Moving Across Sign Systems: Learning to Write in a Multimodal Classroom

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between multimodalities and writing development. It explores the symbolic worlds of young children and analyzes how a child's variety of ways of representation can scaffold and enable writing development. When children are provided with opportunities to use other forms of representation and are encouraged to move from one mode to another, new meanings and perspectives are discovered and learning becomes deeper and more complex. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the impact of learning multi-modally in today's classroom. Students arrive at school with many ways of knowing. It is schools and educators that need to tap into these ways of knowing in order to connect with students, to support their writing development and enrich their way of learning.
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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

As an early childhood educator I have felt an increasing pressure to have children reading and writing at an earlier and earlier age. The strengths that children bring to school in terms of meaning-making are generally overlooked in the rush to have them engage with written language. I believe children come to school already familiar with and able to use a wide variety of symbol systems, such as drawing, dramatic play and music. These sign systems serve a purpose in children’s lives and are significant meaning-making tools. It is my belief that, through the privileging of print, schools are missing both the strengths children bring and the unique ways in which they represent/communicate their understandings of their world(s). Teachers can feel overwhelmed by high expectations and an inflated curriculum of skills that they feel compelled to teach. The urgency to immerse them in a world of print has come at the cost of sacrificing critical time for children to explore, play and create, even in the kindergarten classroom. By not tapping into the sign systems children are using in their everyday lives, teachers lose out on the potentials the children have and their abilities to make and communicate meaning successfully.

Young children enter formal schooling with a repertoire of modes or representation with which they try to make sense of the world – drawing, modeling, role play, storying, emergent literacy and numeracy... On entering formal school, the messages children receive from the culture of classrooms is that the modes of representation that are valued are the formal symbolic modes of literacy...as children are cultured into ‘academic achievements’ they lose out on opportunities to engage in alternative modes of representation/symbolic systems, which may offer opportunities for cognitive challenge at higher levels. Thus, whilst pushing children to perform ‘academically’ in the early stages of schooling, we underestimate them ‘intellectually’. (Anning, 1999 p.163)

Children come to school with their own ways of thinking, talking and interacting. They have keen interests and passions and have developed their own ways of knowing
before they enter formal schooling. In children’s lives outside of school, they naturally move between art, music, drama, language as ways to think about the world. It is within the schools, that students are restricted to using one sign system (written prose) to think and respond (Short, Kauffman & Kahn, 2000). Teachers are often too focused on what is in the guidebook or what is on their own minds, rather than what is on the student’s mind. When learning revolves around the teacher’s mind and not the child’s, classrooms are more likely to become will less child-centred and children will enter school at a disadvantage.

In my own kindergarten classroom, I began to closely watch and listen to the children’s stories, thoughts and reflections in an attempt to build a connection between their world and the learning that happens at school. When children were free to play in the classroom, so much was going on, more than I often acknowledged. When I took a closer look at the children during these free exploration times, there was so much meaning being expressed through other symbolic modes; drawing, play, talk and gesture, modes which they had developed confidence with and had come to rely on. I began to see that the sign systems the children chose allowed them an avenue through which to create their own understanding of experiences and what it meant to them and their world. Already children were coming to school with many ways of knowing and were already equipped with skills to switch between the different modalities.

The underlying pressures I felt from outward sources to focus more exclusively on print, along with taking the often overlooked step of watching and listening to children in their natural, play-like environment, encouraged me to think about the possibilities of incorporating the different avenues children were using to express themselves into more
curricular areas, particularly writing. Clearly there is no shortage of support for the creative experiences of art, talk and dramatic play within the early childhood classroom. The arts is seen as a key way of enhancing children’s social, cognitive and physical development, but art and drama are often seen as separate subjects to be taught. What I am curious about is how children could merge these experiences with the development of their writing.

- What happens when other sign systems, such as art, drawing and gesture are incorporated into writing activities in the classroom? What might these modes of expression offer writing?
- What happens to the meanings children create when they move from one sign system to another?
- What are the advantages of learning multi-modally in today’s classroom?

All this has urged me to think critically about my practice and to consider how I would bridge the gap between school literacies and children’s ways of making sense of the world. I yearn to create a practice that ensures a child’s preferred mode of responding to and producing all kinds of texts is attained.

In this paper I investigate the current research about multimodal ways of learning and the pedagogical implications of incorporating a variety of sign systems to support young children learning to write.

**Theoretical Framework**

I am approaching this topic of writing and multimodality from a social constructivist point of view. Vygotsky (1978) argued that children construct their understanding of the world, which includes how symbolic media work, as they engage in
social activities with other people. That is, children learn about this tool as they encounter it in various meaningful activities. The New London Group (2000) also state their view on learning is based on “the assumption that the human mind is embodied, situated and social” (p. 30). Knowledge, therefore, is embedded in social, cultural and material contexts and that knowledge is developed as part of collaborative interactions with other individuals who also have diverse skills, perspectives and histories. The Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada (Heydon & Iannacci, 2004) state that “what is means to be literate is situational and individuals generally acquire numerous literacies as they navigate different linguistic spheres.” Heydon (2007) extends and modifies this definition to state that “individuals acquire many literacies as they navigate different semiotic spheres” (p. 38). Therefore, what counts as literacy is not simply the focus on reading and writing, but also the myriad of ways in which people make meaning through various signs. I use the term sign systems to mean the multiple ways of knowing—the ways in which people communicate and make meaning, through modes such as music, art, drama, language and even mathematics (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996)

Along with a broadened definition of literacy, an understanding of the theory of social semiotics is critical to recognizing and valuing the role multimodalities plays in the writing development of young children. Multimodality is the field of study concerned with how people use different modes of communication, like image, gesture, writing and sound to represent or make meaning in the world (Stein, 2008). This premise is based on social semiotic theory, which is concerned with “how human beings make meaning in the world through using and making different signs, always in interaction with someone” (p.
Signs can be a written text or a child's drawing and signs are never neutral, but always socially and culturally situated, produced and motivated.

