangling from it. On the mattress are his Spiderman toy, a Teenage Mutant Ninja toy, and an assortment of plastic army men. He ties the Spiderman toy to the string, and positions the army men on his bed.

Devin: Okay, are you ready for the show?
Jodi: Yes, I can’t wait!

Devin: Okay, Spiderman is a good guy, and him helps people, and here is the monster (holding up the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle toy). These army guys are trying to shoot the monster.
Jodi: Okay.

Devin (making shooting sounds) “You can’t get me! I’m gonna make a web and get out of here. See ya sucker!” (mimicking the voice of Spiderman)
Jodi: This is an awesome show!
Devin (grinning) Yeah, I know!
Jodi: Where is Spiderman going?
Devin: I’m untying him from this string, and then he’s gonna fly across the room to get away from the monster, so watch out!
Jodi: Okay, I’ll get ready to move.

Devin: Okay, “I’m making my web! Watch out, ready or not, here I come!” (Devin throws the Spiderman toy across the room, it bounces off the wall, and lands beside the bedroom door. Devin starts to laugh).
Devin: The End!
Jodi: Cool, great show! Can you do another show?
Devin: Yeah, I can, but I have to make you another ticket.
Jodi: Sure, no problem. I will have to give you money too, right?
Devin: Yeah! Lots!
During that event, Devin drew on his recent experience of attending a Monster Truck Show with his father by including many of the activities and texts associated with that outing (e.g., seeing posters of the upcoming event in grocery stores and at bus stops, having money to purchase a ticket, giving the ticket to a ticket taker). It appeared that he included these activities in an attempt to recreate a significant lived experience through play, and to provide me with insight into a meaningful experience he had with his father. As Devin drew on that experience, I observed his meaning making flow through his play, drawings, and use of props and toys. Devin’s engagement with his toys also revealed how toys are often malleable enough to allow players to invent new meanings; just as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle toy did in Devin’s play, as it became a “monster” to suit his play text. Although Devin subtly changed the toy action figures’ storylines and roles, the stereotypical gendered nature of his play was well within the realm of these characters and narratives (e.g., action sequences, violence).

As Devin played, I observed him seamlessly cross from one mode to another, and when the affordances of one mode began to lose its communicative possibility (e.g., drawing the ticket), he took up another mode (e.g., play). During that event, Devin was also keenly aware of his audience (me), and understood the importance of creating an exciting show to keep his audience interested. Although his parents and siblings were not directly involved in that communicative event, his parents supported his meaning making by providing him with new experiences, and a range of materials and toys that were of interest to him.

Figure 5-2: Devin’s Million Dollar Bill
Figure 5-3: Devin’s Ticket for the Spiderman Show

Figure 5-4: Devin’s Poster of the “Monster” in the Spiderman Show

(April 28th, 2008)
As Devin engaged in play, he also frequently drew on the narratives he was exposed to through television programs, and he often involved his sisters in his play. These narratives provided scripts for Devin’s imaginative play, and enabled him to localize global popular culture narratives for his own purposes. A favourite television program that Devin and his family watched in the evenings was the crime drama, CSI (Crime Scene Investigation). The following event outlines Devin’s adaptation of a storyline from the popular television program, and reveals how he transformed the storyline into a meaningful and localized play text which represented and furthered his interest.

**Communicative Event 5-6: Secret Clubhouses, Unsolved Mysteries, and CSI (transcript: April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008)** (data sources: participant observation, field notes, video recording)

It is the beginning of April, and although there are still traces of snow on the ground, small buds are beginning to form on the tree branches, and the sun is setting later in the evening. For the past several months, my visits with Devin have always been indoors; however, when I turn my car onto Devin’s street, I realize that this visit will most likely be different. Devin is sitting on the sidewalk in front of his house, and when he sees me, he starts to wave at me with one hand, while holding a large stick in his other hand. He excitedly jumps up from the curb, and begins to point the stick to an empty lot close to his home.

Devin: Come quick! You have to follow me to Clubhouse Number One!

Jodi: Okay, let’s go! (Devin leads me to an empty lot on his block, south of his home. The lot is situated beside a back alley that borders an inner-city hospital. The clubhouse is located in the southwest corner of the neglected lot, where there are several trees and bushes. A broken set of drawers that Devin’s mother had discarded and placed by a dumpster a few days earlier is placed by the bushes, and Devin has put a blanket in one of the drawers. As I take a closer look at the drawer, I notice that a stray cat is curled up on the blanket, watching us. Devin has retrieved cylinder-shaped fluorescent light bulbs from the dumpster, and in his club house there is an old metal pot filled with mud, and three tree stumps, resembling stools).

Devin: This is Clubhouse Number One, but I actually have seven clubhouses! These are my candles (pointing to the fluorescent bulbs), and this is my cake (pointing to the mud-filled metal pot). Come on! Let’s go to Clubhouse Number Two!

Jodi: Okay, this is so cool, lead the way!
Devin: Okay, follow me! (Devin starts running towards the hospital, where his second clubhouse is located. The clubhouse is situated by a chain-link fence where there is still deep snow. Tammi and Niki start to run towards us from their home).

Tammi: Devin, what are you doing?

Devin: I’m showing her (pointing to me) my clubhouses! You wanna play too?

Tammi: Okay! (she looks at Niki, and Niki nods her head).

Devin: Okay, let’s go to Clubhouse Number Three! (Devin starts to run to a large tree in the empty lot. He climbs the tree, and his sister, Tammi, quickly follows him. Devin leaps from one of the high branches onto the ground).

Devin: Oh shit! That hurt! (holding his knee and wincing)

Niki: Devin, no swearing!

Devin: Don’t tell mom! Oh shit, my knee really hurts! (he starts to laugh)

Tammi: Devin, stop it, or I’ll tell!

Devin: No, no, no! I’ll stop! (he stands up). Okay guys, let’s skip the other clubhouses and go to Clubhouse Number Seven!

Jodi: Sounds good!

Devin: Let’s go! (Devin starts to slowly run down the back alley, and the girls and I follow him. When we arrive at his seventh clubhouse, which is located at the side of his house, he is bending over a long tree branch and a large rock).

Tammi: What are you doing Devin?

Devin: Guys, I found a T-Rex bone (tree branch), and a T-Rex tooth (rock). These are my clues to help solve the mystery. Tammi, I’m gonna go to the front of the house, bring these to me, because I have to go there to call for “back-up”!

Tammi: Okay, but I’m not picking up that rock if it’s too heavy.

Devin: Okay, I’m gonna go to the front yard (Devin runs to the front steps of his home and perches himself on the steps’ railing. He holds an imaginary hand-held radio to his mouth and shouts into the receiver). “2246, yeah that’s right! Over and out, CSI!” (he points to his house number which is 2246, and waits for Tammi to bring the branch and stone to him).

Tammi: Devin here is the T-Rex bone, but the rock is way too heavy!

Devin: Okay, when my back-up cops get here, we’ll investigate the bone first.
This play narrative was abruptly stopped when Carol told her children to come inside to get ready for bed. Although the children were disappointed to end this play scenario, they begrudgingly went inside their home, and asked me if we could play “Secret Clubhouse” the next time I came over for a visit. On my following visit to the children’s home, we continued this play narrative. Devin resumed the role of a crime scene investigator, he designated Tammi and Niki as his back-up cops, and he assigned me to take photographs of a “crime scene” that occurred in the back alley.

During that event, Devin created an imaginary world of secret clubs and police investigations where he expertly took on the role of a crime scene investigator which enabled him to exercise power and agency in his play. His understanding of the constructed nature of femininities and masculinities was also apparent in his play, particularly in relation to gender roles. For example, Devin cast his sisters in narrowly defined, subsidiary roles with little to no power – which is often how female characters are portrayed in popular media, and he cast himself in a role that enabled him to be independent, assertive, and powerful.

Devin’s play was also symbolic, as fluorescent light bulbs represented candles, a mud-filled pot represented a cake, and a rock and tree branch became a Tyrannosaurus Rex bone and tooth in his imaginary world. In that play text, it was not surprising that a dinosaur narrative entered into the storyline as Devin’s love of dinosaurs was evident from my initial home visit, and his interest in dinosaurs was fuelled by the toys his parents purchased for him, including the large collection of dinosaur books that he kept in his room. Over the course of the study, Devin and his parents also had many conversations about a possible family trip to a town in a neighbouring province where there was a dinosaur museum and an actual dig-site where dinosaur bones had been discovered.

Throughout this dissertation, Vygotsky’s (1978) perspective on the role of mediators, and the scaffolding that is provided by mediators as young children make sense of their worlds has been a constant. This is also consistent with an Aboriginal approach to learning, which acknowledges the vital role a range of more experienced caregivers play in mentoring young children. I have also addressed, however, the extent to which children take control of their learning, and assume an active role in their construction of knowledge, which was evident in the previous event. Research on young children’s play from a sociocultural perspective suggests that “play” is a practice in which children are the active creators of their own meaning making, that is, they provide their own scaffolding, and also have the capacity to scaffold others. For Devin, his engagement in play in the previous event offered him a space in which he could position himself in a powerful role, and where the scaffolding was done by him as he introduced
his sisters to his imaginary world, and they, in turn, supported his play by willingly participating in his meaning making.

Another way that Devin exercised agency in his home was through storybook reading. During one of my visits early in the study, Carol shared that several years ago she had watched a television program on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) channel that talked about the importance of providing young children with access to different types of storybooks and non-fiction books, and how children needed to be read to during their early years. That message provoked Carol to purchase several books for her children, and to take her children to the local public library. She was particularly proud of a series of glossy, paperback books that she had purchased for Devin that combined fictional stories about animals that lived in the Rain Forest with accurate information, such as what they ate. Carol also bought Devin a number of dinosaur books, which he kept in a large stack beside his bed. However, throughout the study, I never observed Carol (or Ollie) engage in storybook reading with Devin or the girls; instead, it was Devin’s sisters who read storybooks to him.

The following event highlights Devin’s interest in storybook reading to access new information about dinosaurs, and shows the important role his siblings played in his meaning making as scaffolders and supporters. Over the course of the research period, I observed Devin engage in storybook reading on six different occasions. On each visit, Devin read storybooks with one or both of his sisters. To document Devin’s use of storybook and non-fiction reading in his home, I also utilized participant observations, and I made one audio recording. In addition to Devin’s use of storybook reading to access information, it was apparent that he also used reading to develop social relationships with his sisters, and to further his interests.

Communicative Event 5-7: Devin Reading a Storybook about Dinosaurs with his Sisters (transcript: October 26th, 2007) (data sources: observation, participant observation, field notes, audio recording)

It is late October, and it is the first time I am visiting Devin and his family in the evening. When I arrive at Devin’s home, it is unusually quiet, and Carol is sitting on the floor of the living room working on her children’s scrapbooks. When I ask where Devin is, Carol sheepishly tells me that she sent Devin and the girls upstairs, because they were being too loud, and they were stepping on her scrapbooking supplies. As I make my way

33 During the study, Carol continually added pages to the scrapbooks she was creating for her children. These books traced the history of the children’s lives, and included photographs, personal hand-written anecdotes by Carol, and artefacts. These scrapbooks were filled with memories and memorabilia, and when Carol invited me to look through these cultural texts, I acquired a deeper understanding of the family and their values.
up the stairs, I hear Devin’s sisters giggling. When I turn the corner into Devin’s bedroom, I see Devin and the girls sitting on the floor, reading a book about Dinosaurs. The children eagerly invite me into the room, and throw Devin’s clothes and toys onto the bed to make a space for me on the floor.

Devin: Look at this page, guys! (pointing to a picture of a Tyrannosaurus Rex with blood spurting from his neck)
Tammi: Devin, that’s gross! I’m turning the page!
Devin: What does this say? (pointing to the printed text on the page)
Tammi: Um…okay, “The Tyrannosaurus Rex walked through the land, looking for something, um, delicious to eat!”
Devin: Oh, guys, guys, I have a good idea. I’m gonna go get something! Don’t move! (Devin runs out of the room)
Tammi: I know what he is going to get…his fake blood.
Jodi: He has fake blood?
Niki: Yeah, Daddy got it for him at the Dollar Store.
Devin: Hi guys, I’m back! (Devin is grinning and standing in the doorway. He is holding a small plastic tube of red liquid).
Tammi: Gross, Devin!
Devin: Tammi, find the page where the blood is coming out of the T-Rex’s neck!
Tammi: Devin, you are so disgusting. If you get that stuff on me I’ll tell mom!
Niki: Yeah Devin, you’ll get in trouble.
Devin: I won’t put it on you. Just find that page!
Tammi: (finds the page in the book, and starts to giggle). Okay, here!
Devin: Cool. (he opens the plastic tube, and starts to put the fake blood on his neck, face, and arms).
Niki: Devin! That looks real!
Devin: I know, this stuff is wicked! (he starts to roar like a dinosaur).
Carol: (yelling from downstairs) What are you guys doing?
Devin: (yelling back) Nothing!
Carol: Niki, what’s going on?
Niki: Devin is just playing with that fake blood that Daddy bought for him!
Carol: Don’t make a mess!
Devin: We’re not, Mom!
Niki: Yeah, we’re not!
Devin: Tammi, look in the book and find another page where a dinosaur’s guts are hanging out.
Tammi: Devin, you’re really disgusting.
Devin: Find it! Then I can put the blood all over me (he starts to take his shirt off).
Niki: Devin, put your shirt on!
Devin: No, her’s gonna find the page (pointing to Tammi), and then I have to put blood on my guts too!

