

Reconceptualizing Child Literacy: Language, Arts and Ecology

by

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BEd, Simon Fraser University, 2003

BA, Simon Fraser University, 2003

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to begin constructing an expanded framework for child literacy learning with participants who educate children in formal and informal settings in literacy, the arts and environmental education. The study explored how a broader framework for child literacy learning could gain strength and purpose from our increasingly diverse and complex social environment.

I used participatory arts-based research to spark dialogue and foster partnerships. The design of the study was intended to demonstrate how the arts, in this case photography, can be effective as a means of attending, exploring, and communicating ideas.

Three major themes emerged: Child Literacy Practices and how they can attend to belonging and voice; Arts and Culture and the engagement of children in the arts and how this is relevant to child literacy learning ;and Environmental Destruction looking towards preparing children to be ecologically literate in the context of child literacy learning.

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## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

As teachers examining practice, we are often asked to reflect on the teachers who influenced us. Teachers that stand out in my mind shared their passions with us, providing learning experiences beyond the classroom in the arts, science, and social studies. My strongest learning experiences combined direct experience, imagination, and reflection in a meaningful social context. Experiences outside of formal education also influenced me. I spent many hours engaged in informal education settings as well as spending my free time as I liked. Sobel (1999) describes the shaping influence such informal childhood exploration has had in the lives of adults who value and advocate for a natural and healthy environment. Like many others who value the environment my values are rooted in the many hours I spent outside in semi-wild and wild spaces, as well as from my parents and other mentors, who taught me to observe, enjoy, and respect nature. Because of my parents' appreciation of the aesthetics of the environment and my own desire to draw, paint and create stories, my early engagement with nature was from an arts perspective, rather than a science perspective.

I have taught grades one through five in seven different schools, most of which have been designated inner city schools. Creating a learning environment that meets the diverse social, emotional and learning needs of my students is intellectually and emotionally demanding work. The greater the depth and variety of needs the students have, the more concrete my teaching has become. By 'concrete' I mean activities that involve action on the part of the learner in manipulating real objects that may or may not have symbolic meaning linked to more abstract concepts. For example, students who have the opportunity to experience firsthand what a stream is like through art and science related activities, who use their senses to explore an environment, can later link their physical experiences with more conceptual experiences such as reading about

the needs of salmon to successfully reproduce and develop deeper or fuller understandings. In math, an example would be using manipulatives to model numbers and concepts before drawing pictures, and before representing concepts solely with numbers. In my experience, the rich dialogue and collaboration that develops during participation in concrete learning activities contributes to an environment which is engaging, challenging and supports the risk taking involved in learning. Beginning with the concrete offers students experiences to talk, read and write about so they can become active co-constructors of knowledge. Incorporating flexibility into learning design allows students to extend their understanding of a topic according to their abilities and interests. Supporting students to take the risks involved in learning is an important part of teaching. When I acknowledge both the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, I see that my teaching is more effective.

Aspiring to be an effective literacy educator in the challenging teaching environment of inner city Surrey, I have attended courses and workshops, read books, discussed ideas with colleagues and with people outside the field of education, and participated as a teacher leader in many of our school district literacy initiatives. However, it was involvement in an action research project exploring the impacts of integrating environmental education throughout the curriculum that unexpectedly brought me to an understanding of the role of direct experiences in developing literacy. Initially, my colleagues and I were worried that our English as a Second Language learners (about 80% or more of our students) might be ‘losing out on literacy learning’ by spending time outside the classroom, but instead it appeared the opposite was true. We noticed that our students were very engaged in learning vocabulary and concepts in active settings outside the classroom and that the students were able to recall and build on their learning throughout the school year (Giesbrecht, 2006). We also observed that the social