Gunther Kress (1997a), a critical researcher in the field of social semiotics, states that "social semiotics views the agency of socially situated humans as central to sign-making" (p. 10). He explains that the word "social" is critical in understanding multimodality because it refers to the role of people in the meaning making process. It is people that use the resources available to them in their specific social-cultural environments in which they create signs. Signs are constantly being made and changed because sign makers decide what interests them, what sign they will use and how meaning will be communicated.

I examine writing development and multimodality using a social semiotic framework. In doing so, I assume that all settings are semiotic environments and that teachers and learners are constantly engaged in creating and reading signs across a range of modes and genres. Teachers make choices about how and what to teach and learners make decisions about how to represent their understanding (Stein, 2008). Therefore, how people represent their meanings is limited to the semiotic resources available to them and will reflect the interest of the sign maker who in turn, is influenced by their social and cultural environment (Kress, 1997a).

As a teacher upholding these views on literacy and how children learn, I strongly believe that children learn best when school literacies are connected to the lives of children and that a child’s preferred ways of knowing should serve as a vehicle to uphold meaning and understand the world around them. I believe that children are active constructors of meaning. They have a natural curiosity about the world and I think it is
my job to support and encourage their inquiries. I believe integrating the curriculum into
the classroom should be done in such a way that it connects to the lives of the students
and is an authentic experience for all the children. I seek to explore how alternative sign
systems can support written language development and how they may serve as a vitally
important role in a child’s form of expression and tool for learning.
SECTION 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section offers a review of the literature in the area of literacy and multimodality, with regard to young children’s written language development. It begins by investigating the symbolic world of child writers. The second part explores the notion of code switching or moving across sign systems and what this means for children in their written language development. The final section of the literature review will assemble the literature on the value of learning multimodality in today’s classroom.

I began conducting my review of the literature by identifying the major researchers in the fields of writing development (for example, Donald Graves, Anne Hass Dyson) and multimodalities (for example, Gunther Kress and Carey Jewitt). After reviewing books and journal articles from these authors, I was able to narrow my research topic and began investigating journal articles that explored the relationship between writing and multimodalities. I focused on articles that pertained to young children and paid particular attention to the drawing-writing interface. I was also interested in exploring the importance of learning multi-modally on a larger scale, in particular what this means for educators and for children becoming working citizens in an ever-changing world.

The Symbolic Worlds of Young Children

Young children yearn to use and manipulate all the communicative tools their cultures and families offer them (Edwards & Willis, 2000). They want to do all the things that the people they are surrounded with do, like talk, write, draw and use the computer. Heath’s (1983) study of the literacy experiences of young children in three communities in close proximity to each other, demonstrates the significance of how
children learn culturally specific modes of representation. Many of the children in one of
the communities in Heath’s work, while exposed to various literacy experiences at home,
were unable to be successful at school because they had difficulty relating and forming
connections between school literacy practices and their personal literacy experiences.
The cultural practices and environmental context within which children live has a
profound impact on the ways in which children make meaning (p. 49). It is natural for
children to want to use the many ways of representation or “alternative literacies” offered
by their family and culture, such as painting, dramatic play, words and gesture (Edwards
& Willis, 2000).

In a child’s life outside of school, they naturally move between art, music,
language, and drawing to think about their world (Short, Kauffman & Kahn, 2000). “For
young children it is most natural to bring together and combine symbolic forms when
they seek to express themselves, for example to combine drawing and writing, or gesture
with speaking” (Edwards & Willis, 2000).

The Reggio Emilia teaching philosophy is a well known approach to teaching
young children, which upholds this view of how children naturally move about their
world using a multitude of symbolic explorations. The Reggio Emilia’s teaching
philosophy is to encourage students to explore the ‘hundred languages of children’ by
enhancing the symbolic, expressive and communicative skills of young children
(Edwards & Willis, 2000). The hundred languages, which include role play, dance, art
and music are multiple modes that children use to explore their own ideas and
communicate them to others. It is expected that these “languages” or multiple modes not
be separated from one another, but rather integrated in order to create the best possible means of expression.

The notion from Reggio Emilio, of the importance of integrating the multiple ways children create and uphold meaning, has significance when investigating the link between children's symbolic worlds and written language development. Anne Hass Dyson (1989, 1992) has taken an in-depth look at the relationship of written language development to the symbolic repertoires of young children. Dyson argues that "written language emerges most strongly when firmly embedded within the supportive symbolic sea of playful gestures, pictures and talk" (1992, p. 18). Thus, in order to understand and foster writing in young children, teachers need to view development within the everyday social and artistic lives of children.

Furthermore, in Dyson's (1989) extensive analysis of the multiple worlds of child writers, she claims that in order to foster writing growth in children, one needs to understand that learning to write occurs in the context of learning to symbolize experiences and to form social relationships with others. Compelled by drawing and talking, Dyson (1989) sought to discover how children's written language texts develop within a context of talking and drawing. Dyson's study of a group of urban children as they progressed from kindergarten to grade three, focused on eight children who were encouraged to use symbolic sources of support when writing (e.g., drawing, talking, and social sources of support, such as helping each other, asking questions and commenting on each other's work).

Dyson (1989) believed that writing does not evolve from writing alone, rather, writing development can be viewed as "evolving with and shaped by children's
interactions with other symbolic media and people" (p. 253). In Dyson’s study, she focused on the meanings each child tried to communicate and discovered that their meanings were being expressed in symbolic worlds, such as drawing, talking, playing and writing. Writing emerges out of the symbolic media over which children already have gained control, such as drawing or talking and children rely on an understanding of how drawing symbolizes meaning as they explore and play with early squiggles and letter-like markings.