_This event was cut short when Devin heard his mother coming up the stairs. When Carol entered the room, she shook her head at Devin, and took the fake blood away from him. She told her children that they had to get ready for bed soon, and that they should read quietly in their own rooms for the next ten minutes. Once their mother left, Devin and Tammi started to giggle, and continued to read the dinosaur book quietly in Devin’s room, while Niki left for her own bedroom._

During that event, Devin’s engagement in storybook reading enabled him to acquire information about dinosaurs, and allowed him to share his interests with his sisters. As Tammi read the printed text to Devin, I observed Devin intently examine the illustrations on the pages. The graphic images (e.g., large dinosaurs with blood around their mouths, decapitated dinosaur heads) incited a connection for Devin to a toy (fake blood) that his father bought him, and he quickly ran off to find it. As outlined in the previous event, when he came back with the fake blood, he began to smear it over his body, pretending that he was either one of the dinosaurs or one of the dinosaurs’ victims depicted in the book. As I observed Devin, it was apparent that the images in the book provided him with a visual representation of dinosaurs, and enabled him to transfer the knowledge he gleaned about dinosaurs from the illustrations into his own imaginary world. In that event, Devin’s use of the fake blood (which I later learned accompanied his vampire Halloween costume) was also functional, in that it allowed him to use it in a different way to invent new meanings.

In the Pepper-Machiskinic family, informal shared reading was a recurring family practice for Devin and his sisters. The significant role of literacy in families was discussed by Taylor (1983) in her family literacy research, and one of her findings was the important role older siblings’ play in shaping their younger siblings’ experiences with literacy. This was
evident in the previous event, even though Devin’s sister, Tammi, deemed the content of the book as “gross”, and Devin’s response to the text as “disgusting.”

Although books played an important role in Devin’s meaning making at home, several of the photographs that Devin took were of toys, particularly toys that related to his interest in popular culture, animals, and his lived experiences. The following photographs were taken by Devin during the study, and as he briefly explained his photographs to me he became visibly excited and animated. Throughout the course of the research, Devin took 45 photographs of his toys.

Figure 5-5: Devin’s Photograph of a Toy Dinosaur

“That’s my T-Rex. Him’s really cool and mean!” (February 6th, 2008)
The toys in the photographs represent meaningful objects in Devin’s world, and during the study, I observed Devin use toys to replay the storylines from television episodes, video games, and storybooks, as well as his lived experiences. For instance, on several of my visits to Devin’s home after the Monster Truck show, he used the Monster Truck toy to show me the different “tricks” that he saw the trucks perform, and he excitedly set up “ramps” with blocks in his bedroom to re-create the stunts he observed. He also pretended that his toy dinosaurs were fighting and killing each other. Devin’s interest in these types of narratives was recognized and supported by his parents, particularly his father, who bought him toys that Devin related to, and that promoted gendered expectations and messages (e.g., rough-and-tumble play, power, aggression).

The School Context

Print-based activities played a significant role in the Grade One learning program. Occasionally however, Mrs. Webster also asked the children to attach a drawing to their print. For instance, during one of my observations, I observed Mrs. Webster ask the children to write a story about their weekend and to include a drawing\textsuperscript{34}. This was a very timely activity for Devin,

\textsuperscript{34} During my eight visits to the classroom (which consisted of full and half-day visits), this was the only time that I observed the Grade One teacher invite the children to share their out-of-school experiences.
as he had just attended the Monster Truck Show with his father, and he was still brimming with excitement over that experience. The following artefact (see Figure 5-7) represents a rare example where Devin was provided with an opportunity to draw on his lived experiences in the classroom, thereby creating a “third space” (Gutiérrez et al., 1997). As Devin produced his drawing and story he was able to have agency and voice, much like the children in the classroom spaces described by Dyson (1997, 2002). That activity represents an instance where Mrs. Webster allowed the children to bring their currency to the site of literacy learning, which is seldom apparent in educational discourses in early childhood (Marsh, 2003b).

**Figure 5-7: Devin’s Story in the Classroom**

![Devin's Story in the Classroom](image)

“I go to the Monster Trucks. I play with my toys. I play with my new cars. I went to the store.”

(April 28th, 2008)

The significance of Devin’s choice of topic also enabled him to engage in conversations with his male classmates about their common interests. Monster Trucks were of interest to several of the boys in the classroom, and by sharing his out-of-school experiences in the classroom, Devin was able to strategically cast himself in a powerful position of “storyteller” among his peer group. As the boys hovered around Devin’s desk, I listened to them ask Devin
the following questions: “How many Monster Trucks did you get to see?”; “Did any of the Monster Trucks crash?”; “Did anyone get killed?”  Devin answered all of their queries through verbal and gestural explanations (e.g., raising his arms in the air to show the height of the trucks, flipping his hands to replicate the stunts), and was particularly excited to tell them about the yellow earplugs that his dad bought for them before the show because of the loudness of the trucks’ engines. When the boys asked if he brought the earplugs to school, Devin replied that he left them at home, but that he would ask his mom if he could bring them the following day. As I observed Devin draw his picture, and then utilize the mode of storytelling with his peers, it was apparent that each of these communicative practices enriched and informed the other.  

During the unstructured periods of the school day, I also observed Devin utilize play to exercise agency and form meaningful relationships with his classmates. For example, during recess, and during the free play period in the classroom, Devin produced play texts that included several of the boys in the classroom, and he drew on globalized popular culture narratives that frequently centered on “good-guy/bad-guy” storylines. The boys’ use of popular culture characters and storylines enabled them to exercise competency and agency in their worlds where they were able to share their knowledge with each other and create storylines based on their shared interests. As previously articulated, the affordances of play in young children’s worlds are extensive, and children often use play to explore their multiple identities. As Devin interacted with his peers during the free play period in the classroom and outside during the recess periods, he interlaced several of the aforementioned concepts (e.g., his interest in globalized popular culture narratives, his lived experiences) into the play texts. The following event outlines the link among play, popular culture, power, and identity construction in Devin’s world at school.

**Communicative Event 5-8: Devin Making “Plans” with a Classmate (transcript: March 4th, 2008)** (data sources: observation, field notes)

It is a cloudy and overcast afternoon, and Devin and his peers are playing “pirate” tag with a large group of older and younger boys during the recess period. When the bell rings, Devin takes his time getting from the playground to the designated spot where his classmates are standing in a line waiting to go inside. When he arrives at the spot, he pushes himself to the front of the line, and grabs the jacket of one of the boys in the classroom, pulling him along with him. Devin eagerly begins to tell his peer what he wants to do in the classroom during the free play period.
Devin: Hey, at free play, let’s play with the Lego and Transformers, okay?
Peer: Okay.
Devin: Okay, we can make a big ship, and I’m gonna be the pirate, or like the captain, okay? We can make a Lego ship that looks like the one from the Pirates of the Caribbean! Have you seen that movie? It’s so awesome!
Peer: Yeah, I saw that movie. It was so wicked, like they when had to walk the plank and stuff.
Devin: Yeah awesome, let’s do that! We’ll make a plank! But, I won’t walk the plank, I’ll just get you and other guys to do it, because I’m really mean because I’m a pirate and a captain.
Peer: Okay. We could use some of the animals and pretend like there is a big lake or ocean, and then we could get eaten by sharks and crocodiles and stuff like that.
Devin: Yeah, yeah, yeah! But I’ll do that, because if you did it, then you would like know not to swim over there.
Peer: Yeah, okay.
Devin: Okay, so when we get in the classroom, I’ll see who wants to play with us – but, no girls!
Peer: Yeah, I know. No girls!
Devin: Okay, get your jacket off, and come to the carpet really quick! I’ll meet you there; we have to get to the Lego first!

Upon entering the classroom, Devin and his classmate hastily throw their jackets into their lockers, and run to the carpet at the front of the room. They grab the bucket of Lego, and start to build a ship. Devin also grabs the pirate Lego figure from the pile of Lego pieces, and puts it in his pocket. Several other boys in the classroom ask if they can play too, and Devin enthusiastically agrees. Devin begins to share the script for the play episode, and the boys eagerly begin to work on constructing the ship and the plank. At one point, two girls ask Devin if they can play with him and the other boys. Devin hastily denies them access to the Lego and their play, prompting the rest of the boys in the group to nod their approval and verbally praise Devin’s actions.

During that event, Devin excitedly shared his interest in popular culture narratives with his peers to create imaginary play scripts. Although Devin occasionally included his peers’ input and ideas for stories, he always positioned himself in a dominant role, and assigned the other boys in his classroom subsidiary roles in his play, which went unchallenged by them. Devin’s
ability to personalize and localize popular culture narratives into meaningful play texts enabled him to exercise agency at school, which often did not occur during the structured periods of the school day as he not only struggled with many of the mainstream practices (e.g., printing, reading) valued and promoted in the classroom, he was largely disinterested. Devin’s engagement in play at school also mirrored his play narratives at home with his sisters, as he always directed the play, and assigned himself primary roles which exuded power, bravery, and control.

As shown in the previous event, during the morning and afternoon recesses, Devin and his peers played traditional games, such as cops and robbers, tag, and hide-and-seek. During my visits to the school, I observed Devin play with his peers during six recess periods. As they played, I frequently observed them localize these games by incorporating different storylines from their favourite cartoons and video games, and by assuming different popular culture characters (e.g., Spiderman, Superman, Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader). The boys’ inclusion of these global narratives enabled them to make connections to the broader society, and also contributed to their construction of identity, as these roles enabled them to assume powerful and commanding imaginary positions. The following event provides a glimpse into Devin’s game-playing with his peers during a morning recess in late May.

**Communicative Event 5-9: Superheroes Come to the School Playground (transcript: May 29th, 2008)** (data sources: observation, field notes)

*It is a warm, sunny morning, and Devin and several of his male classmates have congregated beside a picnic table in the school yard. Devin starts to count how many boys are in the group, and nods his head approvingly at the four boys. He and his peers begin to choose the characters they want to assume in their play, and engage in a lively, child-choreographed script where they draw on popular culture global narratives in their meaning making.*

Devin: Okay, guys! There are five of us, and we all have to choose who we want to be. I’m Spiderman!
Peer One: Okay, I’ll be Luke Skywalker!
Peer Two: I’ll be Darth Vader then.
Peer Three: I’ll be on your team then (pointing to the boy who will be Darth Vader), cause I’m gonna be a Storm trooper!
Peer Four: Okay guys, I’ll be Superman.
Devin: Okay cool! So, it’s me, and you guys (pointing to the boys who are going to be “good guys” - *Luke Skywalker* and *Superman*) against you two (pointing to the boys who are going to be “bad guys” - *Darth Vader* and the *Storm trooper*). So, are you guys trying to destroy the world? (looking at the “bad guys”)

Peer Two: Yeah, so watch out! (Devin and the boys on “his team” start to run to the playground structure and quickly scramble up the slide)

Devin: Come and get us, suckers!

Peer Three: I have a gun, so watch out, cause I’ll shoot you! (points his finger at Devin, and makes shooting sounds). We’re taking over the world!

Peer One: *Spiderman*, build a web and attach it to the school!

Devin: Good idea, then you guys can grab onto me, and we’ll lose them!

Peer Four: No, I’m *Superman*! So, I’ll fly over there, you just have to take *Luke Skywalker* (The boy who has assumed the role of *Luke Skywalker* grabs onto Devin’s shirt and they race across the school yard and touch the school. The “bad guys” follow in pursuit. Once Devin touches the school, he informs the other “team” that he is “safe”, and that the school is their home base. This provokes a spirited argument about the use of this “new rule,” and through negotiation, the group of boys decide that the “bad guys” can have one of the picnic tables as their home base.)

The boys continue to play for the rest of the recess period, and generally stay in character throughout the event. Right before the school bell rings, Devin pretends to see a meteor hurtling toward the earth, and as a result, all of the characters end up dying in the blast. As the boys walk to the school door, they decide that during the afternoon recess, Superman will rotate the earth “back in time,” so that they can destroy the meteor before it makes contact with the earth, and thus, continue on with their play episode.

As the boys played, they engaged in several simultaneous tasks (e.g., managing social interaction and relationships, the maintenance and modification of rules of play). During their play, they also drew on multiple popular culture storylines. As the boys mediated the complexity of three different popular culture narratives, they took control of these stories by positioning themselves in different superhero roles.

That event occurred during the morning recess, and following recess, Devin and his classmates participated in Reading Groups/Speech and Language sessions in school; therefore, I did not observe the boys extend their play within the space of their classroom at that time.
However, I observed the boys “pick-up” the storyline of their play text during the afternoon recess. Following the afternoon recess, the Grade One students had a free play period in the classroom, and the boys took advantage of that time to extend their play narrative. However, rather than personally assuming the roles of their designated superheroes they used action figure toys to take on these roles. Although it has been argued that the integration of popular culture narratives in early childhood classrooms opens up possibilities for dialogue between young children and educators, and provides a space for educator-mediated critiques of a range of texts and discourses (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990, 1995), this did not occur in Devin’s classroom, as the free play period seemed to be provided to the children to appease them while Mrs. Webster got caught up on marking and worked with individual students.

Another example of how I observed Devin exercise agency in the classroom occurred when Mrs. Webster instructed Devin and his peers to draw their self-portrait. That activity was inspired by their recent field trip to an Andy Warhol exhibit at a local art gallery. The teacher gave all of the children their own hand-held mirror, and then asked them to draw their image on a piece of white paper. During that activity, I observed Devin transform the teacher’s directive by producing a “monster” self-portrait (see Figure 5-8). As Devin created his drawing, he studiously hunched over his creation, made growling sound effects, and at times, shielded his drawing from his tablemates with his arm, before enthusiastically revealing it to his peers.
The previous drawing reveals Devin’s interest in monsters, which was most likely influenced by several of the books he enjoyed reading and the cartoons he watched, as those texts frequently threaded monsters/bad guys into their storylines. His drawing was well-received by his peers, particularly the boys in the class, who complimented his drawing, and attempted to replicate his self-portrait.

