

Empowering children’s voices through the narrative of drawings

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Abstract

This article shares my journey about becoming a researcher of young children. Importantly, a part of this journey is an understanding of how to empower children’s voices in the classroom through playmaking and through the narrative illustrated in the drawings of young children. Using a narrative approach and visual methods to connect to children’s voices through drawing and classroom discussions, I use the Mosaic approach in the collection of data to fully capture the essence of what it truly means to “listen” when young children are expressing themselves (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005). The richness of children’s meaning making (Wells, 1999) is shared through this multi-method approach. The recognition of the different “voices” or “languages” of children is enriched through narrative and empowering for all when children are treated as experts and agents through the sharing of story.

“That’s the secret in my picture.” – Daneisha, age 6

Introduction

Pictures and stories (or “secrets,” as young Daneisha characterizes them) are very important to our research about children’s literate understandings of their world. My particular research focuses on children’s play and how it illustrates their role as “meaning makers” in their own lives. The very essence of a child’s understanding stems from the social events that characterize each young child’s life, and their understanding of these events becomes apparent through play (Wells, 1999). Their rich social interactions, found through play, provide opportunities for both rehearsals and re-enactments of roles and experiences. In my research, I have used a number of visual methods and narrative approaches to connect to their important stories, which in turn has shaped my research around the literacy practices of young children (Burke, 2010). Engaging children as collaborators in my research has demonstrated how the expertise of young children provides meaning making for both their teachers and myself.

A story is composed of events that can be real, imaginary, or organized through forms such as pictures, words, songs or even dances. Relating the events of a story can also be termed a “narrative”. Children often tell narratives along a time-line, describing self-identifying features, a sibling’s birth, or the process of a day at school. Notably, these stories help children make sense of their world by engaging their feelings, exploring complicated feelings and emotions, or connecting them to childhood memories through their association with characters and illustrations in picture books. With a child-centered approach to research, the significance of a child’s sharing is expressed through the methodology itself, where the children’s own narrative stories are told in their own voices. As a researcher who is primarily concerned with children’s voices and knowing, I use a narrative approach in my research. I am a strong admirer of the work of early childhood educator and writer Vivian Paley. By wisely acknowledging the power and voices of kindergarten children, through story, Paley helped her students make sense of their young lives through friendship and in the context of their relationships with others in their world.

Paley employed a number of “narrative tools” (McNamee, 2005) to help children connect their school knowledge to their knowledge of their homes and world, including: author studies, picture books, children’s play, illustrations depicting dilemmas faced by characters in stories, and personal narratives. The narrative tools used in this study are similar to ones used above, but I also use children’s artifacts from home such as digital pictures and personal drawings.

Beyond a child’s first beginnings with narrative, it is used in our society for a variety of purposes: for entertainment through recitation, for teaching morals and values to children using fables and legends, for reporting academic findings, for documenting historical events through novels, and for relating cultural practices and traditions. “The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Children’s literacy scholars, such as Hardy (1997), believe that stories act as a narrative web, bringing meaning and understanding about the world to children. Ethnographic research in classrooms, conducted by Anne Dyson (1993; 1994) and focused around play, meaning and literacy, illustrates the importance of storytelling as children use it to filter their own narratives within the official classroom curriculum. Other seminal research about children’s literacy engagements, by Shirley Bryce Heath (1983), observes that the development of children’s narrative and cultural identities is vital to sharing experiences from home, and by sharing home narratives they demonstrated closer connections to literacy than those exhibited in classroom performance. Her study suggests that narrative is essential to children’s meaning making in the classroom. In many ways, narrative is the act of speculating on the life and the events, which characterize a young child’s experiences. It is their way of showing us what they know, in their natural form of knowing.

This article is an exploration of the particular stories and knowing that children can share through play-based learning in classrooms and through illustration. This article employs research data from a project that examined children’s literacy development and forms of text making in primary schools. As the researcher, I was particularly interested in looking at literacy practices developed through play pedagogy in school compared to how children constructed literacy in their out-of-school play at home. My research intent was to engage children, through narrative, in the types of texts and literacy events they use outside of the classroom. This is a very natural way for the children to share their stories about how literacy is constructed in their worlds.