Much of Dyson’s study focused on the social interactions the children engaged in with peers and adults in the context of writing and drawing. Each child’s growth as a writer is not only influenced by his or her ways of interacting with various materials and symbolic tools, but it is also influenced by interactions with other people. Dyson concluded that writing efforts can change and evolve and therefore be given new meaning as they are responded to by others. As Dyson argue, “Writing as a symbolic and social tool grows directly out of children’s experiences with other tools, such as gesture, speech, dramatic play and drawing and their relationships and their relationships with other people” (p. 68).

Written language development is linked in complex ways to the whole of a child’s symbolic repertoires as they explore and begin to control new ways to organize and represent their world. Teachers are often instructed in manuals and teacher guides about the ‘developmental stages of writing’- progressing from scribbles to invented spelling. As Dyson (1992) points out, this should be more accurately called the stages of spelling because the attention to writing is only focused on the surface manifestations- the marks on the page and not on the complex underlying reality. Dyson argues that there is no
linear progression in written language development. The roots of children’s writing are often found not in their squiggles, but in drawn pictures, dramatic play, constructions and talk. Thus, children in the early years need many opportunities to use the arts- to draw, play, dance and sing.

Likewise, Millard and Marsh (2001) claim that visual literacy is rarely given any status in school, expect maybe as a creative art form. Teachers often regard the movement from pictures to words as an intellectual progression, rather than valuing the visual piece for the meaning it can uphold. In teacher’s schema there is an assumption of developmental stages of writing and drawing is viewed as a ‘stage’ prior to writing. It is often assumed that children first make random markings, which later transforms into drawing, which transforms into letters then words and then sentences (Millard & Marsh, 2001). Millard and Marsh (2001) research which studied the relationship between words and pictures, led them to conclude that “the current system of schooling is foreclosing on children’s culturally acquired resources for communicating meanings to others by devaluing all but the products of the writing process and, in particular, privileging continuous, uninterrupted prose texts” (p. 55).

In summary, in order to support children’s written language development it is necessary to recognize and place value on the symbolic tools that children are already immersed within and have developed a confidence with. Drawing, talk, and play are avenues through which children have come to understand their worlds. To take away these tools, when learning to write, is taking away the means for which children have come to express themselves and communicate in their world. As adults we turn to media that is comfortable for us, whether it be to map something out, draw or sketch or write a
conversation on paper. What needs to happen is to find ways to merge writing with the symbolic tools of a young child’s world. In order to put writing in its symbolic place, one needs to see it emerging within the child’s total symbolic repertoire (Dyson, 1992)

**Moving Across Sign Systems**

This next section discusses the research on the possibilities that emerge as children move across sign systems. It will take an in-depth look at various studies that have focused on multiple modes children use and what happens to the meanings children create when they move from one sign system to another. Thus, this research uncovered the potentials for written language development when children were presented with a variety of modes of representation and permitted to move from one sign system to another.

Pahl’s (2003) three year study investigated how meaning was constructed by boys living in 3 homes and aged between 5- and 7-years. The study focused on the multimodal texts produced by the boys. In her analysis she discovered that complex learning experiences were taking place as the children were moving across modes. The transformation of meaning, in this case when Pokemon cards were made, then cut out and then later used with a camera to set up dramatic action with commentary, was a complex process of transformation. When the form (Pokemon) was being transformed through other modes (cutting out and photography) new meanings were being created and it “helped make leaps in imaginative conception” (p. 153).

Kress (1997b) explored this concept of transformation (transitioning between modes) in his analysis of a child’s “cut-out” creations. Through his observations and
analysis of the intentions and possibilities of moving from a drawing to cutting it out, he discovered,

When the representation comes off the page, it enters another world. It shifts from the world of contemplation into the world of action, into the world of my practical here and now; from a world of mental action, to a world of tactile, physical, objective action. (p. 26)

Writing alone has a lack of translatability. It has a flatness about it and is less tangible than other 3-dimensional modes of representation. Kress gives us the examples of a cut-out car and a Lego car and demonstrate the dynamic and affective potentials of these modes compared to writing. The cut-outs and Lego constructions can be physically explored, felt and moved to new environments and with other objects in order to form new structures in new imagined and real worlds. In this way, children’s imaginations are engaged in a different manner than with the mental engagement with a distanced world when children are writing.

Both Kress (1997b) and Pahl’s (2003) investigations into children’s playful worlds demonstrate how each mode offers different potentials and limitations. As children move across modes, different affordances are present and can be manipulated and used. When the affordances of one mode begin to lose their communicative possibility, another mode can be taken up. Lego offers possibilities that paper does not and paper, whether it be painted or cut out, offers possibilities which lego does not.

As a result of his study, Kress (1997b) claims that each move between the modes, "engages the child differently in cognitive and affective action. The move, the 'transduction' across modes, encourages the 'synaesthetic' potentials of the child in their transformative, creative actions" (p. 29). Kress’ term “synaesthesia” refers to the idea that many sign systems may be working together at the same time. He suggests that there
are best ways of representing meaning, whether it is language, drawing or colour and that many modes of representation may be in use at the same time—some modes may just be more dominant or noticeable than others. The significance being, that all modes enable cognition, but in different ways. “Written language enables one form of cognition; drawing another; colour as a medium another; the production of physical objects and their interactive use, yet others” (Kress, 1997b, p. 43).

When children are given the opportunity to use an assortment of modes to synthesize information or meanings, whether it is from one mode to the next or a combination of modes, such as drawing and writing or language and gesture, there is an abundance of potential for them to express and construct meaning in their world.