As mentioned in previous chapters, during my visits to the school, I observed the ways in which rudimentary aspects of Aboriginal culture were implemented by staff and members of the community in an attempt to provide Aboriginal students with connections to their Aboriginal identity. However, the most consistent way that Aboriginal knowledge was shared with Devin and his Grade One peers was through bi-weekly visits by an Elder to their classroom. As stated in Chapter Four, however, the children were not provided with opportunities to reflect on these visits, or engage in conversation about the other Aboriginal events that occurred at the school, and no attempt was made by the adults in these settings to make links to the students’ contemporary lives.
During one of my home visits, I asked Carol and Ollie if they knew that an Elder visited Devin’s classroom on a bi-weekly basis. Carol stated that she was aware of these visits because she had read about the Elder’s involvement in the school in one of the monthly school newsletters, and Ollie stated that he did not know this was occurring. In the following excerpt, taken from our conversation, Ollie shares his thoughts on having an Elder spend time with Devin and the other children at school:

I think having an Elder talk to Devin is good, but I don’t think it’s fair to the other kids in the school who are from different backgrounds, like from China and stuff like that. They (students) should have people from their backgrounds come and talk too. I was bullied for being an Indian when I was young, and I don’t want Devin to be pulled out (of the classroom) by an Elder. I trust the Elder, but I don’t want the school to separate Devin and the other Indian kids from everyone else. They (students) should all learn about other’s history and stuff.

(personal communication, April 16th, 2008)

Based on the aforementioned conversation, I argue that the literature surrounding the lack of communication and outreach by the school to Aboriginal parents is accurate. As shown in previous excerpt, Aboriginal parents often have no idea what is actually occurring in their children’s school, and as outlined in Chapter Two, Aboriginal family members are rarely invited to meetings to decide on directions to be taken, and are rarely asked for their thoughts on how or what should be done in certain situations (Friedel, 1999).

The Kids Club and Sunday School Classroom

Sundays were long days for Devin, as the bus ride to church took approximately thirty minutes, followed by a two-hour service, lunch with congregation members, and another bus ride home. Due to the length of time it took to travel to the church and attend the service, Devin’s mother made sure that she was well-prepared to keep Devin occupied. For example, Carol filled her bag with non-fiction books about animals, blank pieces of paper, and an assortment of crayons, felt markers, and pens. Once Devin arrived at the church with his family, he spent approximately one hour in the church service (e.g., where the congregation sang hymns, listened to testimonials), before going to his Sunday school class. During that time, I observed Devin
read a number of books and produce several drawings. The following drawings (see Figures 5-9 & 5-10) were created by Devin during one of the church services. When I asked Devin about his drawings he told me that they were pictures of himself, and that he was going to show them to his friends at church when it was time to go to Sunday school.

**Figure 5-9: Devin’s Self-Portrait**

*This is a picture of me, I’m a monster with six arms! Cool, hey?*
I made another picture of me. I have wings!

(December 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2007)

At church, this type of communicative practice offered Devin a powerful medium of expression for his imagined identity. Devin created these particular drawings several months before he created his “monster” self-portrait in the classroom, and before he produced the play text in his home about the “monster” who was trying to kill Spiderman. Thus, it was apparent that the underlying narratives of “monsters” and “bad guys” held a significant importance in Devin’s world, as these themes appeared across his use of a range of semiotic systems, they appeared in multiple contexts, and his interest in these narratives lasted over a sustained period of time. When the children were told to go to their Sunday school classes, I observed Devin quickly grab his drawings, and run up to three boys who were in his class. He excitedly showed his drawings to his peers, which in turn, inspired them to also create their own monster self-portraits and drawings of “bad guys” in their Sunday school class. As the boys created their drawings, Devin took on a mentorship role by providing them with advice on how to make their self-portraits menacing and intimidating. Although Devin positioned himself in the role of an “expert” with his peers, as the boys drew, I observed them exchange thoughts and ideas fluently.
(e.g., “I like the fangs on your guy!”; “How did you make your head like that?”), and construct knowledge jointly.

**Discussion**

In this chapter, I looked at the multiple ways Devin utilized a range of communicative practices to make meaning across home, school, and community contexts. As stated on the opening page of this dissertation, from a sociocultural perspective (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978), a child’s development cannot be understood by a study of the individual. Instead, we need to also examine the external social world in which that child has developed. This perspective recognizes that who a person becomes depends on the meaning making systems that he or she participates in, and what support and assistance he or she receives from other members of that relevant community (Vygotsky, 1978). As I observed Devin travel across multiple contexts, it was apparent that the values, identities, and skills that were a part of who he was were formed through his active participation with different mediators (e.g., parents, sisters, peer group) who introduced him to specific communicative practices, embedded within new and different learning opportunities. Through my analysis, overarching themes were evident in his meaning making that focused on notions of membership, competency, and agency.

As previously suggested, during my observations of Devin’s engagement in the world as a meaning maker, it was apparent that the social construction of multiple forms of communication played a key role in his meaning making. For instance, Devin frequently made meaning in the company of others, and his agency as a meaning maker was significant to how he wished to position himself in the recurrent social activities of his daily life. This understanding was particularly evident when Devin engaged in play across contexts. Through play, Devin was able to position himself in a powerful role by producing and directing play scripts, assigning himself primary roles, and appointing secondary roles to others (e.g., sisters, classmates). As Devin engaged in play, it was apparent that his use of communicative practices empowered and enabled him to take control of his own learning, and provided him with opportunities to generate new and diverse organizations of meaning (Gallas, 1994; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). However, at times, Devin’s communicative practices were constrained, or were not recognized by the different individuals in his world as he moved across contexts. This frequently occurred at school, as many of the worksheets and themes that Devin was introduced to had little connection to his out-of-school interests and experiences, and it was only during the unstructured
free play period and during the recess periods, that he was provided with opportunities to bring his interest in play and popular culture narratives to school (e.g., Spiderman, Superman).

During my visits to the Pepper-Machiskinic home, I also observed Devin draw on combinations of semiotic systems to make meaning. For instance, as Devin engaged in play in his home, he also occasionally utilized drawing to enhance his elaborate play texts. He also read storybooks with his sisters which stimulated new ideas for play, and he engaged in video gaming with his father and sisters which he recontextualized into play texts. The support Devin received from his family as he made meaning reflects the theoretical underpinnings of a sociocultural view of learning, that being, that a range of mediators (e.g., parents, siblings) play an important role in the education of children. This is also consistent with an Aboriginal approach to family life, although traditionally, Aboriginal children grew up surrounded by both familial and communal Aboriginal caretaker-teachers who collectively contributed to the development of a child’s individual and communal identity. In Devin’s world, his circle was relatively small, and consisted primarily of his parents, who supported his interests by purchasing video games, storybooks, toys, paper, crayons, and markers that were of interest to him, and which allowed him to be a “producer” of new texts, and his sisters, who supported his learning in other ways (e.g., supporting and engaging in his play, reading Devin books, teaching him dance moves). Similar to the previous study in this dissertation, as I observed Devin and his family engage in a range of communicative practices I noticed many parallels to the literacy study that Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) conducted with African-American inner-city families. In that study, they revealed the rich array of literacy practices that were occurring in the African-American families’ homes which is similar to my findings in the Pepper-Machiskinic home.

Samara and Devin were classmates at school, and therefore, experienced the same learning activities in the Grade One classroom (aside from when they attended different Reading Groups, and Samara attended sessions with the SLP). Thus, Devin was also exposed to an array of traditional, print-based activities (e.g., worksheets, journal writing) that did not align with his out-of-school experiences\(^{35}\), or build on his emerging expertise with digital technology. Although this was the case, Devin was provided with opportunities to pursue his interest in popular culture narratives during the free play period in the classroom. For the most part, however, structured and traditional learning activities dominated the learning landscape in the

\(^{35}\) Although there were differences between the literacies practiced and valued at school compared to the literacies practiced and valued in Devin’s home, storybook reading was a valued practice that was common to both contexts.
classroom, thereby supporting the perspective of Marsh (2005), who contended that traditional early childhood schooling has tended to focus on normalized versions of childhood in which developmentally-appropriate practice is neatly packaged for children who enjoy linear developmental trajectories. While I recognize that it was the teacher’s responsibility to follow the curriculum guides and learning objectives outlined by the Ministry, I argue that this came at the expense of building on Devin’s funds of knowledge and out-of-school engagement with popular culture, media, and digital texts, all of which were deeply inscribed in his contemporary childhood. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the school staff included sporadic Aboriginal activities in the learning curriculum. However, these experiences appeared to be superficial “add-ons” as I did not observe these events, or the meanings embedded in these practices being expanded on by the teachers or other school staff.

During my visits to the Kids Club and Sunday school classroom, I observed the volunteers introduce Devin to new communicative practices (e.g., Christian children’s songs, reciting Bible verses). Although Devin generally participated in these activities, he was much more interested in engaging in play with his peers, and building on their shared knowledge of popular culture. As discussed previously, across all of the significant contexts in Devin’s world (home, Grade One classroom, Sunday school classroom, Kids Club), popular culture toys were a part of the landscape. This enabled Devin to pursue his interests in each environment, where he positioned himself in a leadership role by navigating the play and assuming the powerful and principal characters in the play texts. As I observed Devin in the two community contexts, it appeared that his motivation for participating in these programs was for the social networking opportunities they provided.

In the following chapter, I use the technique of cross-case analysis to reveal the significant themes across the two case studies included in this dissertation.
Chapter Six
Cross-Case Analysis

Although a single case may provide a detailed understanding of a phenomenon, the use of more than one case allows for greater opportunity to make comparisons across several representations of the phenomenon.
- Borman, Clarke, Cotner, & Lee (2006)

In the preceding chapters, I presented the findings from two cases. I arrived at these findings through my use of qualitative methods of data collection, and the utilization of four phases of analysis, as outlined in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I take the analysis one step further by conducting a cross-case analysis. Tesch (1990) described the technique of cross-case analysis as a process of “decontextualization and recontextualization.” During this process, data are decontextualized as they are separated into units of meaning through coding in each case, and then recontextualized as they are reintegrated into themes across cases.

In this dissertation, the theoretical perspectives provided a comprehensive framework for analysis of this multiple case study. As revealed in the previous two chapters, dominant themes that were congruent to both focal children’s meaning making emerged from the data. These themes centered on: i) the importance of membership in their worlds, which included the significance they placed on being viewed as competent meaning makers; and, ii) the notion of agency, specifically the ways in which they exercised agency as meaning makers across sociocultural contexts. Through the technique of cross-case analysis, I was then able to uncover several prominent sub-themes across the cases. In this chapter, I outline the salient sub-themes that occurred across the children’s meaning making at home, followed by the sub-themes that occurred in their meaning making at school and in community contexts. In this stage of analysis, I developed matrices of the commonalities and variations between the cases in each context to enable the reader to look across rows or down columns and perform a “squint analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These matrices are followed by in-depth summaries of the common sub-themes across the cases according to context (e.g., home, school).
The Focal Children’s Meaning Making at Home

As the children made meaning in their homes, it was evident that they utilized a range of communicative practices for a variety of purposes, and that their parents and siblings influenced and supported their use of these practices. As outlined in the literature review, recognition has been given to a range of individuals (e.g., parents, siblings) who, through collaborative group activity, pass on cultural and linguistic knowledge in informal ways in their everyday activities and relationships with children (Gregory, 2000). The following matrix highlights the children’s meaning making in their homes, and reveals the role their family members played in their construction of meaning. The ways in which the children’s identities were constructed is also presented. The following matrix highlights the children’s meaning making at home, and reveals the similarities and differences between the cases. In-depth descriptions of the sub-themes and variations across the cases follow the matrix.

Table 6-1: Summary of Samara’s and Devin’s Meaning Making at Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Child</th>
<th>Types and purposes of communicative practices</th>
<th>The role of mediators in the focal children’s meaning making</th>
<th>Identity Construction</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samara</td>
<td>Video gaming to form and maintain relationships/sense of belonging with parents and sisters; to develop skills and acquire knowledge; for entertainment and enjoyment</td>
<td>Samara’s sisters and parents introduced her to video games/rules of the games; acted as scaffolders as she played</td>
<td>Constructed an identity as an emerging gamer in her family; assumed a virtual identity while playing the video game</td>
<td>Played Nintendo Wii® bowling game with her family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal Child</td>
<td>Types and purposes of communicative practices</td>
<td>The role of mediators in the focal children’s meaning making</td>
<td>Identity Construction</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging with websites on the Internet to form social relationships with others/sense of belonging; to develop skills and acquire knowledge; for enjoyment and entertainment</td>
<td>Samara’s sisters, parents, and a family friend helped her locate websites; they sporadically supported her engagement with these websites</td>
<td>Constructed an identity as an emerging, competent user of technology; made links from the virtual world to her lived experiences (e.g., having a best friend)</td>
<td>Played games on <em>Dora the Explorer</em> website; listened to and viewed on-line story about <em>Dora</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play for enjoyment; to develop skills</td>
<td>Family members did not engage in play with her; Samara played with her puppy, who often occupied a central role in her play texts</td>
<td>Assumed an anticipated or imagined identity of a “mother” or “caretaker” when playing with her puppy</td>
<td>Playing with her puppy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing for enjoyment; to develop skills</td>
<td>Samara’s parents provided her with crayons, pencil crayons, markers, and paper</td>
<td>Identified herself as a child living in an inner-city neighbourhood</td>
<td>Drew pictures of her house and of graffiti</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching Aboriginal hip-hop videos/listening to hip-hop music for entertainment and enjoyment; sense of belonging/to form social relationships</td>
<td>Samara’s father introduced Samara and his other daughters to these songs and videos</td>
<td>Samara’s father shared the social history and identity of Aboriginal people with his daughters</td>
<td>Engaged in conversations about the music/videos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal Child</td>
<td>Types and purposes of communicative practices</td>
<td>The role of mediators in the focal children’s meaning making</td>
<td>Identity Construction</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>Video gaming to form and maintain relationships with father and sisters/sense of belonging; to develop skills and acquire knowledge; for entertainment and enjoyment</td>
<td>Ollie introduced Devin to video games; Ollie supported Devin’s development by acting as a scaffolder</td>
<td>Constructed an identity as an emerging, competent gamer in his family; assumed a virtual identity while playing the Wii® video game</td>
<td>Played Xbox 360 Lego Star Wars video game with his family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play to form relationships with his sisters and me; for entertainment and enjoyment; to develop skills</td>
<td>Devin’s sisters actively participated in his play texts; Devin’s parents purchased toys that supported his interests</td>
<td>Positioned himself in the anticipated and imagined role of a crime scene investigator, and other popular culture characters</td>
<td>Threaded popular culture storylines and toys into his play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing to form a relationship with me; for enjoyment; to develop skills</td>
<td>Devin’s mother provided him with paper, pens, pencil crayons, markers</td>
<td>Assumed the position of a storyteller; combined lived experiences with drawing</td>
<td>Created monster poster and “money”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Storybook/non-fiction book to form relationships with his sisters; to develop skills and acquire knowledge</td>
<td>Devin’s mother bought him books, took him to the library, created personalized scrapbooks about Devin’s life</td>
<td>Assumed the imagined identity of a dinosaur</td>
<td>Used dinosaur storybook as a catalyst for play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal Child</td>
<td>Types and purposes of communicative practices</td>
<td>The role of mediators in the focal children’s meaning making</td>
<td>Identity Construction</td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>Singing/dancing/listening to music to form relationships with his father and sisters/sense of belonging; to develop skills and acquire knowledge; for enjoyment and entertainment</td>
<td>Ollie supported Devin’s interest in music/popular culture by buying him an iPod® and uploading music onto it; Devin’s sisters taught him the dance steps to a popular hip-hop song</td>
<td>Constructed an identity as an emerging, competent user of digital technology; as knowledgeable about global, popular culture songs among his peers</td>
<td>Danced and sang to popular culture music that was uploaded onto his iPod®</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sub-Themes in Samara’s and Devin’s Meaning Making at Home**

A cross-case analysis of the focal children’s meaning making in their homes revealed three prominent sub-themes. Within these common sub-themes there were also variances (primarily gender-specific) between the cases. These sub-themes include: i) the significance the focal children placed on being valued members of the “digital kinship” or digital culture that was evident in their families; ii) the impact globalized popular culture narratives played in their meaning making, specifically in their identity construction; and iii) the notion of “parental investment” in relation to the children’s meaning making.