This research study is comprised of my observations in the children’s classrooms, during interviews, of visual representations of their knowing and their voices. My observations provide data consisting of “actions, events, and happenings” that, when looked at through a narrative lens, “produce stories” (Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 577). Focusing on the process involved in the construction of a story, and ‘topic-centered narratives’ in particular, I relate children’s literacy moments as “snapshots of past events that focus around particular topics and themes and are fragments rather than extended narratives” (Jones, 2011, p. 112). Through observation of these literacy moments, we are able to analyze how a child creates meaning and constructs these moments as a story around a particular topic. As Kramp (2004) explains “through narrative inquiry, you gain access to the personal experiences of the storyteller who frames, articulates, and reveals life as experienced in a narrative structure we call story. In narrative inquiry, this story is the basic unit of analysis” (p. 105).

Becoming a researcher

My interest in play, and how children learn from play, stems from my work with teachers in primary and elementary classrooms across Canada. I have since recognized that there are many life skills such as turn-taking, critical thinking and problem solving which may be credited to the powerful learning potential of play. Literacy in young children is nourished through play, which in turn benefits their own knowing. The following sections share the narrative stories of two classrooms and involve a number of research studies that examine the play lives of Canadian children. In particular, I consider how different resources such as picture books, children's personal narratives, and illustrated texts can help children to fully engage their narrative voices. When this research was conceived, I was working with a publishing team and looking at the creation of a new kindergarten resource program in three Canadian provinces. In my research of early learning, I sought out kindergarten teachers who held a similar philosophy, and I sought pedagogy and practice to support the idea that the situated learning and diversity in literacy each child carries is a personal map to greater achievements.

Research is an important aspect of professional practice that is designed to promote educational effectiveness. As such, it is imperative that educators be versed in educational theories that attempt to represent the "best" professional practices as well as how these practices might be facilitated in the classroom. This idea of praxis, where theory and practice come together as an integrative frame, is important to me for a number of reasons. As a former classroom teacher, I would often find myself limited when only using a best practice approach. It often did not answer the questions of why some children would clearly grasp the lesson more quickly, or be more creative, or be critically attuned to deeper issues within a reading of a story. Without a theoretical framework, educators are left with few resources for thoroughly interrogating their respective sites of research (i.e. the classroom). According to Lankshear and Knobel (2006), there are three "moments" that can be most productively discussed as a means to this end.

The first moment, experienced by educators, is described as the impetus for pursuing a particular topic of inquiry. For example, research may be inspired by something an educator may have read, a topic addressed during professional development, or an interaction with faculty or staff. This is considered the primary research activity. For this research, I was concerned with how play could be used as a pedagogical tool to more deeply explore how children play and construct narratives.

The second moment takes place when educators begin to actively frame their topic into a research question for further inquiry. This includes the consideration of related concerns for the research topic, various theoretical approaches that can be employed as a lens through which to view the topic, and a rationale for the selection of a particular approach. This moment is considered an on-going process for the duration of educational research. In my early classroom visitations, I realized that teachers needed to consider their own questions about how to teach using play and books, and how to invite home experiences into the classroom. The research questions were flexible enough so that teachers could mould their understanding to different groups of learners.

The third and final moment occurs when research is complete, and educators begin to reflect on the feedback and response to the research. The third moment of this research study, produced

sudden and clear realizations for both the teachers and myself, as we reflected on what the children shared through their play episodes. By sharing our collective knowledge, we could create a holistic picture of learning based on what we had observed in the classroom. As a result, the learners and theory became our inspiration, or first moment, to look more deeply into improving professional practice.

Children are natural storytellers, which is evident in how they recount their life events. Stories are shared through multiple forms of knowing, such as illustrations and play, which in turn invite a narrative approach, ensuring that life stories from beyond the classroom are shared (Eick, 2011). Using narrative inquiry as the basis of analysis would also emphasize the necessary life experience and beliefs that are needed to see children as active co-researchers (Eick, 2011). As active co-researchers, the children's stories were molded through a narrative lens, which acknowledges the multiple ways and forms of knowing that children share in this world. When working with young children as active researchers in collaborative research; however, other considerations need to be taken into account.