Dyson (1989) investigated this topic of moving across sign systems in her analysis of the interplay between talk, drawing and writing. She examined how the concept of “crossing symbolic borders” (p. 71) is helpful for beginning writers. She claimed that children could be “symbol weavers” (p. 78) by using talk, drawing, writing and sometimes gesture to enter into and create imaginary worlds. Talk could be used as a tool for directing drawing and it served with drawing to represent meaning. Children needed talk to dramatize feelings or actions and they needed drawing to represent a figure or character. She stated that as children grew as writers, they needed to “differentiate worlds of drawing, talking and writing so that they can more deliberately manipulate them” (p. 71). If boundaries are firm between drawing, talk and writing, it can leave writers feeling unsupported. Beginning writers whose symbolic worlds are not woven together may feel stranded when asked to begin writing with no other means of scaffolding.
Dyson (1989), along with Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984), Kress (1997b), Pahl (1999) suggest that each sign system has a potential and a limitation. In order to become capable meaning makers, children need to be able to manipulate and move between sign systems to suit their ideas and agendas. Harste et al. (1984) explains that “alternative communication systems support language and language supports alternative communication systems and this aids in moving from one system to another” (p. 207). The movement from one system or mode to another and the affordances and limitations of each of the modes, is fundamental in beginning to unravel the intentions and meanings of the sign-maker.

There is extensive research examining the movement between particular sign systems, such as drawing and writing, and the profound impact it can have on the learning potentials of a variety of learners. Many researchers Millard and Marsh (2001), Kendrick and McKay (2004) and Sidelnick and Svoboda (2000) have investigated the power of drawing and how it can serve as a bridge from one symbol system to another.

Millard and Marsh (2001) examined teacher’s responses to writing and related drawing and the effect it has on student motivation. They studied how visual literacy skills are integrated with a student’s motivation to write in school. In their research they concluded that boys were found to use drawing as a means of enhancing printed text and they held an implicit understanding of the role pictures usually played in stories. Teachers that were interviewed also stated that boys tended to verbalize while they drew and “accompanied their work with action, noises and commentary” (p. 57). Drawing in conjunction with writing, rather than writing alone, was the preferred mode of expression...
among all the children in the study. The students claimed that it “helped them to think about the content of their composition” (p. 58).

Likewise, Kendrick and McKay (2004) solicited the drawings of young children in grades one and two in order to understand their impressions of reading and writing. The results of their study suggest that “drawing allowed young children to represent whole areas of their sensory lives” and that “pictures capture sensory modes such as smell, hearing, sight in a way that language cannot” (p. 123). Drawing can “infer the moods, relationships and interactions that are embedded and diffused across the many different literacy contexts of children’s lives” (p. 123).

While drawing and the arts hold value for all children, it can be especially motivational for children with special needs who might otherwise be unreachable (Sidelnick & Svoboda, 2000). Through a case study of a girl with special needs, Sidelnick and Svoboda (2000) took an in-depth look at how drawing can move children from the visual to the spoken and then to the written word. They concluded that artistic expression, such as drawing, enables children with special needs to translate what they know into another modality in order to express meaning. In Sidelnick and Svoboda’s case study, “Hannah” was unable to write and drawing enabled her to express meaning and ideas. Drawing was Hannah’s symbol system and she used it to organize her thoughts. Drawing was her language. As she was learning organizational skills from drawing, she was also slowly learning to express herself in other areas, including writing. As Sidelnick and Svoboda write, these drawing “skills provided a bridge from the visual to the spoken and written word” (p. 183). As explained earlier in Dyson’s (1989) and
Millard and Marsh’s (2001) work, drawing may or may not proceed writing, but may develop simultaneously with it.

Children use drawing in an integral way in their written work and there is a strong dialogical relationship between word and image (Millard & Marsh, 2001). Drawing can capture ideas, feelings and expressions that writing cannot. Consequently, by moving between the systems of drawing and writing, children can be involved in a deeper and more complex process in their meaning making. The relationship between seeing, telling, drawing and writing is intimate and an essential and significant aspect of teaching writing (Ernst, 1994).

To summarize, moving across sign systems enables learners to choose the best mode to represent their meaning, assessing whether it will limit the meaning they intend to express or facilitate it. Consequently, by transforming information across modes, imaginations and cognitive and affective processes are activated in a different manner. In addition, one sign system may mediate another in an effort to organize ideas. For example, talk may direct drawing and drawing may help sort out thoughts in order to write. All learners can benefit from multiple modes of representation with respect to an increase in motivation and enabling learners to organize and express themselves accordingly. However, it has an even more powerful benefit for specific learners such as boys who may rely on drawing and their verbalizations to express the majority of the meaning, and learners with special needs who could rely on an alternative symbol system to gain access to information and give them a tool to express themselves (Sidelnick & Svoboda, 2000).
The Impact of Learning Multi-modally in Today's Classroom

Children are already coming to school with skills to switch between the different sign systems. They are already multi-modally literate and it is teachers and schools that are often print-bound. Times are changing and teachers and school systems need to keep up with the change in order to meet the demands of their learner's profiles and provide learning opportunities that will enable them in the 21st Century.

Many current researchers (Archer, 2006; Jewitt, 2005; Kress, 2003; Millard & Marsh, 2003; New London Group, 2000) are calling for a shift in educational policies and literacy pedagogy to look beyond traditional (print-based) concepts of literacy to include and place value on the different semiotic dimensions of representation in literacy education. Educational policy and assessment continue to promote a linguistic view of literacy and this fails to connect to the kinds of literacy required in schools with the "out-of-school worlds" of most people (Jewitt, 2005). Schools and educators still assume precedence of written texts over any other, with an emphasis on the control over stages and targets for writing, assuming that all children move in a linear fashion from spoken word to visual representation and onwards towards the conventional literacy model (Millard & Marsh, 2003). In addition, schools neglect to utilize the range of modes as a way of harnessing the resources that students bring with them to school.