**Digital Kinship**

Alexander, Miller, and Hengst (2001) argued that “family life is embedded in recurring activities that are mediated by particular discourses, and young children come to orient themselves within particular systems of meaning by participating in these everyday social practices” (p. 379). In the focal children’s homes, this understanding was evident, as their families’ use of a wide range of digital technologies played a significant role in their meaning making, and brought about the emergence of new social and digitextual practices in their lives (Hull 2003; Hull & Nelson 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Livingstone 2002). Throughout
the research period, I observed the focal children and their family members interact with computers, iPods®, and digital cameras for a variety of purposes; however, it was their engagement with video games that seemed to occupy the most significant place in both families’ meaning making, both as a social activity and as a valued form of entertainment.

During my observations in the focal children’s homes, I observed Samara and Devin become apprenticed into the skills they needed to navigate and succeed at these video games by their more experienced family members. As the children became more competent video gamers, I observed their family members move from guides to collaborators. In both homes, the children’s engagement with video games, and other forms of digital technology provided them with an entryway into the valued discourse on digital technology among their family members. Through their use of digital technology, Devin and Samara were able to assume agentive roles, as they were provided with opportunities to independently engage with different digital texts, and engage in conversations with their family about digital technology and new media. The importance of digital technology in the children’s worlds supports the finding of Carrington (2005) who posited that in many young children’s worlds, mastery with, and knowledge of a range of multimodal texts, including digital texts, are highly valued commodities in peer and family cultures. In contrast to Devin’s experiences with digital technology, Samara’s family had access to the Internet, which provided her with a much broader link to global narratives through multiple forms of representation (e.g., YouTube™ video clips, children’s websites, social networking sites). These multimodal texts allowed her to further explore her interest in Dora the Explorer, which played a significant role in her meaning-making at home36, and become familiar with Aboriginal hip-hop music and videos.

Although Devin and Samara were provided with opportunities to engage in a range of digitextual practices in their homes, this inevitably brings up the question: What skills are the focal children acquiring through video game playing (and other forms of engagement with digital technology) that will advance their learning, particularly in broader contexts, such as at school?37 Previously, I discussed the blurring of education and entertainment in relation to the children’s use of digital technology, which Buckingham and Scanlon (2001) referred to as

36 The role of popular culture narratives in the focal children’s worlds will be discussed in more depth in the following themes.
37 Although I situate the present study within the body of literacy research that acknowledges meaning making as a social practice, I contend that the development of skills is also a part of social practice. As outlined in previous chapters, one of the purposes linked to the focal children’s engagement in communicative practices was for skills development. The development of skills is also a valued component of school learning.
“edutainment.” This perspective recognizes that in addition to entertainment and enjoyment, children’s engagement with digital technology facilitates a number of skills which can advance their learning. These skills include: discussing and sharing, following directions, basic math and reading skills, problem solving, hand-eye coordination, and symbol reading, all of which are significant to contemporary children’s learning in school. Additionally, at school and in other contexts, there are always other children who share a passion for digital technology (e.g., console videogames, hand-held video games), which can aid in the formation of friendships based on common shared interests.

It is important to note, however, that the technological transformations taking place in this millennium are impacting Aboriginal cultural knowledge and Aboriginal family structures. In the past, the use of print literacy was viewed as the mark of superior civilization, and residential schools made every attempt to eradicate Aboriginal children’s ways of knowing that were grounded in reading the environment, and included the transmission of knowledge through oral communication. As shown in the present study, the current communicational landscape in which young, Aboriginal children are making sense of their worlds is comprised of a complex interplay of factors that includes the increased use of digital technologies and globalization. This has inevitably played a role in the decline of Aboriginal texts (e.g., dance, reading the environment, ceremonies) being a central part of urban Aboriginal families, and has led them to seek new ways of expressing their contemporary Indigenous identity (e.g., Aboriginal hip-hop music/videos).

Digital technology and new media have become so pervasive in the lives of many young children around the globe that it is difficult to recall what life was like before cell phones, digital cameras, iPods®, and the Internet (Ito et al., 2008); and for Devin and Samara, they have not known a world without these forms of technology. The rise of digital technology and globalization also highlights the paradox between contemporary, technologically-based communicative practices, and Aboriginal forms of meaning making. This will be further discussed in the final chapter, including how digital forms of communication and Aboriginal approaches to literacy might be merged to form meaningful forms of representation and communication for Aboriginal children in contemporary early childhood classrooms.
Globalized Identity Construction

During my visits to the focal children’s homes, the impact of global popular culture narratives in their lives was evident. What seemed to be particularly appealing to both children was the intertextuality or hybridity of popular culture narratives in their worlds. This enabled them to encounter the same themes, storylines, and characters in different forms, and provided them with opportunities to recontextualize the globalized narratives they encountered into more localized texts that were specific to their cultural practices. The concept of globalization-localization was therefore critically important to understanding the link between the children’s identity construction and their interest in popular culture as it allowed me to trace the ways they adopted and adapted cultural icons, artifacts, and narratives in order to articulate aspects of their identities (Marsh, 2005).

In this study, Devin was interested in a range of globalized popular culture narratives that catered specifically to young boys (e.g., Spiderman, Star Wars). He engaged with these narratives through his use of different multimodal texts (e.g., toys, songs, video games, storybooks). Samara also engaged with globalized popular culture narratives through multiple multimodal texts; however, the themes of these narratives generally related to young girls, and she was particularly interested in the world of Dora the Explorer. In comparison to Devin’s home, which was rich with popular culture toys, Samara’s exposure to popular culture occurred almost exclusively through technology (e.g., websites, DVDs, YouTube™ video clips, television).

Devin’s and Samara’s engagement with specific popular culture characters played a significant role in the shaping of their identities, and motivated them to participate in a range of communicative practices. For example, during the study, I observed Samara take on a mothering and caring role as she played with her pets, similar to the way that Dora interacted with her animal friends. In comparison, I watched Devin assume authoritative and superhero roles in his play, such as a crime scene investigator, Spiderman, and Luke Skywalker. Although the roles the children assumed generally followed stereotypical gender discourses, there were several intersections in the personal characteristics of the popular culture characters that were of interest to them. For example, the characters that Devin related to, such as Luke Skywalker and Spiderman, had a specific set of characteristics (e.g., brave, competent, powerful), all of which are representative of the ways that male characters are typically portrayed in popular media. However, Dora the Explorer also shared these characteristics. Although she is not considered to
be a “superhero,” *Dora* is portrayed as brave, competent, practical, and independent, which significantly differs from how popular culture narratives that cater to young girls are typically represented in contemporary media culture.

**Parental Investment**

As Devin and Samara engaged in a range of communicative practices in their homes, it was apparent that their learning interactions frequently occurred within “organized, flexible webs of relationships that focus on shared cultural activities” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 97). This understanding is supported by others (e.g., Gregory & Williams, 2000; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) who have discussed the importance of families in children’s learning and development.

As previously mentioned, Devin and Samara shared a desire to engage in the communicative practices that their family members participated in, the majority of which were embedded within media and digital technologies. Although both families engaged with a range of digitextual practices in their everyday lives, the ways in which they supported the focal children’s use of these practices looked different in each home.

For example, in the Pepper-Machiskinic home, Ollie introduced Devin and his daughters to video games. During the study, I never observed Carol play video games with her family, and when I asked her about this, she said that there were always too many household chores to do, and that video gaming was something Ollie enjoyed doing with their children. During my visits to the Pepper-Machiskinic home, I observed Ollie model how to play the video games, and I also observed him encourage and mentor his children as they played. During the study, Ollie also bought Devin an iPod® and uploaded his son’s favourite songs onto the playlist, the majority of which were from animated popular movies (e.g., *Madagascar, Cars*). He also bought Devin popular culture toys and DVDs that he knew Devin was interested in, while Carol purchased clothes for Devin that featured his favourite characters (e.g., *Luke Skywalker, Spiderman, SpongeBob Squarepants*), as well as books that related to his interests, and a wide variety of writing materials (e.g., paper, notebooks, marker, pens, pencil crayons).

Video game playing was also a valued practice in Samara’s home and involved everyone in the family, including the children in the neighbourhood. In the Pasap family, all of Samara’s sisters, and both of her parents apprenticed her into the skills linked to video game playing. They also uploaded *Dora the Explorer* video clips for her on YouTube™, and showed Samara how to use a cell phone and digital camera. In addition, Beatrice and Renae purchased DVDs
for Samara that were based on her popular culture interests, bought her clothes with *Dora* decals, and for her birthday, they bought her a *Barbie* laptop and *Dora the Explorer* digital camera.

It has been well documented that Aboriginal people have strong family values, and apprentice their children into the valued practices of their families and communities in multiple ways. Historically, this occurred through the use of oral traditions and other symbolic forms of communication. However, as shown in this study, the transmission of knowledge is changing in Aboriginal children’s worlds, as the technological transformations taking place in the new millennium are playing an important role in these Aboriginal families’ meaning making and identity construction.

**The Focal Children’s Meaning Making at School**

At school, both children engaged in a range of communicative practices for a variety of purposes. Although many of these practices were imposed on the children by the classroom teacher and different teacher assistants, Devin and Samara were also provided with small periods of time to exercise agency, and to participate in their own valued forms of meaning making. In the following section and included matrix, I outline the similarities and variations in the children’s meaning making at school. In-depth descriptions of the sub-themes and variations across the cases are then discussed.
Table 6-2: Summary of Samara’s and Devin’s Meaning Making at School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Child</th>
<th>Types and purposes of communicative practices</th>
<th>The role of mediators in the focal children’s meaning making</th>
<th>Identity Construction</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samara</td>
<td>Storybook reading (teacher-imposed and directed; self-directed) to form social relationships/sense of belonging; to develop skills and acquire knowledge; for enjoyment</td>
<td>Mrs. Webster modelled book reading by reading to the whole class; Reading Group teacher assistant read books to small groups of children, provided individual help to Samara as she read leveled books</td>
<td>Attempted to position herself as a “good student” by engaging in the valued practices promoted at school</td>
<td>Read leveled books with Reading Group teacher assistant; Samara independently read storybooks (e.g., <em>Franklin the Turtle</em>) in the classroom, and read books with Gabby and me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Printing/drawing activities (teacher-imposed/directed) to develop skills and acquire knowledge; sense of belonging</td>
<td>Teacher/teacher assistant introduced Samara to worksheets, agenda writing, phonics, grammar</td>
<td>Attempted to position herself as a “good student” by engaging in the valued practices promoted at school</td>
<td>Completed an “All about Me” worksheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Printing/drawing activities (self/peer-initiated) to form and maintain social relationship with Gabby; to develop skills; for enjoyment</td>
<td>Teacher provided children with scrap paper, notebooks, pens, pencils, crayons, markers; Gabby encouraged Samara by praising her writing skills</td>
<td>Positioned herself as an important member of a friendship in the classroom</td>
<td>Created personalized storybooks with Gabby based on their play texts and shared experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playing (peer-initiated) for entertainment and enjoyment; to form a meaningful relationship with Gabby; sense of belonging</td>
<td>Gabby included Samara in her play texts during recess</td>
<td>Gabby allocated secondary roles to Samara; Samara was included as an important member of a peer group</td>
<td>Played “High School Musical” on the playground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal Child</td>
<td>Types and purposes of communicative practices</td>
<td>The role of mediators in the focal children’s meaning making</td>
<td>Identity Construction</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>Storybook reading/ non-fiction book reading (teacher-imposed and directed; self-directed) to form social relationships/sense of belonging; to develop skills and acquire knowledge; for enjoyment</td>
<td>Mrs. Webster modelled book reading by reading to whole class; Reading Group teacher assistant provided individual help to Devin as he read leveled books; Devin and his peers read storybooks/non-fiction books together</td>
<td>Attempted to engage in the valued practices of the classroom; Devin exercised agency by engaging in books that were of interest to him; positioned himself in an authoritative role among his peer group</td>
<td>Read leveled books with teacher assistant; read storybooks about knights, castles, and animals with the boys in his class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Printing/drawing activities (teacher-directed) to develop skills and acquire knowledge; sense of belonging</td>
<td>Mrs. Webster introduced Devin to worksheets, phonics skills, and grammar; had Devin attach a drawing to one of his writings; self-portrait</td>
<td>Exercised agency within these tasks to position himself in a powerful role among his peers</td>
<td>Wrote a story about his weekend; agenda writing; drew a “monster” self-portrait; Monster Truck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playing (self-directed) for entertainment and enjoyment; to form meaningful relationships with peers/sense of belonging</td>
<td>Boys in the classroom engaged in Devin’s play texts</td>
<td>Positioned himself in a powerful role by directing the play</td>
<td>Built a Lego <em>Pirates of the Caribbean</em> ship with the boys in his class; included other toys in his play (e.g., plastic animals); engaged in Superhero play at recess</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sub-Themes in Samara’s and Devin’s Meaning Making at School

A cross-case analysis of the focal children’s meaning making at school revealed two dominant sub-themes. Within these common sub-themes there were also variances between the cases. These themes include: i) the important role friendships played in Samara’s and Devin’s meaning making; ii) the intersections and discrepancies between the literacies promoted and valued in the children’s primary classroom, and the communicative practices used by the focal children in their homes.