Other considerations with children's narratives

Using young children as research participants has been contentious due to the perception that children who are often below the age of seven (sometimes older), lack the competency, capability, and responsibility required to contribute any relevant or beneficial information to researchers, generally speaking (Smith, 2011). Nonetheless, it must be understood that the subjective experiences of the children involved in this study of children's narratives are an important element because they reflect the quality of research where children are the major focus (Dunphy and Farrell, 2011). Reflection is a key feature here. Children will often articulate their views on aspects of their own learning, and educators must reflect on this in their efforts to maximize the learning potential of their students (Dunphy and Farrell, 2011).

The unfiltered views of the participating children were essential features in our search to understand the literacy engagements of the children in that particular classroom. As stated previously, children may not completely understand the purpose of an academic activity involved in the research process. As researchers in these primary classrooms, however, our intentions and responsibilities were to monitor and record how children learn through play, and, just as importantly, how literacy instruction could be informed by their voices. The United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC-1989), as an organization, reiterates this understanding through their statement that children should "have agency and voice, and that they have a right to participate – to give information and to take part in decisions in matters that affect them" (Smith, 2011, p. 12). For this reason, as researchers in this area, we have an obligation to not only "hear" but also "listen" to the voices of these young children.

According to Smith, another key aspect to take into consideration is the importance of methodology when investigating issues concerning the child, while also emphasizing the agency of the child. If we, as researchers, seek to find the children's voices, then we must view the children as subjective participants (knowers and social actors) rather than objective participants (Smith, 2011). In other words, researchers should seek out a participatory dialogue with these children, creating a "safe" space in which to collect data. The children's voices, their sharing, artifacts, and stories, were the basis of our knowledge. Asking them to share their expert

knowledge as “meaning makers” brought deep stories that were embedded with an understanding of literacy and performed through play.

Visual Understanding

Another element of our research was the study of children’s intentions and abilities to engage with literacy through multiple forms of text. In honoring what the students knew, we allowed them to find voice through illustrations, art mediums, and various digital tools, such as cameras and video recorders. Research showed that using visual elements as a methodology made it possible to provide a voice to disenfranchised groups, those who had been marginalized or socially excluded, students with disabilities, children as well as young people (Bragg, 2011). Although Bragg (2011) writes about youth as adolescence, in particular, we also found that the visual elements engaged our young research partners in ways they could not always access through their own dialogue. Bragg (2011) contends that the “youth voice can be heard more directly through images, and thus the visual methods give a more privileged ‘inside’ perspective than others, allowing young people to speak for themselves” (p. 89).

Methods

We decided to use the Mosaic approach, which incorporates a narrative approach to include “the voice of the child.” The framework is devised to fully capture the essence of what it truly means to listen when young children are expressing themselves (Clark, Kjørholt & Moss, 2005). “Listening” is the basis of the framework, and it has success if employed in a multi-method approach. The Mosaic approach recognizes the different “voices” or languages of children, sees children as participatory in their own knowledge building, and treats children as experts and agents in their own lives (Clark et al., 2005). The inclusion of children, practitioners, and parents in this framework, proved to be useful in our research, as reflective meaning was cultivated through deeper inquiry into the questions of interpretation. In this particular aspect of the study, children shared their learning through their expertise, alongside the teacher’s pedagogy, and their parents’ participation with home literacy activities, such as visiting a market. Because the framework is adaptable, it can be applied in a variety of settings, such as a primary school or a childcare centre. It is focused on children’s lived experiences, and it can be used for a variety of purposes, which can include a consideration of life experiences, rather than merely knowledge gained or care received.