Adapting an educational philosophy that supports the natural ways young children go about making meaning in their world, along with valuing the possibilities other modes of representation can offer, is necessary in that it can support students in an ever changing economic and social world. Kress (1997b) calls for an enabling in schools to create possibilities for the cognitive and affective potentials of children by making available to
them the means of producing all kinds of signs. He suggests teachers intervene and support students by making sure that they have on hand what they need for meaning making. Kress’s (1997b) notion of the enriching process that occurs when a child is able to manipulate, move between and take up a new sign when conveying information, is not only “cognitively, conceptually, aesthetically and affectively” (p. 29) enriching for the child, but has incredibly powerful notions in the outside world as well. This ability to switch sign systems with the understanding that certain signs can offer different potentials or limitations for the sign maker, is a critical skill for children’s social and economic futures in the 21st century. Likewise, New London Group (2000) calls for a literacy pedagogy that can reflect the global economic change. Their analysis suggests that economic markets today are centred on change and flexibility.

The old vertical chains of command are replaced by the horizontal relationships of teamwork. A division of labour into its minute, de-skilled components is replaced by ‘multi-skilled’, well-rounded workers who are flexible enough to be able to do complex and integrated work. (New London Group, 2000, p. 11)

This new literacy debate is prompted by the influence of new technologies and global economic change where markets are centred on change and flexibility (Millard & Marsh, 2003; New London Group, 2000). The world is changing and the interface between audio, visual and print technologies is shifting. We live in a digital world—a world where image, sound and print are interwoven together in such arenas as the “world wide web,” “playstation” and “CD Roms.” The world is increasing in the complexity of communication systems and representation and “literacy pedagogy must account for the increasing variety of text forms associated with multimedia and information technologies” (New London Group, 2000, p. 9).
Therefore, writing, and for all purposes literacy, needs to be re-shaped in order to meet the diverse needs of our students and to meet the demands in a changing social and economic world. Many scholars who view literacy more as a social practice, such as Archer (2006), Gee (1996), Heath (1983), and Street (1995), along with the researchers discussed in this paper, suggest that the current ‘traditional’ notion of reading and writing needs to change in order for school literacy to be relevant and to meet the demands of the multimodal environment of a larger world. “It (literacy) must move away from a series of technical skills or risk fostering a population of functional illiterates” (Archer, 2006, p. 330).

Summary of Literature Review

This review of literature suggests that there are many ways alternative sign systems can enhance written language development. The cultural practices of a children’s families and the environmental context in which they live, have a significant impact on meaning making practices. Families may offer alternative sign systems, such as painting, dance and music as ways to express emotions, ideas and understandings. This becomes a powerful force in how children make meaning (and children enter school with these culturally acquired resources for communicating meaning.)

The literature also reveals that children naturally move between sign systems. They combine drawing and writing and gesture and speaking. Thus, it makes sense to bridge writing with other sign systems. Written language development emerges when it is strongly rooted with a child’s symbolic world of drawing, play and talk (Dyson, 1992). Writing develops within a context of environments rich with social and material resources. This provides the scaffolding needed to enable beginning writers. Therefore,
alternative sign systems need to be viewed, not as a stage of written language development prior to writing, but as a valued mode of expression onto itself as well as a tool that enables children to communicate their meanings and understandings as they begin to write (Millard & Marsh, 2001).

Pahl (2003) and Kress (1997b) explored how children create new meanings when they transform content from one mode to the next. As content is manipulated onto a new plane, children benefit cognitively and affectively because meanings change, imaginations are engaged and new perspectives are reached. Thus, when children move across sign systems, such as from writing to drawing to drama and back again, children can reach their “synaesthetic potentials” (Kress, 1997b, p. 29). Learning is enriched because each ‘transduction’ or movement from one mode to the next triggers a different cognitive action.

Another way alternative sign systems enable writing is by increasing motivation and engagement. Drawing and writing have an intimate relationship. By connecting written expression with drawing, it can be highly motivational for all learners and more specifically to learners that might be less reachable, such as non-English speakers and special needs students. When word and image are connected deeper and more complex processes of learning take place (Millard & Marsh, 2001).

Researchers studying the effects of literacy and multimodality (Archer, 2006; Jewitt, 2005; Kress, 2003; Millard & Marsh 2003; New London Group 2000) argue strongly for schools and educators to place more value on the different semantic dimensions of representation of literacy and to put alternative sign systems on an equal playing field with print-based literacy. In doing so, schools will enhance the learning
potentials of all students by connecting school literacy with the culturally acquired literacy practices of children along with supporting a population of flexible learners who can adapt to the ever-changing demands of living and working in the 21st century.
SECTION 3: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

In the following section I will explain how I took these findings to develop a brochure for the parents at my school. In order to provide a context and an explanation as to why I feel it is necessary to create a brochure, the first part of this section will describe the community in which I teach- the school, its setting, the population of teachers, learners and parents. The second part will describe what the brochure will look like and the information within it. Finally, I will reflect on the process of creating the brochure and seek to comment on the impact that it might have in my teaching community.

School Context

The school where I teach, is situated in a suburb of a large urban area in western Canada. The suburb is predominantly a detached residential area with the majority of the residents being upper middle class families and retirees. The school is situated in quite an affluent area set among a quiet neighbourhood of detached houses. It is surrounded by a creek, a small forest and it is near a variety of recreational facilities, such as a local ski mountain and a small public beach.

The school is a public school with only primary grades. It consists of three classrooms from kindergarten to grade three with a population of about sixty to seventy students. There is also an attached, but privately-run preschool located within the building. We are a small site with only three teachers, so collaboration is at the root of most of our teaching endeavours. Together we plan instruction, conduct action research and teach to multi-age groups of learners.

Our school also has a history of focusing on the arts. Each teacher has a special skill in some area of fine arts and it is explored and integrated into many curricular areas
on a daily basis. Each year the teachers and students integrate their special talents into some kind of performance or celebration.

The fine arts have a strong influence on my teaching practice and it guides a lot of the experiences I have with my kindergarten students. I teach a morning and afternoon kindergarten class. The majority of students is English speaking and already come to school with a wide range of worldly experiences. I try to establish a classroom environment, where creativity permeates most of the experiences and children are encouraged to experiment and explore with a variety of tools and media to express themselves and represent their ideas and thinking.