Friendship

A strong pattern that emerged across both cases was the important role friendships played in each focal child’s meaning making at school. However, this looked different in each case. For example, during the study, I observed Devin primarily interact with the boys in his classroom, and together, they frequently brought their out-of-school interests to the classroom or school playground, thereby creating a “third space” (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997). The creation of a transformative third space opened an area where Devin and his peers could weave their shared interest in global popular culture narratives into their play, and assume imagined identities, free of adult constraints and the literacy practices endorsed in their classroom. However, as illustrated in Chapter Five, their play texts went unacknowledged by the teaching team. During these periods (e.g., recess, free play), Devin held a leadership role, as he was often the child who initiated the play and created new rules and other improvisations as he played with his peers. This enabled Devin to construct a powerful sense of identity and competency within his peer group.

In comparison, Samara interacted almost exclusively with Gabby at school. The value Samara placed on her relationship and interactions with Gabby in this context also paralleled their strong friendship outside of the classroom. As described in Chapter Four, the girls enjoyed creating storybooks together in the classroom that were based on their shared personal history. As they produced these identity texts they co-constructed knowledge and understanding, exchanged thoughts and ideas, and made personal connections. In the classroom, I also watched Gabby act as a guide and mentor to Samara by helping her navigate classroom practices and routines.
As Devin interacted with the boys in his classroom, and Samara interacted with Gabby, their meaning making was supported through these friendships, particularly during the unstructured periods of the day. These friendships allowed them to talk about the selected texts (e.g., play, storybook reading) they engaged in or produced, which in turn, motivated a shared culture of learning, or as Bruner (1986) contended “a joint culture of creating” (p. 127).

**Home-School Discontinuities**

Several researchers and theorists have addressed the discontinuities between home and school literacies for young children (e.g., Gregory, 1996; Heath, 1983; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Volk, 1997). Lankshear and Knobel (2003) added to this discussion through their distinction between literacies that resemble “school literacies”, such as reading and print awareness, and literacies that do not resemble the literacies promoted in schools (e.g., computer and video gaming). As suggest previously, however, it would be unreasonable to think that “school literacies” do not need to occupy a significant place in early childhood classrooms, as these literacies have provided the foundation for school-based learning across centuries, and these literacies are necessary for children to succeed in today’s world. However, I argue that by focusing solely on school literacies, at the expense of broader notions of literacy in children’s out-of-school worlds, we are invalidating the fluent and resourceful ways that children make meaning in their worlds (Knobel, 2001), and thus, valuing only a narrow view of what counts as effective language and literacy education for young children. Luke (1998) added that students’ future worlds will require the use of conventional print literacies in combination with new types of literacies, and posited that this confluence will enable children to access and construct knowledge in multiple ways within local and global worlds. Therefore, classroom learning needs to account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with a broad range of technologies in our increasingly globalized society (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

In relation to the current study, Devin and Samara engaged with a diverse range of technologies in their homes (e.g., computers, iPods, digital cameras) that provided them with multiple affordances (e.g., access to new information, development of skills). However, digital technology was noticeably absent from their classroom, thus preventing them from bringing their expertise with a range of digitextual practices to the classroom.
Although the children were not provided with opportunities to bring their digitextual knowledge to the Grade One classroom, they were provided with opportunities to engage in their own valued forms of meaning making during the “free play” period at the end of each school day. During that time, Samara often utilized combinations of semiotic systems (drawing, writing) to create personalized storybooks with Gabby. When this occurred, there appeared to be an “intersection” between her use of print, and what was valued and promoted in school. During the free play period, Devin engaged in play with his peers that included both generic toys and popular culture action figures, and he often wove popular culture narratives that were of interest to him and the other boys into the play texts.

Throughout the study, I never observed Devin or Samara transfer or draw on the specific practices or themes that they encountered at school in their homes. This finding differs from the work of Williams (2004), whose study revealed how children played “school” at home, and included a range of activities they associated with the structure of school in their play scripts (e.g., science and physical education lessons, school trips and assemblies). However, both focal children brought their out-of-school experiences to the classroom, and as mentioned previously, Devin in particular, brought his interest in popular culture to the classroom, even though it was not officially introduced by the Grade One teacher (see e.g., Dyson, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003). During my observations in the classroom, I only observed one occasion where the teacher solicited the children’s out-of-school interests. Therefore, it was primarily during the unstructured periods of the school day that the children were able to bring their out-of-school interests and funds of knowledge to the school context.

The Focal Children’s Meaning Making in Community Contexts

In the Christian-based community contexts that were a part of this study, the focal children were introduced to a new realm of literacies, “church literacies” (e.g., memorizing Bible verses, listening to Bible storybooks, singing Christian children’s songs) that reinforced a set of beliefs and values to them. In those settings, Devin and Samara were also provided with a significant amount of autonomy to participate in other types of meaning making (e.g., play, drawing) that they valued. In the following section and included matrix I outline the similarities and variations in the children’s meaning making in a shared community context (Kids Club), and I also include the communicative practices that Devin engaged with at church.
### Table 6-3: Summary of Samara’s and Devin’s Meaning Making in Community Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Child</th>
<th>Types and purposes of communicative practices</th>
<th>The role of mediators in the focal children’s meaning making</th>
<th>Identity Construction</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Samara</td>
<td>Storybook reading/listening to oral stories (volunteer-directed; self-directed) to form social relationships; to acquire information; to develop skills; for enjoyment</td>
<td>Volunteers (Kids Club) read storybooks/told stories with Biblical themes to Samara and her peers; Samara looked at Christian children’s storybooks with Gabby and her sisters</td>
<td>Positioned herself as a competent member of the club by engaging in the valued practices promoted by the volunteers</td>
<td>Read books about <em>David and Goliath, Baby Moses, Daniel and the Lions</em> with her peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reciting Bible verses (volunteer-directed) for sense of belonging</td>
<td>Volunteers (Kids Club) introduced Samara to the practice of reciting and memorizing Bible verses</td>
<td>Attempted to position herself as a competent member of the club by memorizing Bible verses</td>
<td>Memorized and recited Bible verses with assistance from volunteers to receive stickers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Singing/dancing (volunteer-directed) to develop skills; to form meaningful relationships/sense of belonging; for enjoyment</td>
<td>Volunteers (Kids Club) introduced Samara and the other children to Christian children’s songs</td>
<td>Emerged as a competent singer; mentored other children’s development</td>
<td>Sang Christian action songs (e.g. <em>Johnny Appleseed, Jesus Loves Me</em>) in peer group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing/writing (self/peer-directed) for enjoyment; to form a meaningful relationship with Gabby; to develop skills</td>
<td>Gabby supported Samara’s bookmaking through positive comments and praise</td>
<td>Positioned herself as an important member of a friendship at the Kids Club</td>
<td>Created storybooks with Gabby about their friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal Child</td>
<td>Types and purposes of communicative practices</td>
<td>The role of mediators in the focal children’s meaning making</td>
<td>Identity Construction</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>Playing (peer-directed/self-directed) for entertainment and enjoyment; to form a meaningful relationship with Gabby and her sisters; sense of belonging</td>
<td>Volunteers (Kids Club) included toys/games in the program</td>
<td>Positioned herself as an important member of a group at the Kids Club</td>
<td>Played <em>Dora the Explorer</em> board game with Gabby; made beaded necklaces with her sisters; played with playdough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>Storybook reading/listening to oral stories (volunteer-directed; self-initiated) to acquire information; for sense of belonging</td>
<td>Volunteers (Kids Club/Sunday School) read storybooks/told stories with Biblical themes to Devin and his peers</td>
<td>Engaged in these practices to be viewed as a competent meaning-maker by peer group</td>
<td>Read books about <em>David and Goliath, Baby Moses, Daniel and the Lions</em> with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>Reciting Bible verses (volunteer-directed) for sense of belonging</td>
<td>Volunteers (Kids Club/Sunday school) introduced Devin to the practice of reciting and memorizing verses</td>
<td>Engaged in these practices to be viewed as a competent meaning-maker by peer group</td>
<td>Memorized and recited Bible verses to receive stickers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>Singing/dancing (volunteer-directed) for sense of belonging</td>
<td>Volunteers (Kids Club/Sunday school) introduced Devin and the other children to Christian children’s songs</td>
<td>Engaged in these practices to be viewed as a competent meaning-maker by peer group</td>
<td>Sang Christian action songs (e.g., <em>Jesus Loves Me</em>) in peer group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>Drawing (self-directed) for enjoyment and entertainment; to form relationships with peers</td>
<td>Sunday school peers asked Devin questions about his drawings</td>
<td>Positioned himself as a mentor to his peer group</td>
<td>Created “monster” self-portraits; mentored his Sunday school peers as they created similar self-portraits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sub-Themes in Samara’s and Devin’s Meaning Making in Community Contexts

During my observations of the children’s meaning making in community contexts, one dominant sub-theme arose between the cases. This common theme was: i) the role Christian-based organizations/programs played in the focal children’s meaning making, including the affordances of these programs for both the focal children and their parents.

The Role of Christian Programs

During the study, the community contexts that revealed themselves as important in the children’s worlds were grounded in Christian-based principles and beliefs. These contexts (inner-city church, Kids Club) promoted Christian values to Devin and Samara through conversation, song, storybook reading, and Biblical readings. The children were also given opportunities to play with popular culture toys and puzzles, and engage in different art activities in these contexts. The relationship the families shared with these Christian organizations stands in stark contrast to past associations that existed between Aboriginal communities and Christian missionary groups. Hare (2005) posited that in the past, many Christian groups deliberately attempted to isolate Aboriginal children from the socializing structures of their lives. During that time, the “Christianization” of Aboriginal people “caused a break in the cultural continuity that led to the passing on of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next” (Hare, 2005, p. 251).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focal Child</th>
<th>Types and purposes of communicative practices</th>
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<th>Identity Construction</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Playing (self/peer-directed) for enjoyment; to form meaningful relationships with peers/sense of belonging</td>
<td>Volunteers (Kids Club/Sunday School) included toys/games in programs; peer group engaged in play with Devin</td>
<td>Positioned himself in a powerful, lead role by directing the play</td>
<td>Created a Lego city with the boys in his Sunday School classroom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During the study, I made a total of seven visits to the Kids Club and Devin’s church, and during each visit I observed Devin and Samara engage in their own valued forms of meaning making (e.g., play, storybook-making), while also being introduced to meaning making practices that incorporated Christian-based principles and messages (e.g., singing Christian children’s songs, reciting Bible verses). In the Kids Club, and at the inner-city Sunday school program that Devin attended, the children were free to engage in their own choice of activity, and although there were routines in both programs, it was loosely structured, and the children were given numerous opportunities to exercise agency by pursuing their own interests.

Although the children were immersed in the Christian-based practices promoted in these contexts during their time in those settings, and Devin was exposed to these practices and principles twice a week (Thursday evening at the Kids Club and Sunday morning at church), I did not observe the children transfer or draw on the songs, stories, and Bible verses they were introduced to, or make direct links from what was being taught in these contexts to their lives outside of these settings. For example, Devin was far more interested in forming relationships with the boys who attended the Kids Club and Sunday school program, and in continuing to position himself in a role of authority with his peers by directing play scripts, and by helping his peers create drawings modeled after his own.

In comparison, Samara appeared to take great pleasure in being a part of her peer group at the Kids Club, particularly during the singing portion of the session, as she excelled at the actions of the songs, and acted as a model for the other children. She also seemed to enjoy the continuity of having Gabby by her side, particularly when they collaboratively engaged in book-making. The sense of belonging that comes from a child’s active involvement with his or her peer group has been documented in a range of ethnographic studies (e.g., Corsaro, 1985; Hogan & Hogan, 1991; Rizzo, 1989). Those studies recognized the importance a set of activities, routines, and values played within the peer culture of young children. In the community contexts that were a part of the focal children’s worlds, it was apparent that Devin’s and Samara’s attendance and participation in these weekly programs was highly motivated by their need to interact with others, and their desire to form meaningful relationships with their peers.

Although Samara’s and Devin’s parents believed that these Christian-based programs were caring and friendly environments, and that the volunteers shared a “good message” with their children, they were also resourceful and strategic in their decision-making in sending their children to these programs. For example, the children’s attendance in these programs,
specifically the Kids Club, got the children “out of the house”, and enabled them to pursue their own interests and engage in a range of practices in their homes (e.g., scrapbooking, browsing the Internet). Their children’s involvement in these programs also presented their families with new opportunities from which they frequently benefitted (e.g., free summer camps for their children), and these programs also provided their children with additional language and literacy experiences (e.g., songs, drama productions).