The three stages to the Mosaic approach are as follows:

Stage 1: Children and Adults Gathering Documentation

Stage 2: Piecing Together Information for Dialogue, Reflection, and Interpretation

Stage 3: Deciding on Community and Change

The three stages support, “both the traditional tools of observing children at play and a variety of ‘participatory tools’ with children” (Waller, 2006, p. 81). This approach gives children the opportunity to not only be heard, but to also be the expert on how they identify literacy, using their voices in a variety of ways: (1) to take photographs of what they like to play with or do at home, (2) to make illustrations, and (3) to create identity artifacts in the classroom. Using a data collection, which adheres to a narrative storyline of the young child’s learning, whether it is at school or at home, engages children in their knowing. It also invites teachers, researchers, and parents into the literate lives of the children, where they can observe and witness the child’s perspective and be a part of the reflective component of the framework (Clark et al., 2011).

Including children's voices in the creation of their own narrative accounts, using visual elements and a variety of textual forms, and communicating within a framework of active listening, invites children to be "skillful communicators, rights holders, and meaning makers" (Clark et al., 2011, p. 6).

Seeing the narrative within the stories

This study focuses on stories authored and drawings illustrated by students, both taking place in a kindergarten classroom. The research design for data collection was selected quite deliberately. While there are several different tools that could be utilized for this sort of research design, a table consisting of guiding questions has proven to be particularly effective. This table, used by researchers, was divided into four columns: (a) research purposes, (b) data to collect, (c) data analysis approach, and (d) guiding and informing sources. In particular, we used the guiding questions of our research to locate the data.

James Spradley (1980) discusses the important use of field-notes as an intricate research design. He describes an ethnographer recording field-notes according to their observation of a social situation. For our purposes, this mode of observation and research is applied to a group of students being instructed in a classroom. Notably, James Spradley (1980) concludes that while these field-notes may provide a series of descriptions of what has taken place (in the classroom), they will not provide any sort of cultural meaning. Ironically, however, according to Spradley, it is this cultural meaning that is the true research aim of the ethnographer. To shift away from mere descriptions of the social interactions contained in field-notes, the ethnographer's observational research must be subjected to thorough analysis. One potential mode of analysis includes cultural domain analysis. This technique involves analyzing patterns that appear in the recorded field-notes, which could constitute certain cultural meanings. Put another way, domain analysis involves sifting and sorting through the data to discover these cultural domains. It is important to note that domain analysis is representative of what data analysis entails beyond a mere repetition of the data collected.

For myself, it was important that the data analysis still represented and related to our informed approach using the Mosaic methods. Our approach to data analysis would position the children in the research as holding the key narratives to their literate understandings through artifacts such as drawings, picture books, and play. Organizing the data collection table so that (a) research purposes was positioned next to types of (b) data to collect served as a reminder that the data to be collected had to be relevant to the purpose of conducting this research (i.e., the question of inquiry). For example, I wanted the data to be augmented with the child's voice so it was necessary for me to record classroom dialogues not only alongside the teacher's lessons but also during the children's interactive play and illustrating of stories. Similarly, by placing (b) data to collect next to (c) data analysis approach, researchers are reminded to use methods of data analysis that are most effective in terms of the actual data that has been collected. Finally, the column labeled (d) guiding and informing sources provided me with a space to indicate current published research, or expert opinions, that may be related to the topic of research or question of inquiry. By designing the research in this way, I could perceive a distinct lens through which the children's voices and narratives could be shared.

Powerful narratives

Schools can empower children to become critical thinkers through their natural ability to use their boundless imaginations as a backdrop for their narrative voices. The following two narratives demonstrate how our Mosaic approach to the research can represent children as agents of their own stories.