The majority of the parent population is highly involved in various activities throughout the school from fundraising to volunteering in the classrooms. Many parents have sought out this small school site for the unique possibilities that it can provide their child. Because of its size, parents are able to be highly involved, students are well-known to all the teachers and students alike and teachers are able to exert a fair amount of influence over the running of the school.

Parents in this community have vested interests in their child’s education. The majority of students come from homes where both parents are highly educated and hold jobs in high positions. They place a high degree of value on education and have high standards and expectations for their children. Parents have researched the best preschools and extra-curricular programs that can provide the necessary skills needed to enter school.

Thus, there is a fair amount of expectation and underlying pressure placed on the child and the child’s teacher, as they enter formal schooling. Parents place a high value
on reading and writing, however, the research examined in this paper suggests that such a focus may devalue other forms of meaning-making, such as dramatic play, drawing, talking and modeling. Thus, I feel I need to challenge parents about the unique ways their child is experiencing the world and to place importance on the variety of modes for which meanings can be created and expressed.

Given the context of the school and the expectations parents often place on the formal role of reading and writing, I feel it is necessary to provide information, like the one in the brochure I have created, that is research-based and places value on the role multimodalities can play in their child’s language and literacy development. I plan to talk about the content of this brochure at our kindergarten Open House and at our September Curriculum Night and pass it out to parents at both these events.

**The Brochure**

The brochure will have six columns, three on the front and three on the back. Information on the brochure will consist of an explanation of the term multimodality, will provide information on the importance of multimodalities and writing development, will give examples of multimodality and literacy in action, and provide ways parents can support their child at home.

**Column 1: Title: What is Multimodality?**

This column will be located on the left hand side of the brochure when you first open it up. I will assume that the majority of parents would be unfamiliar with the term multimodality, so this column of the brochure will provide information that explains what multimodality is.
This column will present information in a bulleted form and will seek to condense and simplify the definition of multimodality and why it has importance for language and literacy learning. Multimodality is the variety of ways (modes) to go about making meaning. These modes can take on a variety of forms such as dramatic play, drawing, modeling, talking, singing and art. The meanings children try to communicate are expressed in their own symbolic worlds, such as drawing, talking, playing and writing. Through their use of drawing to represent meaning and through exploration with early squiggles and letter-like markings, children gradually engage and take control of the writing process.

Language and Literacy researchers, such as Kendrick and McKay (2004), argue that “becoming literate means more than being able to read, write or code; it means acquiring the ability to use a variety of representative forms for conceptualizing and expressing meaning” (p. 110). Recognizing art, drama, dance, and music as forms of literacy plays an important role in the development of children’s lives. In order to understand how children find their way into the world of print, there is a need to understand these principles of meaning-making (Kress, 1997b).

Column 2: Title: The Importance of Multimodalities when Learning to Write

This column will also present information in a bulleted form and will provide information on the connectedness of multimodalities and written language development. Drawing, talk, and play are avenues through which children come to understand their worlds. To take away these tools, when learning to write, is essentially to take away the means by which children have come to express themselves and communicate in their world. In order for children to become proficient meaning makers they need to be able to
use, manipulate and move across a variety of modalities. In this way, they learn the limits and possibilities of each mode and thus become powerful sign makers and communicators. For example, drawings can capture sensory modes such as smell, hearing, and, sight in ways that language cannot and it can infer moods, relationships and interactions. (Kendrick & McKay, 2004) Lego, blocks and cut-outs allow children to manipulate objects and this enables them to enter into new imaginary worlds. When children are given the opportunities to engage with multiple modalities new meanings can be formed because children are engaged in different cognitive actions and learning experiences become more enriching and complex.

In addition, for all writers and most definitely for beginning writers, moving between different modes is helpful. Children can use talk, drawing, and writing all at the same time to uphold meaning. Talk could be used as a tool for directing drawing and it can be used in tandem with drawing to represent meaning. Children may need talk to dramatize feelings or actions and they may need drawing to organize their thoughts and ideas.

Additionally, when a child switches from one mode to another, it may create new meanings and new possibilities for expression. There may be best ways of representing a meaning and finding that best way can enrich a child’s understanding or enlighten them with a new possibilities.

Column 3: Title: Multimodality in Action

This next column will explain the ways in which multimodality and literacy are connected and provide a variety of examples from both the classroom and home setting. The impetus for creating this column is to provide a context for parents to understand the
richness of learning that can occur through the various sign systems (multimodalities). By using examples of real experiences to explain how moving across multiple modes offers many possibilities to children, I hope to give parents a new perspective on the importance of children’s play and art experiences and the ways in which they may enrich their children’s experiences.

The first example originated from an exploration into the theme of “our school” by a class of kindergartens. The children were led by their teacher on a sensory tour of the school grounds. Children looked, touched and explored all areas of the school and were then given a choice of materials with which to re-create their impressions of the school. Some children chose to use blocks to make models of the classroom, others painted representations of the outside play area, and yet others chose crayons and paper to map out the inside of the school. These drawings, paintings and maps of the school were displayed on school bulletin-boards along with descriptive written commentaries.

The second example illustrates how a young boy’s interest in and understanding of Knights was expressed and transformed through multiple modes. The boy’s interest was initially piqued by stories of knights read to him by his parents. He began exploring the concept of knights through drawing. These initial drawings became more complex and included the special features of knights, such as a knight’s armour, horses and weapons. He then, turned these pictures of knights into a book, in which his mother scribed his ideas. He began by explaining the different kinds of armor and moved onto the actions of knights. He later took on the role of a knight in a play he created with his aunt. He planned to follow this up with a Knight Museum which would be housed in the hallway of his home.
The third example identifies how a group of children took a multimedia approach to writing a Christmas play. They began this project by drawing pictures of scenes they wanted to be included in their play. The drawings created by the children provided them with a scaffold from which they could begin developing and acting out characters and scenes. As the children's work progressed adults wrote down the children's ideas. When completed, the play was video-recorded for everyone to enjoy.