**Summary**

In this study, my goal was to provide a view into Samara’s and Devin’s meaning making over a ten-month period. To do so, I weighed and sifted through the communicative events that I thought best represented the children’s meaning making, and made choices about what was trivial, what to include, and what to exclude in this dissertation. These events were included in an attempt to let the reader grasp “the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural contexts (Davis, 1997, p. 30). I engaged in a cross-case analysis so that interconnections within and across the cases could be revealed, and thus, lead to stronger understandings of contemporary Aboriginal children’s meaning making, resulting in increased credibility (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003).

In-depth case studies, particularly those that have documented the relevance of home-school-community environments to a child’s literacy learning (e.g., Gregory & Williams, 2000; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) acted as models for the present comparative case study. In the present dissertation, the case studies revealed the ways that Devin and Samara constructed meaning within and beyond their family structures, and provided insight into how different individuals impacted their learning (e.g., peer group, best friend, teachers, volunteers). As the focal children moved across contexts, it became apparent that at times, specific communicative practices were imposed on them by a range of mediators (e.g., teacher, teacher assistant); there were also periods of time, however, when Devin’s and Samara’s agency and personal interests surfaced in their meaning making in these environments (e.g., Samara’s production of personal books at school and at the Kids Club; Devin’s self-portraits of monsters at school and at church).

In the final chapter, Chapter Seven, I summarize the significant findings of the current study, and discuss the study’s contribution to the field of early childhood literacy. I also highlight implications for theory, as well as implications for policy makers, primary teachers,
and Aboriginal children and their families. I conclude the chapter by suggesting recommendations for further research.
Chapter Seven
Conclusions, Implications, and Further Study

Children carry within themselves unique collections of individual meanings that result from experiences they encounter.
- Schiro (2008)

In this study, I examined two six-year-old urban Aboriginal children’s meaning making through their use of a wide range of communicative practices. In addition to examining the types and uses of communicative practices the focal children engaged in as they moved across contexts, I observed the ways family members, friends, teachers, and community members influenced and supported their use of multiple semiotic systems, and I explored the link between their communicative practices and their identity construction. In this final chapter, I present interpretative explanations and conclusions drawn from the findings, and I also return to the significance of this study, which was presented in Chapter One. In the initial chapter of this dissertation, I stated that although Saskatchewan Community Schools are attempting to incorporate Aboriginal content in their programming, what is missing, are Aboriginal students’ voices on their use of communicative practices in their everyday lives, including the ways technological transformations, globalization, and popular culture narratives are impacting their meaning making.

As will be discussed later in this chapter, it is against that backdrop that I suggest that a space needs to be created for contemporary Aboriginal children to engage in communicative practices that are meaningful to them within the classroom. In this chapter, I also address implications for policy makers and teachers, and explore the role they can play in the development of culturally-relevant literacy curriculum for young Aboriginal children in primary classrooms. I also address implications for Aboriginal children and their families. Finally, I present the limitations of the study and suggest directions for further study.

Conclusions

In this study, I drew on several theoretical perspectives to understand the multimodal textual worlds of two urban Aboriginal children, and to develop an understanding of the powerful and influential role different mediators played in the children’s lives, particularly in the area of meaning making. Martello (2002) argued that from children’s earliest speech experiences, through to their contact with written language and digital technologies, what happens in children’s homes, schools, and communities shapes their early learning. As a result,
the ways in which children make meaning are constantly shifting, depending on their social identities, and the power relations in which they operate.

In this final chapter, I address the conclusions from the findings of the two case studies by returning to the research questions that guided this study: i) What are the types and purposes of communicative practices used by young urban Aboriginal children at home, at school, and in the community?; ii) What role do family and community members play in supporting and influencing Aboriginal children’s communicative practices?; and iii) What is the relationship between Aboriginal children’s use of communicative practices and their construction of identity? As I addressed these questions, new questions also emerged in relation to the focal children’s meaning making.

What are the types and purposes of communicative practices used by young urban Aboriginal children at home, at school, and in the community?

Children’s meaning making is rooted in their families’ and communities’ cultural beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices (Hall, Larson, & Marsh, 2003). This understanding was apparent in the current study, as I observed the focal children draw on a range of communicative practices that were embedded with the particular value systems of their families, classroom, and community. In Devin’s home, I observed him engage in play, book reading, drawing, and video gaming, as well as combinations of these meaning making systems for a number of purposes (e.g., sense of belonging, to acquire information, to develop skills). As Devin fluidly and freely moved between these different practices, he also used additional modes such as gesture, body movement, sound effect, and conversation to aide in his construction of meaning. While at home, Devin was provided with opportunities to experiment as a meaning maker for extended periods of time, and as he constructed meaning in his world, I observed his sisters act as supportive playmates, and I observed his parents support his gender-specific and popular culture interests by purchasing supplies and resources that were meaningful to him (e.g. toys, books, video games).

In Samara’s home, her communicative practices were largely mediated and motivated by her desire to engage in the practices that were valued by her family members (e.g., video gaming, uploading music, engaging with websites). During my visits, however, I also observed her engage in playing and drawing. In that context, her parents also supported her popular culture interests by providing her with resources that were significant to her and which supported
her construction of meaning (e.g., markers, video games, DVDs). Her parents and sisters also modeled how to use technology, and assisted her as she engaged with technology. Similar to Devin’s meaning making at home, Samara was also provided with extended periods of time to experiment and exercise agency as a meaning-maker.

In comparison, the structure and rigidity of the children’s Grade One classroom routine provided them with only small periods of time to engage in communicative practices that they valued, or draw on topics that were of interest to them. As mentioned in previous chapters, the activities that were included and valued in the Grade One learning program were primarily print-based. However, Mrs. Webster also provided the children with a “free play” period in the classroom, and it was during that time that Devin brought his interest in global popular culture narratives and his lived experiences to the classroom by drawing on recontextualization processes to produce play texts. In comparison, Samara brought her perceptions of friendship that were grounded in her own lived experiences to the classroom (which she recontextualized into personalized storybooks).

During the free play period, the children’s meaning making in the classroom was choreographed and directed by them, and there were no stipulations attached to this period by the classroom teacher. This freedom allowed Devin and Samara to engage in their own valued forms of meaning making with their peers, where they drew on a range of communicative practices (e.g., playing, drawing), and recontextualized popular culture narratives and their lived experiences to create a meaningful social space in the classroom. Although it is difficult to predict, I speculate that had their teacher observed Devin and Samara during the free play period, or acted as a participant-observer in their meaning making endeavours she would have gained valuable insight into their interests and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and may have been motivated to draw on, or make stronger links to their out-of-school interests in the classroom in different ways (e.g., agenda entries, writing assignments, art projects).

As previously stated, digital technology was noticeably absent from the focal children’s classroom. This prevented the focal children (and arguably the other Grade One children) from engaging in a range of digitextual practices in that context, as well as making links from their home to the classroom, and making broader links to the global world. Instead, traditional notions of early childhood schooling dominated their classroom learning (e.g., worksheets, agenda writing, spelling tests), and in doing so, privileged particular modes of communication that do not reflect the fast-moving cultural changes of society. Luke and Luke (2001) contended
that this type of curriculum, which continues to privilege the written word above all else, and focuses entirely on the page rather than the screen, is steeped in dominant ideologies that reflect stagnant and traditional programs of learning which are all too common in contemporary early childhood classrooms.

In the children’s school, Aboriginal events and practices were sporadically included in the classroom and at school assemblies. These events were primarily “add-ons” as I never observed these events being extended on by the classroom teacher or other school staff. Although Aboriginal knowledge and practices were imparted by Elders, Aboriginal consultants, and Aboriginal dancers and drummers to the children at the school, the out-of-school experiences and communicative practices of contemporary Aboriginal children, and the perspectives and beliefs of their parents in relation to their children’s learning were not drawn on by the school. This is somewhat problematic as one of the goals of Saskatchewan community schools is to “enhance parent involvement and encourage shared responsibility for the well-being and success of students” (Saskatchewan Education, 1996, p. 8).

As I noted in Chapter One, the overarching objective of community schools is to provide Aboriginal children with a learning environment that is culturally affirming, and that respects and reflects the experiences and realities of the students’ lives. During the research period, it did not appear that the focal children’s out-of-school experiences and realities were recognized by the teaching staff. I speculate that had the staff solicited the families’ perspectives, and provided a respectful space in which knowledge could be shared, this may have provided the teachers with a critical source of knowledge about these Aboriginal families’ meaning making, and enabled them to reflect on how these families’ contemporary communicative practices could be included in school curriculum.

In the community contexts in which I observed Devin and Samara, they also engaged in a range of communicative practices (e.g., storybook reading, playing, singing, reciting Bible verses). In these settings, the volunteers also provided them with opportunities to pursue their interest in popular culture by including a range of toys and games linked to their favourite popular culture narratives. As discussed earlier, these settings enabled the children to form meaningful relationships with others and provided them with valued social outings. Similar to the focal children’s experiences at school, however, I did not observe them transfer any of the

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38 In that manual, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education uses the term “parent” to refer to a child’s significant caregiver. This may include a child’s mother, father, grandparent, aunt, uncle, sister, brother, foster parent, or other guardian.
Christian-based teachings they learned in these contexts to the other sites in which they made meaning.

What role do family and community members play in supporting and influencing Aboriginal children’s communicative practices?

Several researchers in the field of literacy education have examined families’ rich and varied literacy practices (e.g., Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Those studies were grounded in a sociocultural framework which recognized literacy learning as a socially-mediated process that cannot be understood apart from its context of development, the forms of mediation available, and the nature of participation across various cultural practices (Razfar & Gutiérrez, 2003). Those studies have informed the current study, as they provided valuable insight into non-mainstream families’ rich and diverse ways of meaning making. Recently, researchers such as Carrington (2005), Marsh (2005), and Pahl (2005) have begun to examine the complex interplay of factors in contemporary children’s meaning making, including their increased use of digital technologies and exposure to new media, the impact of globalization in their worlds, and the role a range of mediators (e.g., parents, teachers, siblings) are now assuming in children’s meaning making in this digital age, all of which are significant to the present research.

In the current study, I revealed the focal children’s homes to be rich sites of meaning-making, and the children’s family members to be significant scaffolders in their worlds; however, I argue that the stereotypical images perpetuated by the mass media often portray Aboriginal families from a deficit perspective, and position Aboriginal parents in particular, as deficient in preparing their children for school, and in providing their children with the necessary skills to be active and meaningful contributors to broader society. Downing (2002) posited that in addition to the generally negative portrayals of contemporary Aboriginal family life, Aboriginal communities and families have to deal with the “digital divide”; including less connectivity and access to the Internet, and fewer digital devices in their homes compared to mainstream, high socio-economic families. However, as shown earlier, this was not the case in the focal children’s homes, as digital technology played a vibrant role in their families’ meaning making, and thus, positioned them as active, contemporary meaning-makers in today’s multimodal world. In comparison, the children’s meaning making at school focused almost entirely on print-based activities, reflecting fixed and narrow definitions of literacy and learning.
As previously mentioned, the focal children’s experiences at school were primarily grounded in narrow school versions of literacy (e.g., spelling texts, worksheets, workbooks) that were a part of the teacher-directed, monthly thematic units used in the classroom. Although these were the practices promoted in the classroom, Devin’s and Samara’s interest in a range of communicative practices and popular culture narratives, as well as the experiences that they engaged with outside of school surfaced, regardless of what was promoted or valued in the classroom. However, this knowledge was left untapped at school, resulting in the children’s agendas and purposes for their representations not being taken seriously (Anning, 2003).

In the other contexts the children inhabited, the volunteers (Sunday school teacher, Kids Club volunteers) supported the children in their own choice of communicative practices (e.g., playing, drawing), and also introduced them to a new realm of practices (e.g., memorizing Bible verses, singing Christian children’s songs). In this study, the volunteers in these settings represent a group of individuals who are not typically recognized in young children’s meaning making. In the context of this study, the volunteers’ role was significant in the focal children’s meaning making as they provided them with an environment in which they could engage in a range of practices and form meaningful connections with others, and they also introduced their families to a range of opportunities and experiences (e.g., summer camps, mission trips).

What is the relationship between Aboriginal children’s use of communicative practices and their construction of identity?

In this dissertation, I recognize that the concept of identity is complex, and difficult to confine to a single definition for contemporary, urban Aboriginal children. In this study, the link between identity, Indigeneity, and meaning making in both families’ worlds was grounded in the importance they placed on creating supportive networks of learning in their families. The Pasap family also recognized the importance of developing relationships with the wider Aboriginal community, particularly, the local Aboriginal and culturally-diverse children in the neighbourhood, and did so by inviting them into their home to engage in contemporary forms of meaning making (e.g., video gaming). Although many outsiders to Aboriginal families and communities believe that little is occurring in Aboriginal homes, or that the authentic Aboriginal individual engages in a range of cultural practices, such as speaking an Aboriginal language and obtaining resources from the land, Aboriginal children’s identities are currently being shaped by
a wide range of multimodal communicative practices, including the technological transformations of the twenty-first century.

The metaphors of identity in relation to literacy as outlined by Moje and Luke (2009) also reflect the link between Samara’s and Devin’s identity construction and their meaning making. For example, these metaphors take into account a sociocultural theoretical perspective which recognizes how through participation in activities that require cognitive and communicative functions, the child is drawn into the use of these functions in ways that nurture him or her (Rogoff, 1990). These metaphors also recognize the impact of globalization and multiple semiotic systems in children’s identity construction, including the stories children tell about themselves and the ways in which they position themselves (including goals, focus, perspective, authority) or are being positioned by others across a range of literacy settings, all of which link to the theoretical perspective guiding this study.