Daneisha's princess

It was a cool morning in April with bright sunshine warming the classroom through the windows. Leslie stood at the door welcoming each of the children as they arrived for the morning session of kindergarten. Confidently, each child removed his/ her coat and placed items in their cubbies, putting on their "indoor shoes" to begin the day. As she greeted each child, one by the name of Daneisha asked if the dress-up centre was allowed today at recess. Leslie smiled at the smallest child in her class and assured her that their story of princesses and princes that had been created over the week, could resume again at playtime. Over the past week, I had come to "play" in the role of a researcher in this urban classroom. We had created a unit on fantasy, using the story *The Paper Bag Princess*, and the children had been busy working on scenery for the castle in the block area, re-enacting different storylines through puppets. As a part of the oral language retellings of story, Leslie wished to engage children in a discussion about stereotypes and gender. She knew that the children felt empowered by the protagonist in the story they were discussing, a heroine who stands up for herself, questioning stereotypical viewpoints of dress and image. Throughout the week we had seen this story narrative through a number of ways: as a puppet play where children explored what it meant to judge someone by their clothes, and how the character Ronald is 'just behaving badly'. We see how the children understand that the resolution means an end for some of the main characters, and in some cases we may have to lose something in order to gain something else. The play scenario, enacted by the children the day before, entitled "Ronald's apology," shows how children can also develop resolution in their own lives by exploring differing viewpoints of the characters, perspectives and ways to address acceptance and difference. After playmaking, Robert Munsch's popular tale, we gather together on the story mat to talk more about the book. I am curious to see how the children retell the story, but also what happens when Leslie leads their expertise of knowing in discussions about acceptance for others. Using their expressive language, the children become a part of the critical discussion about how the protagonist stands up for herself – using their own voices, they question stereotypical viewpoints, dress and image, and come to a critical understanding of *The Paper Bag Princess*.

Leslie: *What did you like about the story? Kieran?*

Kieran: *Well, I liked the end. I think that Ronald is a bad friend...a bad prince.*

Leslie: *You do, why is he not a good friend? Why do you think that?*

Kieran: *Because even when Elizabeth saved him from the dragon, he did not say thank-you. He told her to change her dirty clothes because she did not look like a princess.*

Daneisha: (interjecting) *...yeah, that, and also too that he thinks that she should wear princess clothes.*

Leslie: *Do you think princesses should always dress a certain way?*

Daneisha: *They wear pink I know (listening to others making reference to other princess dress) ...but you know she saved him from the dragon and got her clothes burned for him. He is a bum. (repeating the last line of the book)*

Leslie: *And, so, he is not a good friend?*

Seth: *No, not a good friend...he is? Just wants everyone to be the way he wants.*

Some of the children were given the task of recreating the story through the drawing of a picture series, which sequenced the events of the story, an expected language arts outcome in the kindergarten classroom. Daneisha chose to draw Elizabeth the protagonist (Figure 1) as a happy princess, now that she had told Ronald “off for his rude behavior.” Her drawing was well represented in retelling the story and fit in well with her peer’s task of sequencing the story events through illustration. I was interested in the “living literacy story,” which was also Daneisha’s intention in how she drew the character of Elizabeth. Sitting next to her at the writing and drawing centre, I asked her to retell me the story through her drawing.



Figure 1. Elizabeth, the protagonist as illustrated by Daneisha.

Anne: *I like your picture. It has many wonderful things about the story. Can you tell me about your picture?*

Daneisha: (excitedly, pointing with her tiny fingers) *See? There is the castle where she lives with her mom and dad. They are called the king and queen, you know, and there are trees here, but they are small because of the dragon burned all of them*

Anne: *I like how you drew Elizabeth* (smiling).

Daneisha: *You like her? Kieran said she was too tall* (laughing). *Her crown. Look! Her crown...* (circling the top of her crown with her whole hand) *Her head is in the sky.*

Anne: *Why do you think you drew her that big?*

Daneisha: *That's the secret in my picture...* (She pauses and looks up at me and quietly says) *Do you really want to know why?*

Anne: *Okay, tell me why?*

Daneisha: *Because... because... I think that is how Elizabeth feels now that she is not Ronald's friend,* (in a really loud voice) *the bum* (laughing)!

Daneisha taught me a great deal that day about how children know much more about life than we expect, and about how their narratives are central to their understanding of even a complex theme, such as stereotype and identity. Leslie allowed children to live within their imaginative world of play and invited her students to explore complex narratives that underpin much of children's popular culture media such as that of the Disney princess play, which enveloped the allotted free play of the classroom at times. The verbal retelling of the story in Leslie's classroom showed how children explore the ideas of the plot, but can also extend the original ideas of the story. The collaborative play through painting, drawing, puppets, and role-play using the block areas, created a setting for the imaginary castle that enabled the children to feel the story as if it were alive. It reinforced narrative structure and allowed them to use their own words, drawing on their cultural understandings. Children used the narrative of their own lives and combined that with Robert Munsch's beloved tale in order to explore differing viewpoints of the characters, perspectives, and attitudes of society. This was the first of many lessons, in which the children would learn the value of critical inquiry through narrative of self and story in a classroom.