**Column 4 & 5: Title: How to Support Your Child at Home**

The next column of the brochure provides ideas for parents to embrace and support literacy development through multimodal activities at home. There are plenty of ideas to share with parents, too many to mention in a small brochure, but for the most part I would like the examples to highlight what the parents and children may already be doing at home and therefore parents may be more likely acknowledge the significance of these experiences to their child's literacy development. I would like them to realize that there are ways to encourage and support written language expression at home, beyond the formal printing of letters or words, ways that are natural, authentic and motivating for their child. Listed below are several examples for parents to support their children's literacy development through the use of multimodalities.

1. Set up an art-writing centre at home. Create an area of your home that provides a variety of materials for children to create with. Easy access to the materials is necessary and materials should be organized and inviting. Have your child help you to organize the materials. You can use empty margarine or baby food jars to hold materials and assemble all containers in a box to be easily pulled out or house materials in a drawer of a dresser or kitchen cupboard. Materials can be gathered, recycled and ideally should
be an assortment of natural and manufactured materials. Some ideas are: pinecones, sticks, water-colour paint sets, staplers, paper, elastics, tape, pom poms, material scraps, toothpicks, old magazines, wrapping paper, greeting cards, and ribbon.

2. Provide opportunities for children to engage in a variety of meaning making activities. Put on music for children to dance to, take out a box of dress-up clothes and face paints and see what happens, venture into the garage to get messy with paints and glue and scissors.

3. Provide experiences that involve a long-term project using a variety of modes, such as journaling a family trip with pictures and then creating a story about the trip from the pictures on the computer. Or display digital pictures and words by completing an on-line scrapbook of your trip.

4. Think about ways you can connect and extend the activities your child is already doing. If they are interested in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, watch them role play with the figurines, then provide them with materials to extend their ideas (e.g. lego and blocks to create a setting to go along with the re-enactment). Give the child a digital camera to record pictures of what happens, then print the pictures and turn them into a book.

Column 6: Title Page: Learning to Write: Supporting Your Child’s Writing Development with Multimodalities

This column will be the title page. The page will consist of the title Learning to Write: Supporting Your Child’s Writing Development with Multimodalities along with a picture and a quote on what it means to be literate in today’s world.
Reflections on Writing the Brochure

Creating the parent brochure on multimodalities and literacy learning has had its challenges. First, condensing pertinent information from my research onto a two-page, six column brochure posed many challenges. I did not want the brochure to look too wordy. Too much print would make it difficult to read. Second, I felt that there was so much I had learned and so much information I felt was important to share, that synthesizing the information was a process that took multiple steps. I started off writing paragraphs of information on the brochure and then proceeded to turn the paragraphs into bulleted phrases. After which I rearranged, synthesized and deleted information to fit the columns and to make it easily readable.

Although tedious, the process of weeding out and synthesizing information was very useful for me. It encouraged me to focus on what was most significant about all the research I had read and learned from. In doing so, I felt it was a cognitively enriching process for me. It encouraged me to put all the information in perspective and to highlight the importance of learning through multimodalities.

In addition, adding the pictures was a multimodal process for me as well. To truly capture the essence of multimodalities, I had to embrace the images as well as words. I ventured into the clipart section of my Microsoft Word program for the first time and had fun finding images that supported my written brochure. I want the parents to “read” the visuals as well as the words and be captivated and intrigued by the images too.

I hope this brochure will challenge the parents in my community to reassess the value they place on their child’s play and exploratory experiences. I know they value fostering creativity and imagination and so by providing research based evidence that
demonstrates how important it is, not only for their social and emotional development, but for their literacy development as well, I hope parents will be able to recognize and support the power of drawing, modeling, music, dance and play experiences for their children.

I would like to do more than just hand out a brochure with information. As mentioned previously, I will address this brochure in the context of our kindergarten Open House and September Curriculum Night. I think the brochure can be best supported with a small power point demonstration highlighting the points on the brochure along with photographs of their children engaging in meaning making across various sign systems.
SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

I began this paper by asking the following questions: What happens when other sign systems, such as art, drawing and gesture are incorporated into writing activities in the classroom? What do these modes of expression offer writing, if anything? What happens to the meanings children create when they move from one sign system to another? What are the advantages of learning multi-modally in today’s classroom? A review of the literature demonstrates that there are many advantages to learning multi-modally and that when children engage in alternative modes of representation, there are many benefits for their writing development.

From an early age children naturally go about their world exploring alternative ways of symbolizing meaning. They wave goodbye with their hands, they make strokes in the sand, they draw pictures and role play experiences they have at school and with friends. Overtime, children develop many ‘tools” to express themselves and make sense of things. They use these specific tools as they see appropriate, picking the most suitable mode or combination of modes to uphold the meaning for them. As children begin to enter the world of print, it makes sense for them to rely on modes that they have control over as they explore and begin to play with the language of writing because in doing so, children are able to become proficient sign users. Drawing, talking, singing can scaffold the efforts of young writers. If they can depend on alternative sign systems, such as drawing or talking, it will enable them as writers because they will have other systems to fall back on. When writing no longer affords a child all the possibilities that child may need to express themselves, being a capable “sign weaver” will enable them to use alternative sign systems to uphold meanings.
As children move between sign systems many affordances are made possible. Images, talk, models, cut-outs, and music allow possibilities that written language cannot. Pictures, paintings and music can evoke feelings, moods and relationships and three-dimensional creations provide a kinesthetic and spatial quality that writing alone does not provide. Alternative modes enable children to enter new imaginary worlds and new dimensions. Children can use written texts as scripts to be acted out, visualize the setting of an author’s texts by drawing, capture a text’s mood through rhythm and movement and discover a character’s feelings by facial expressions and voices (Dyson, 1989). In doing so, children discover the interrelated purposes and powers of varied media, as their growth in writing develops (Dyson, 1989). When children develop the ability to move within and across a variety of modes of representation the meanings they create can be expressed in the best possible way and in doing so they discover new meanings, new perspectives and new understandings.