As Devin and Samara made meaning across contexts, shifts in their identities were apparent. As previously suggested, this was often due to the ways in which they were positioned by others in different settings. Norton (1997) posited that a person’s identity must always be understood in relational terms: one is either subject of a set of relationships (e.g., in a position of power), or subject to a set of relationships (e.g., in a position of reduced power). For example, in their homes, Devin and Samara moved in and out of positions of power as they made meaning. For example, when they engaged in play, Devin with his sisters, and Samara with her puppy, they positioned themselves in expert or agentic roles, where they freely and confidently took on different imagined identities (e.g., police investigator, caretaker). As they led the play, I observed them invite their siblings or pets into their imaginary communities. However, when the children engaged in a range of digitextual practices in their homes, they were often in positions of reduced power, not only in their struggle at times to gain access to the technological devices in their homes (more so in Samara’s home), but also in their competency. Although the focal children displayed an emerging level of expertise with technology during the study, they still needed and received assistance from their family members. The children’s interactions with Xbox or Wii® video games also inspired a whole new understanding of identity in their worlds, which enabled them to explore an identity outside of their real lives. During the research period, Renae also introduced Samara and his other daughters to contemporary Aboriginal texts (e.g., Aboriginal hip-hop music and videos). Although these texts currently appeared to be on the periphery of Samara’s meaning making, I contend that these texts, and the messages embedded
in these texts, will become more important in her world, and in turn, impact her identity in future years.

At school, the structure of the daily schedule, combined with the classroom’s lack of digital technology provided little opportunity for Devin and Samara to exercise agency in this context, or to bring their out-of-school interests and expertise, which in turn, shaped their identities in the classroom. However, there were small periods of time (e.g., free play period, recess) when the children were provided with opportunities to engage in meaningful practices that linked to their identity (e.g., Samara’s personalized storybooks which linked to her out-of-school lived experiences, popular culture, perceptions of friendship; Devin’s production of play texts in which he positioned himself in an authoritative role, Devin’s Monster Truck story and drawing); however, these forms of communication and representation were rarely acknowledged by the classroom teacher.

The community contexts that were part of the focal children’s worlds in this study were grounded in Christian principles. In addition to Devin and Samara engaging in a range of communicative practices in these settings, and acquiring information about Christian values, the volunteers also initiated discussions about how to be a kind person and a good friend. In these settings, there appeared to be a balance between volunteer-directed activities, and the children participating in their own valued forms of meaning-making. Through play, I observed Devin position himself in a powerful role and exercise agency in these contexts by leading small groups of boys in play narratives based on their shared interests, and positioning himself as a mentor to the boys as they created “monster” self-portraits. In comparison, Samara continued to produce storybooks with Gabby that were identity texts of their lived experiences and perceptions of friendship, and she also competently performed the actions of different Christian children’s songs which enabled her to feel a sense of competency and importance among her peers.

**Contributions of the Study to the Field of Early Childhood Literacy**

This study has contributed to our knowledge of Canadian urban Aboriginal children’s meaning making in the following ways. First, this study revealed that the focal children’s homes were vibrant, multimodal textual landscapes in which Devin, Samara, and their family members engaged in a wide array of communicative practices representative of the changing technological transformations of the new millennium (e.g., video gaming, engaging with interactive, multimodal websites). As the children made meaning across contexts, it was also revealed that
at the core of the children’s meaning making were themes of membership, agency, and competency.

Second, this study has contributed to our understanding of the important role a range of mediators play in children’s meaning making (e.g., parents, sisters, grandparents). In recent years, researchers such as Gregory, Long, and Volk (2004) have examined the power of other mediators in children’s lives, beyond their families and teachers (e.g., volunteers, peer groups). In the current study, the volunteers in the Christian-based programs the focal children attended introduced them to new practices, and provided them with opportunities to further their interests. Across contexts, Devin’s engagement in play with different peer groups of boys provided him with opportunities to engage in joint learning with others to construct meaning. In Samara’s world, the significance of a “best friend” was evident in her meaning making across contexts (particularly at school and at the Kids Club). In those contexts, Gabby also helped Samara negotiate classroom routines and valued practices, and they collaborated to create meaningful texts through the use of combinations of semiotic systems.

Third, this study has contributed to our understanding of the link between urban Aboriginal children’s identity construction and their use of communicative practices in the context of changing global and cultural contexts (Gee, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). As stated previously, the families’ homes were rich, textual landscapes in which both sets of parents provided their children with the materials and resources they needed to engage in a range of communicative practices and pursue their digital interests, their interest in gender-specific narratives and global popular culture interests, and produce new and meaningful localized identity texts (e.g., drawings, play texts). In regards to the link between identity and Indigeneity in urban Aboriginal families’ worlds, particularly in relation to the notion of community and how Canadian Aboriginal families support young children’s learning, the findings from this study have contributed to our understanding of how this is manifested in contemporary Aboriginal families.

Finally, the findings from this study have contributed to the body of research (Luke, 1999; Luke & Luke, 2001) that discusses how early years’ literacy curriculum continues to be dominated by narrow and traditional forms of learning (e.g., traditional print-based texts), even though we are in the midst of profound changes in communication and technology. Although print knowledge is essential to students’ futures, I argue that early childhood educators need to offer Aboriginal children curricula and pedagogy that build appropriately upon their expertise,
and which prepares them for a future in which competence in analysis and creation of multimodal texts is crucial (Luke, 1999).

**Theoretical Implications**

In this section, I return to the theoretical framework that grounded this study to examine the ways the study has consolidated and developed the framework.

**Sociocultural Theory**

From a sociocultural perspective, meaning making is a socially mediated process that cannot be abstracted from the cultural practices in which it is nested, and is instantiated in the practices of everyday life. This perspective recognizes that there are variations in the ways members of a community make sense of the valued practices of their community, as well as the variations among individuals in relation to which practices they choose to take up (Gutiérrez, 2002). In the focal children’s homes, I observed them seamlessly move between an array of communicative practices, and their engagement in these practices often included social interaction with their family members. The children’s utilization of a broad range of meaningful practices (e.g., video gaming, drawing, play) was also linked to specific purposes (e.g., to form relationships, to access information). At school, however, the lessons and activities that the children were introduced to, including the Aboriginal events that were included in the classroom and broader school context, were largely presented to the children as isolated events or skills, reflecting an autonomous model of literacy learning that did not link to their out-of-school worlds, specifically the technological transformations taking place in this new millennium which played a significant role in their construction of meaning at home. The children’s learning at school also contrasts their learning and engagement in a range of practices at the Christian-based community contexts, as the children were encouraged to engage in practices that they valued over longer periods of time, and were free to explore their popular culture interests.

**The New Literacy Studies and Multimodality**

Recently, a number of researchers (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 1998; Brandt & Clinton, 2002) have considered how globalization fits within the paradigm of the New Literacy Studies, and contend that it is impossible to describe local literacies in children’s worlds without paying attention to global contexts (Pahl & Rowsell, 2006). In the present study, the focal
children drew on gender-specific global, popular culture narratives that they recontextualized into new multimodal texts to make sense of their worlds across contexts. Across contexts, the social nature of Devin’s text production was evident as he not only frequently initiated the ideas for new play texts, he also led the play, and engaged in the process of creating new rules and ideas as the play progressed. As such, he established himself as a leader among his male peer groups in different contexts (classroom, school playground, Kids Club, Sunday school class), and with his sisters at home. Samara also produced texts in her home (e.g., drawings, play), and at school and at the Kids Club her production of new texts (e.g., storybooks) occurred in collaboration with her best friend, Gabby. For the focal children, their engagement with, and production of multimodal texts, revealed how multimodality aided their thinking and communicating skills (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005).

*Indigenous Knowledge*

The theory of Indigenous knowledge recognizes that multiple semiotic systems play a significant role in Aboriginal people’s meaning making. This theory of knowledge is not static or fixed; instead it is viewed as an adaptable, dynamic system that is based on skills, abilities, and problem-solving techniques that changes over time in Aboriginal communities (Daes, 1993). Historically, meaning making in Aboriginal communities has been based on an ideological model which recognizes the importance of relationships in how one makes sense of the world (e.g., relationships between people and the environment). For example, Hare (2005) revealed that in the past, Aboriginal people largely made sense of their worlds through their relationships with living things and nature’s patterns. Instead of written protocols, Aboriginal people across Canada drew on a range of semiotic systems that were deeply encoded across many dimensions of their environment. When Aboriginal children were taken from their homes to attend residential schools to learn Christian practices and western forms of literacy (reflecting an autonomous model of literacy and learning), this resulted in these ways of knowing being severely damaged or lost for future generations.

As articulated earlier in this dissertation, in 1980, Saskatchewan Community Schools were developed to address these concerns and to revitalize Aboriginal knowledge for their students. Although the focal children attended a local community school, and were being provided with isolated exposure to rudimentary aspects of Aboriginal culture, their contemporary communicative practices were not drawn on at school, including the ways that Samara’s family
was engaging with Aboriginal hip-hop videos that represent a new way that Indigenous knowledge is being transferred to younger generations.

**Implications for Policy Makers**

This study raises key theoretical and empirical issues for policy makers in relation to the development of literacy curricula in contemporary classrooms for young Aboriginal children, particularly in relation to questions on the inclusion of digital technology and popular culture in early childhood literacy curriculum. Currently, the different ways digital technology can be incorporated in Grade One classrooms is addressed in the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education Language Arts curriculum. However, in this case study, digital technology was not utilized by the Grade One teacher. In comparison, globalized popular culture narratives are not a part of Grade One curriculum documents.

As stated previously, I contend that the merging of digital technology with knowledge from Aboriginal Elders may be a way to move forward in inner-city Saskatchewan classrooms. This merger would tap into the massive technological changes over recent decades which have impacted the course of everyday life and communication for society, and address Aboriginal community members’ concern that younger generations are not interested in, or being provided with opportunities to learn about Aboriginal meaning making systems. This could occur through the development of a database or website in the classroom/school that would endorse the use of technology in combination with learning about traditional knowledge from Elders. This database or website could include print, narratives, photographs, videos, maps, and lists to assist with Aboriginal knowledge conservation in young Aboriginal children’s worlds, and help Aboriginal children learn who they are, where they come from, and where they are going. However, the merging of digital technology with Aboriginal knowledge in schools would require deep thought, dialogue, reciprocity, and respectful collaboration and conversations with Aboriginal children, families, Elders, and teachers.

There are also other issues that we need to consider in relation to merging Aboriginal knowledge with contemporary forms of communication. For example, Greenall and Loizides (2001) argued that technology has the potential to negatively affect Aboriginal culture. They contended that as the importance of technology rises, the holders of technological knowledge also rise in importance and that it is typically youth who possess expertise in technology use.
This affects the traditional role of authority in Aboriginal communities by challenging the role of the Elder as the primary source of wisdom and experience in the community.

However, there are also scholars who recognize the affordances of technology in Aboriginal people’s worlds. For instance, Deger (2006) explored how digital technologies were incorporated into a Yolngu Indigenous community in Australia’s remote far north. In her study, she worked with the Yolngu community to create new ways of introducing younger generations of Yolngu people (and the mainstream Australian population) to the knowledge of their community through the production of radio programs about the cultural heritage of the Yolngu, and audio recordings and television programs of Yolngu rituals and ceremonies. A study by Gibson (2007) revealed that in a different remote area of Australia, Aboriginal students produced music videos and video-recorded interviews with Elders which they uploaded to YouTube™ or included on a community database, which became contemporary digital artifacts for their families and community. This allowed the children and Elders to collaboratively engage in language and cultural maintenance and be active producers of meaningful artifacts through the use of digital media. Kral (2010) posited that such media work is frequently validated by Elders who need young people to mediate between old knowledge and new technologies.

This understanding taps into Battiste’s (2000) position that we need to find new and respectful ways to include both Indigenous knowledge and contemporary forms of meaning making in contemporary classrooms to bring about a blended educational context that respects and builds on both Indigenous and Eurocentric knowledge systems. This understanding is also supported by Hare (2005), who argued that a space should be made in contemporary classrooms where the rich, symbolic meaning-making systems of Aboriginal culture can be taught alongside mainstream literacies. However, as shown in the present research, the mainstream literacies that were utilized in the Grade One classroom continued to focus on traditional, print-based literacies, and as a result, disenfranchised Devin and Samara to an even greater extent by valuing narrow versions of literacy and disregarding their emerging expertise with digital technology (Beavis, 2002), as well as their engagement with a diverse range of multimodalities that were linked to popular culture narratives (Gallas, 1994).
Implications for Teachers

Comber (1999) and Wepner, Valmont, and Thurlow (2000) argued that it is the responsibility of schools to draw on skills and interests that different children bring to school in an attempt to prepare children for their social futures. Several researchers (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Purcell-Gates, 1995) have argued, however, that the literacies of non-dominant students are rarely reflected in school settings. This perspective often focuses on the mismatch between home and school learning, and presents deficit portraits of students that compel us to want to “fix” these children so that they match normative views and practices (Gutierrez, 2002) - without regard to the students’ existing repertoires of practices, or the additional set of challenges that inner-city children experience.

For Samara and Devin, there was an obvious lack of continuity between their significant engagement with digital technology in their homes (which led to a wide range of communicative practices), and the ways in which popular cultural narratives shaped their localized meaning-making practices, and the primarily paper to pencil practices valued in their Grade One classroom. In regards to digital technology, I contend that in this particular study, it may be the literacies of the classroom that are deficient, as Samara, Devin, and their peers are “children of the digital age” (Marsh, 2005) who are shaped by, and in turn, shaping the communicative practices of the twenty-first century. Luke and Carrington (2002) argue that primary school curriculum needs to bring together a richer, more intellectually demanding and contemporary analysis of young students’ identities and competences, and a more cogent understanding of the overlapping and multiple communities that children inhabit. They add that the difficulty teachers face is understanding the new knowledges (e.g. digital technology), experiences, and skills that contemporary children bring to classrooms, and how they need to draw on, and expand on these skills in the classroom so children will be able to navigate today’s globalized world.