To Market to Market?

An important part of the literacy engagement with young children is through oral language that is central to narrative. My own classroom observations showed the importance of story and how children's voices are part and parcel of that language connection. Very early, children come to understand that language and its use is a critical component of their social engagements. They learn that language serves a purpose and is used in differing contexts, and that understanding these differing contexts will be beneficial to them. However, it is through narrative, imaginative play in the early years of children's lives that they come to understand the differences that make each of our identities unique. How we live our lives informs how we come to literacy. Home literacy practices vary from child to child, and it is how these literate engagements are included, which plays a formal role in children's communication. This is evident through the narrative of Laura's classroom, described below.

Laura had just started teaching a new grade one classroom and was making great efforts to locate the children's reading and writing within their own community. Early in September, she started a discussion about a farmer's market that had recently opened in the area. Laura brought in newspaper clippings, discussed the idea of a market, and she asked the children to help make a list of all the jobs at the market. She wanted to create a narrative around their understanding of market. Children worked in small groups drawing pictures, in comic strip form, of what each person would do. The sharing of knowledge and experiences helped the children to offer their narrative telling in a meaningful way, and drew from their social and environmental contexts. Laura also used their own understanding of what it meant to communicate in their own world to good effect. Some children drew a road map, outlining how to get to the market, marked by various familiar store and restaurant signs, such as a McDonalds and a nearby fire station. Another group drew and cut out pictures of vegetables that would be sold and had discussions about the colors of the vegetables and their various flavors. One little boy, named Sam, reported that he felt that vegetables that were green should not be eaten, while another child argued strongly about the virtues of a balanced diet.