As I look back on my experiences in school, I recall vividly how I struggled with writing. I had come from a family of artists who valued learning through the arts. Drawing, painting and movement were ways I felt comfortable communicating. In school, I was only given one avenue for expression, writing and my drawings were seen as afterthoughts and finish-up activities, not as an integral piece of the meanings I was communicating. I believe that if I had been given opportunities to enter into the act of writing along side other modes of representation such as movement or drawing, that I would have embraced writing, and been more confident in my abilities as a proficient communicator.
If schools can provide communicational environments that provide rich sets of resources for bridging modes of representation children naturally use, they can reach and connect to learners in ways they might never have been able to. Schools play a critical role in determining a student's life opportunities and the "learning processes (in school) need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments and purposes that students bring to learning (New London Group, 2000, p.11).” There are ways to improve writing in schools by including the wide range of cultural resources that children bring to their classroom engagements (because) when we turn to the dominant modes of communication in the world, beyond the academic, both static and moving images predominant and the ability to move effortlessly between different modes of communication enables messages to be transmitted in many forms other than through linear narrative or logically argued report (Millard & Marsh, 2001, p. 60).

When children encounter experiences that nurture their strengths and interest, they are more likely to feel engaged, satisfied and want to participate. If we as adults and educators observe closely and listen attentively, children will invite us into their worlds and share their ways of living in the world with us. When they invite us in, then we can support and extend what they know and enrich their ways of knowing.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: Parent Multimodality Brochure
What is Multimodality?

Multimodality is the variety of ways (modes) to go about making meaning.

- Modes can take on a variety of forms such as dramatic play, drawing, modeling, talking, singing and art.

- Children rely on an understanding of how drawing symbolizes meaning as they explore and play with early squiggles and letter-like markings (Dyson, 1989 p. 7).

- In order to understand how children find their way into the world of print, there is a need to understand these principles of meaning-making.

Learning to write needs to develop simultaneously with other, more established ways of communicating, such as drawing, talking, and dramatic play.

The Importance of Multimodalities when Learning to Write

Other modes, such as drawing, painting, talking and building, offer possibilities that writing may not.

- Drawing, dance and music can capture sensory modes such as smell, hearing, sight in a way that language cannot and it can infer moods, relationships and interactions. (Kendrick & McKay, 2004).

- Models, cut-outs, blocks and lego creations allow children to manipulate objects and this enables them to enter into new imaginary worlds.

- Talk could be used as a tool for directing drawing and it can serve with writing to represent meaning.

Moving between different modes is helpful.

- Children can rely on other modes, along with writing, to help them communicate their ideas effectively
- New meanings can be created and new perspectives gained
- Engages them in different cognitive actions and thus learning experiences become more enriching and complex.

Multimodality in Action

After an exploratory tour of the school grounds a class of kindergarten children were given a choice of materials to re-create their impressions of the school. Some children chose to use blocks to make models of the classroom, others painted the outside play area, and many others chose crayons and paper to map out the inside of the school. These drawings, paintings and pictures of their models were displayed among the school along with a written commentary of their descriptions.

Another example is taken from a young boy's interest in Knights. He began exploring this concept of knights through drawing pictures of knights along with their special features. He then, turned those pictures of knights into a book, in which his mother scribbled his ideas. He later took on the role of a knight in a play he made with his aunt. His next intention was to set up a Knight Museum in the hallway of his home.

Another example is from a group of children who took a multimedia approach to writing a Christmas story. They began this project by drawing pictures of scenes. They started creating different characters and scenes by acting out parts from their drawings. Ideas were recorded in print by an adult as the children acted out various scenes. When completed, the play was recorded via video camera for everyone to enjoy.
How to Support Your Child at Home

Set up an art-writing centre at home
• Easy access to the materials is necessary and materials should be organized and inviting.
• Have your child help you to organize the materials. You can use empty margarine or baby food jars to hold materials.
• Materials can be gathered, recycled and ideally should be an assortment of natural and manufactured materials.
• Some ideas are: pinecones, sticks, water-colour paint sets, staplers, paper, elastics, tape, pom poms, material scraps, toothpicks, old magazines, wrapping paper, greeting cards, and ribbon.

Provide Opportunities for them to Engage in a Variety of Modes and Media.
• Put on music to dance to, take out a box of dress-up clothes and face paints and see what happens.
• Venture into the garage to get messy with paints and glue and scissors.
• Have them cut out images and words and phrases from the newspaper or a magazine and then match images with words to create poetry.

How to Support Your Child at Home Continued

Long-term Projects using a Variety of Modes
• Provide space and materials for your child to create their own world; space world, underground world or something inspired from a TV show or movie. Make cut-out characters, video tape scenes, or create a story from this dramatic play.
• Display digital pictures and words by completing an on-line digital scrapbook of a family trip, adventure or year together. Great websites are www.mypublisher.com or www.photoinpress.ca.

Extending what Your Child is Already Doing
• Think about ways you can connect and extend the activities your child is already doing.
• Watch and listen to what they are interested in. It may be fairies or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, or trains.
• Watch them role play and then provide them with materials to extend their imaginations, such as lego and blocks to create a setting. Give them a digital camera to take pictures of what happens, then print the pictures and turn it into a book.

Learning to Write: Supporting Your Child’s Writing Development with Multimodalities

“Becoming literate means more than being able to read, write or code; it means acquiring the ability to use a variety of representative forms for conceptualizing and expressing meaning (Kendrick & McKay 2004 p. 110).”

Brochure written by Andrea Beatty-Anderson 2008