Implications for Aboriginal Children and Families

As shown throughout this dissertation, children make meaning from texts of all kinds (Pahl & Rowsell, 2006). As Samara and Devin engaged with different texts or produced new texts, they often drew on global discourses and practices, and adapted these discourses to suit their own purposes in local contexts (e.g., Janks & Comber, 2006; Stein & Slonimsky, 2006). Thus, the process of meaning-making in the children’s lives was revealed to be socially-situated, fluid, and constantly in process.
Despite the fact that Devin and Samara came from families that lived well below the poverty line, their family members supported their interests and communicative practices, and provided them with access to a range of technological tools. Over the last several decades, researchers have noted that many young children’s literacy activities involved digital technology (e.g., computers, video games) prior to and outside of school, and are typically more frequent, rich, and more meaningful than are such activities they encounter when they enter elementary school (Green & Bigum, 1993; Mackey, 1994; Unsworth, 2001). Although urban, Aboriginal families are frequently deemed “at risk” by society, and have less economic, social, and cultural currency than others, the members of the children’s families were resourceful in providing their children with the tools that they felt would further their children’s success in the broader, mainstream society (e.g., Ollie fixing discarded computers for his family and extended family, Renae and Beatrice purchasing a Barbie laptop computer for Samara).

For the Aboriginal parents in this study, it was apparent through my observations, and my conversations with them, that they took great pride in providing their children with the newest technological devices so they could learn how to navigate a range of new media tools, have the same opportunities to hone their digital skills as their mainstream peers, and be active participants in increasingly globalized societies.

**Limitations**

Similar to all case study research, the research findings from this multiple case study cannot be universally generalized. Therefore, the findings cannot be assumed to represent all six-year-old Aboriginal children living in urban inner-city settings, nor can it be assumed that the communicative practices they utilized, and the contexts they inhabited are representative of young Aboriginal children across Canada. However, I argue that the two cases of the children’s meaning making can enable other researchers to use the results of the study as a basis for comparison to other cases.

One of the limitations that I encountered in this study was at the children’s school, as I was not provided with an opportunity to engage in conversation with the Elder who visited the Grade One classroom every other week. During the study, I visited the school eight times, and observed the Elder share stories with the focal children and their peers on three separate occasions. The Elder’s time was limited in each classroom throughout the school, and due to this inflexible schedule, I was not able to share my study with the Elder, or ask his opinion on
the role of Aboriginal ways of knowing in young Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children’s learning. Nor, was I able to discuss with him the possible benefits or limitations of digital technology in Aboriginal families and communities’ meaning making.

To assess the trustworthiness of this study, issues of confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were addressed. By applying these notions, readers of this study may find themselves in a comparable situation, and as a result, the study’s findings may relate to their situation. I suggest, however, that the Aboriginal children, families, classroom teacher, and other significant mediators presented in this study are not unlike many others in inner-city neighbourhoods across the province, or across Canada. It is my hope that this study will provide insight into contemporary Aboriginal children’s meaning making across contexts, the ways in which their identities were constructed, and the significant role a range of mediators in played in their meaning making.

Further Research

Kress (1997) posited that there is an urgent need for research that examines young children’s meaning making outside of school in which multimodal forms of meaning making are prevalent, and shaped in part by technological innovations. Kress (1997) added that there is an equally pressing need for research which explores whether these contemporary communicative practices are incorporated into early years settings.

In this study, I provided a view into two, urban Canadian Aboriginal children’s meaning making across contexts. However, it would be interesting to examine the meaning making practices of urban Indigenous children in other parts of the world, and investigate the role globalized popular culture discourses and digital technology plays in their lives, and whether these discourses and tools are meaningfully and authentically included in pedagogical practice in early childhood classrooms. Additionally, it would be interesting to investigate whether or not the cultural traditions linked to their Indigenous world, and which are embedded in a rich social history, are being included in schools in authentic and meaningful ways.

As stated at the onset of this dissertation, finding a balance between these worlds in classrooms in which Aboriginal children are enrolled is significant to meeting the needs of these children, and authentically representing their lived experiences and out-of-school realities. I contend that this would be particularly significant to contemporary, urban Indigenous children’s understandings of their personal identity, their social futures, and their sense of place in today’s
world. As a result, the field of language and literacy education would benefit from research which further explores Indigenous children’s valued communicative practices in different global contexts, the dissonance between these practices and the learning that is promoted and valued in schools, and issues related to revitalizing Aboriginal ways of knowing in young Indigenous children’s worlds.
References


Delpit, L. (2002). No kinda sense. In L. Delpit & J. Dowdy (Eds.), The skin that we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom (pp. 31-49). New York: The New Press.


Letter of Invitation and Initial Contact (Parents)

August 13, 2007

Re: Aboriginal Children’s Communicative Practices: Two Children’s Home, School, and Community Contexts

Dear Families,

I am conducting a research project that explores Aboriginal children’s meaning-making practices (e.g., play, drawing, reading, artistic endeavours, cultural practices), their perspectives on these practices, and the role family (immediate and extended), and community members play in their literacy experiences. I am particularly interested in learning more about the nature and range of Aboriginal children’s practices. Currently, there is little known about the meaning-making practices of Aboriginal children. Therefore, my intent is to document your child’s meaning-making practices in a variety of contexts (e.g., classroom, community events, playground, cultural/heritage events) that are a part of his/her daily life.

This study is being carried out by Jodi Streelasky (co-investigator), under the supervision of my doctoral supervisors, Drs. Maureen Kendrick and Jim Anderson. I am currently a pre-kindergarten teacher with the Regina Public School Division and a doctoral candidate at the University of British Columbia. I am seeking your permission and support to conduct this research with your child and your family. This study will take place over a one year timeframe and will require that I visit your home every two weeks to observe and play with your child. Each visit will span approximately 1-3 hours and will be scheduled in consultation with your family. I also plan to observe your child in his/her classroom (six half days and one full day over an entire school year), as well as at out-of-school events (e.g., park, or after-school clubs on approximately ten occasions for 1-2 hours/per session).

If you require further information, please contact Jodi Streelasky or Dr. Maureen Kendrick. Thank you for considering this research request.
Sincerely,

Jodi Streelasky, Ph.D. Candidate  
Language & Literacy Education Dept.  
University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

Maureen Kendrick, Principal Investigator  
Associate Professor  
Language & Literacy Education Dept.  
University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2
Appendix Two:

Letter of Invitation and Initial Contact (Community Members, Extended Adult Family Members, School Personnel)

August 13, 2007

Re: Aboriginal Children’s Communicative Practices: Two Children’s Home, School, and Community Contexts

Dear Community Members, Extended Family, and School Personnel,

I am conducting a research project that explores Aboriginal children’s meaning-making practices (e.g., play, drawing, reading, artistic endeavours, cultural practices), their perspectives on these practices, and the role family, community members, and teachers play in their literacy experiences. I am particularly interested in learning more about the nature and range of Aboriginal children’s practices. Currently, there is little known about the meaning-making practices of Aboriginal children. Therefore my intent is to document two Aboriginal children’s (boy and girl) meaning-making practices in a variety of contexts (e.g., classroom, community events, playgrounds, cultural events) that are a part of their daily lives.

This study is being carried out by Jodi Streelasky (co-investigator), under the supervision of my doctoral supervisors, Drs. Maureen Kendrick and Jim Anderson. I am currently a prekindergarten teacher with the Regina Public School Division and a doctoral candidate at the University of British Columbia. This one year study will examine the meaning-making practices of two Aboriginal children and document the role extended family, community members, and teachers play in their literacy experiences. My intent is to observe the children eight times in a school context over the course of one year, as well as spend time with them in out-of-school contexts (e.g., ten times per child at after-school clubs, neighbourhood events, etc. for approximately 1-2 hours). My focus will be on the child’s literacy experiences, as well as on your perspectives of the child’s literacy experiences. The nature of my conversations with you will center on possible questions such as, “What role do you play in the child’s life?” or “What activities do you do with the child?”. A variety of data collection methods will be used during the study, including photographs and video-clips (only of the two children unless consent is given by you to share your image(s) through photographs and video clips), written field notes,
and informal conversations. If you require further information, please contact Jodi Streelasky or Dr. Maureen Kendrick. Thank you for considering this research request.

Sincerely,

Jodi Streelasky, Ph.D. Candidate
Language & Literacy Education Dept.
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

Maureen Kendrick, Principal Investigator
Associate Professor
Language & Literacy Education Dept.
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2
Appendix Three:

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Consent Form (Parents)
(Permission to participate in the study and to use actual full names)

Aboriginal Children’s Communicative Practices: Two Children’s Home, School, and Community Contexts

Principal Investigator: Dr. Maureen Kendrick
Language and Literacy Education Department
University of British Columbia

Co-investigator: Jodi Streelasky, Ph.D. Candidate
Language and Literacy Education Department
University of British Columbia

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to explore the variety of ways that your child uses literacy (e.g., through play, drawings, reading, writing, song, drama) in his/her daily life. This study will aim to acquire and understanding of how young Aboriginal children utilize meaning-making practices in a variety of settings (e.g., school, home, community events). I will document your child’s individual meaning-making practices, as well as their practices with siblings, extended family, teachers, peers, and community members.

Procedures:

The focal participant (your child) will be observed over a one year timeframe. The observations will occur every two weeks at your home (approximately twenty-six visits over the course of the study), and observations will also occur in his/her Grade One classroom (six half-days and one full-day over the school year). Observations will also take place in out-of-school contexts, such as at playgrounds or cultural events (approximately ten occasions). Direct observations and written field notes will be utilized in your child’s classroom, and data collection methods such as, video and audio-recordings, photographs, and the collection of children’s artefacts (e.g., drawing, writing samples) will be used in your home. A combination of
direct and participant observations will be employed in community contexts. When I am observing in your child’s classroom, in your home, or at community gatherings I will make every effort not to disrupt your child’s everyday routine, as my intent will be to document the natural interactions and practices of your child.

Confidentiality:

Your child’s and family’s identity will be kept confidential, unless you would like your names and “stories” to be heard. If so, your real names will be used in the study, if not, pseudonyms (false names) will be provided to protect your identities. You will also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Dissemination of Research:

I will share what I learn from the study at local, national, and international conferences, as well as with Aboriginal community members in various contexts (e.g., Aboriginal research symposiums, Aboriginal community gatherings). My intent is to listen to your perspectives, as well as members of the local Aboriginal community when deciding how best to share my research findings with the broader society (e.g., policy makers, school divisions).

Inquires:

I will be happy to answer any questions about the research at any time. Please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone.

Jodi Streelasky, Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Language and Literacy Education
University of British Columbia

Concerns:

If you have any concerns about your rights, or the treatment of your child as a participant in the research, you may contact the UBC Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598.

Consent:

Your verbal consent indicates that the information about this study has been discussed with you, and that you have been given a copy of this letter. Your signature below indicates that you freely and willingly give your consent to allow your daughter/son to participate in the study. You will also be given the choice to willingly provide consent for your child’s full name, your full name, and your immediate family’s full names (e.g., your other children) to be used in the study. You may withdraw your permission at any time without any consequences.
Printed Name of Child Participating

Parent’s Signature

Date

Signature to use your Child’s Actual Full Name in the Study

Signature to use your Actual Full Name in the Study

Signature to use your other Children’s Actual Full Names in the Study, or extended family (minors) who live with you in your home

Printed Name of Parent(s)

Printed Names of Children
Appendix Four:

Consent Form (Community Members, Extended Adult Family Members, and School Personnel)
(Permission to participate in the study and to use actual full names)

Aboriginal Children’s Communicative Practices: Two Children’s Home, School, and Community Contexts

Principal Investigator: Dr. Maureen Kendrick
Language and Literacy Education Department
University of British Columbia

Co-investigator: Jodi Streelasky, Ph.D. Candidate
Language and Literacy Education Department
University of British Columbia

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to explore the variety of ways that young Aboriginal children use literacy (e.g., through play, drawings, reading, writing, song, drama) in their daily lives. This study will aim to acquire an understanding of how young Aboriginal children utilize communicative practices in a variety of settings (e.g., school, home, community, cultural events), by documenting their individual practices, as well as their meaning-making practices with siblings, extended family members, teachers, and community members.

Procedures:

The two focal participants (Grade One boy and girl) will be observed over a one-year timeframe. These naturalistic observations will occur every two weeks in the children’s homes, as well as in their classroom (eight visits). The visits to the classroom will include six half-day visits for 2 hours and forty-five minutes each, and two full day visits for 6 hours and thirty
minutes each. After-school activities or neighbourhood and community events (approximately ten visits/per child for 1-2 hours each) will also be observed. A variety of data collection methods (e.g., collection of children’s artefacts, written field notes, photographs) will be used in this study. If you are involved with the child or children during any of these occasions, my conversations with you will center primarily on your interactions with the child, and your perspectives of his/her literacy experiences. The amount of time that you will be expected to be directly involved in this study will be minimal (approximately 1-2 hours) to discuss your perceptions of the child’s literacy development.

**Confidentiality:**

Your identity will be kept confidential, unless you would like your full name to be shared. If you wish that a pseudonym be used I will respect that decision, and I will refrain from using your actual name in the study.

**Dissemination of Research:**

I will share what I learn from the study at local, national, and international conferences, as well as with Aboriginal community members in various contexts (e.g., Aboriginal research symposiums, Aboriginal community gatherings). My intent is to listen to your perspectives of the children’s meaning-making practices and the ways the findings should be disseminated, as well as members of the local Aboriginal community when deciding how best to share my research findings with the broader society (e.g., policy makers, school divisions).

**Inquiries:**

I will be happy to answer any questions about the research at any time. Please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone.

Jodi Streelasky, Ph.D. Candidate  
Department of Language and Literacy Education  
University of British Columbia

**Concerns:**

If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in the research, you may contact the UBC Office of Research Services at (604) 822-8598.
Consent:

Your signature below indicates that the information about this study has been discussed with you and that you have been given a copy of this letter. Your signature also indicates that you freely and willingly give your consent to be involved in the study. If you wish that your actual name be used in the study, you can also willingly provide your consent for this to occur. You may also withdraw your permission at any time without any consequences.

____________________________  _______________________
Signature to participate in the Study           Printed Name

____________________________
Signature to use your Actual Full Name in the Study