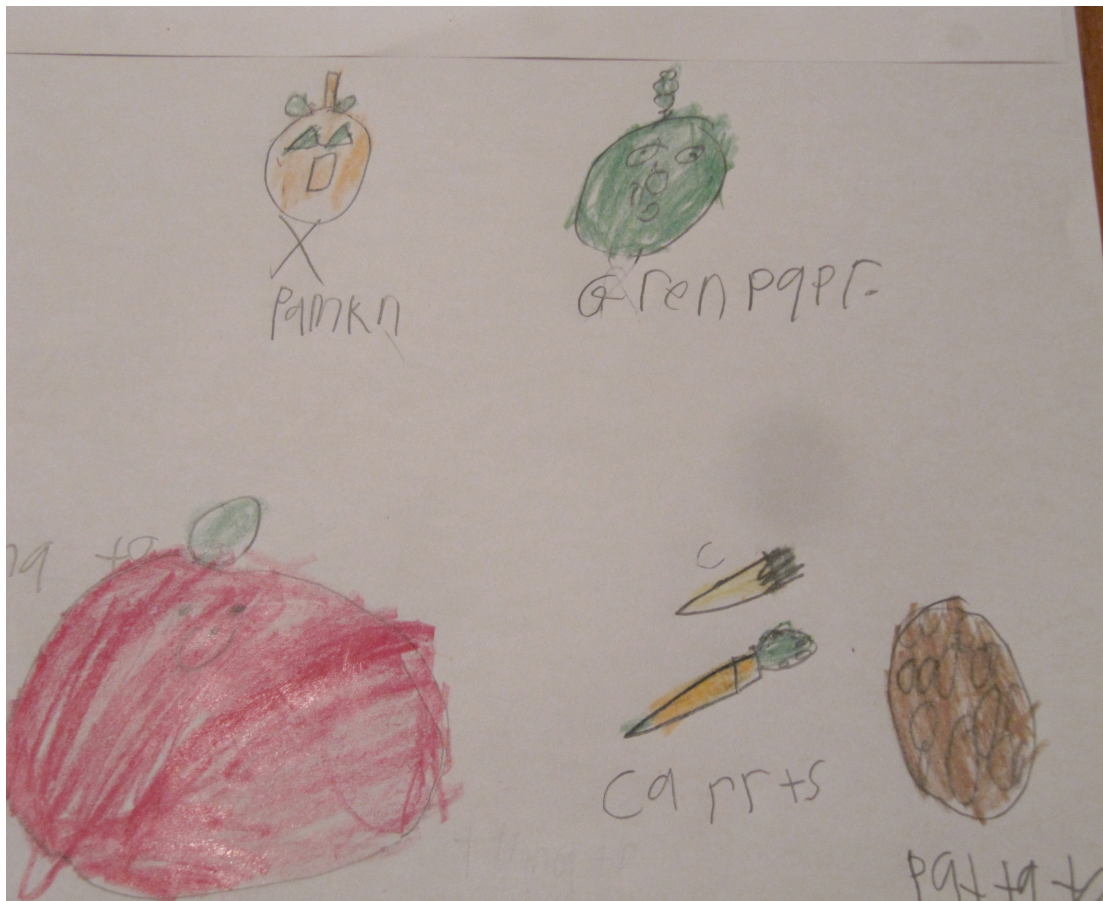


Figure 2. Types of vegetables as illustrated by the children.

I chatted with a group of children about the market and the types of vegetables we could get there. One of the children produced a picture (Figure 2), which showed each vegetable the children discussed. The following excerpt comes from their discussion.

Jenny: *Every week my Nan buys carrots (speaking to the group's designated artist), so Michael you draw carrots.*

Sam: *I like carrots. They are not green (others are talking around him).*

Henry: *My mom buys green peppers. She cuts them. She says they are good for everyone.*

Sam: *I don't like green ones.*

Anne: *Just green ones Sam? (He nods.)*

Michael: *I can make a green pepper like this (works on drawing).*

Henry: *My mom says ...says that you have to eat things you like, and not really like, to be healthy.*

The children's home literacy practices emerge from a meaning-making process, which is centered on narrative. Jenny, Michael, Sam, and Henry constructed social understanding of the market along with the ways their families interact around food and nutrition at home. We know that literacy is socially constructed (Teale & Sulzby, 1986), and we see in this scenario how the children develop this narrative in the context of the market. We learn much from what the children share, such as home practices of grocery shopping and trips to the market, stories related by parents, such as Henry's retelling of his mother's nutritional advice. The stories the children share through their group discussion show their rich literacy context, which forms the basis of their knowledge. The powerful learning for me, as the researcher, was in observing first-hand how children share their first literacy experiences through their "skills of life" by relating an event and drawing on a part of that knowing. During my visits, I would often hear Laura sharing the day's events with parents. In return, parents would share small stories of their child's experiences at the market, anecdotes about eating a banana that hadn't been paid for, and picking out pumpkins for the traditional Halloween carving. On reflection with Laura, she shared that through embedding the children's oral story retellings of their trip to the market, within their individual contexts, she felt she was empowering their ability to "re-story" their lives. The important lesson for Laura, as a new teacher, was her realization that the most empowering foundation of literacy is the story, which each of her students brings to school.

Ways of knowing

In completing this research and writing this article, I realize our current pedagogical approach to early learning and literacy, with teachers, is too often focused directly on the teaching and learning of explicit academic skills, such as reading and writing. Centering a child's knowing in narrative, through various types of texts that include visual elements, like illustrations, gives a child agency. In this research, children's voices and knowing become the main storyteller. Moreover, schools and teachers have access to these important stories, which are embedded within each child's life experiences. The children's narratives also help educators, such as Leslie and Laura, to understand the rich literacy connections their students are making. Anthony Paul Kerby (1991) concludes that, "Narratives are a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience, and ultimately of ourselves" (p. 3). If we recognize that a child's understanding of the world is enhanced when it is mapped as a personal narrative, we are better equipped to truly listen as their story of pivotal moments is shared. Narratives explored through the Mosaic approach validate the distinct voices of children as active participants in their own

knowledge building and meaning making. Through their story telling, children can be recognized as experts and agents in their own lives.

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