and emotional aspects of learning changed in active outdoor/beyond school learning settings as student leadership shifted from those who enjoyed academic success in the classroom to those who demonstrated competence in more physical or practical learning situations. In particular, students with exceptional learning needs who were often isolated in a classroom setting were more easily able to participate and interact with their peers when the stratification according to intellectual ability was disrupted. Since then, I have continued to integrate literacy learning with environmental education and also increasingly with the arts, both in the classroom and in the community. Connecting literacy to direct experiences appears to help make literacy learning more meaningful, engaging, and long-lasting. But there are challenges that must be faced. Under an increasing neo-liberal agenda, schools are facing increasing pressure to follow standardized models of education which purport to focus on basic skills and provide a uniform education for all students, which do not consider the social or learning contexts of the students. The arts and outdoor education programs are under pressure of budget constraints and are reduced or even eliminated. Specialist teachers, equipment and time are seen as ‘extras’ that take away from, rather than contribute to, students’ learning and there is a marked movement away from their ability to become thoughtful, knowledgeable citizens. Parents are concerned about their children’s future in what they are told is an increasingly competitive social and economic context. Understandably, they want their children to receive an appropriate education. Yet within the current ideological context, determining what an appropriate education looks like is another dilemma. Parents may have limited awareness of education from their own educational experiences coupled now with what they hear in the media, and information gleaned from their children’s experiences. In times of uncertainty, the familiar can be reassuring. Back to the basics sounds like a call to build a solid foundation of skills. While a skills based focus is certainly

important, an understanding of how students learn to read, write and become thoughtful discriminating people is sometimes lacking. It is time to learn and do more because the arts, environment and literacy remain disparate yet deeply important ideas or areas of children's learning lives. At times like these, it is also appropriate – if not necessary - to move outside the walls or confines of the school and search for support and ideas from others who care about the state of the world, the education of children but see things from a very different standpoint: the community. Opening up these spaces provides the opportunity to hear a range of ideas around children's literacy that can contribute to a rich, meaningful dialogue about education.

This study used arts-based research methods to open a creative public space of collective engagement with participants in a variety of community settings in order to discuss conceptions that would expand the framework of child literacy to include the arts and environmental education as a way to prepare students to more positively direct their lives and affect their communities. It provided an opportunity for open dialogue between community-based artists and environmental educators and activists, to begin to construct a new and more holistic direction for educational leaders in schools and communities. I chose arts-based research because scholars argue the arts can be conducive to opening thinking in research to new possibilities and because they have the potential to create interest and dialogue between diverse groups (e.g. Knowles & Cole, 2009). In this study, the arts were used in focus groups to stimulate dialogue between community and school-based educators. The art exhibit created from the focus groups was a key element in extending this dialogue – what scholars often call 'knowledge mobilization or dissemination (Etmanski & Hall, In Press) to other participants in the community, including educators, parents and children.

As a teacher, artist and environmental activist, two key assumptions guided me in this study. The first is the belief that educating children to be literate in the traditional sense as well as in the arts and ecology may increase their potential as citizens who can better contribute to developing healthy and sustainable communities. This would require developing within themselves the creativity and resilience to adapt and live fully in a rapidly changing global economy and environment. Secondly, preparing children to be effective citizens with full lives is the primary goal of education and teacher/educational leadership.

### Context of the Study

This study was located in the rapidly growing multicultural city of Surrey, British Columbia. Surrey is a local example of the rapid social, cultural and economic changes that are happening across the Western world, and possibly across the globe. This context offers the characteristics, opportunities, and challenges for educational leadership that can be found in many urban areas. The school district has the largest enrolment in British Columbia. Students come from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and have a wide variety of learning needs and expectations. Approximately two percent of the population is identified as Aboriginal. There is a large immigrant population from South Asia and growing populations from other regions in Asia, Latin America and Africa. The 2006 census reported a population of 394, 976 people with 44% of the population reporting a language other than English as their mother tongue. Rapid growth and redevelopment has created a shortage of affordable and adequate housing for the almost 20% of the population living below the Low Income Cut-off in Surrey. Health and access to health services are affected as families often do not have enough money to pay for food or transportation after paying for housing (Summers, 2006). Surrey is home to 39%

of the children living in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development in BC. Not surprisingly perhaps, Surrey has more students below standard in reading than the provincial average and improving literacy is a central goal of the school district (School District No. 36 (Surrey), 2008).

One initiative to improve literacy is the leadership Surrey School District is providing in the recent Community Literacy Plan. This plan identifies formal and informal organizations and agencies as community partners in developing literacy, but does not describe how community partners will work with schools to help develop literacy in school aged children. For this research, I, as a teacher leader, collaborated with selected community partners to begin to construct a more grounded, ecological and creative expanded framework of child literacy. I aimed to also provoke other educational leaders to consider how this view of literacy may be relevant for range of learners, particularly learners whose backgrounds are not congruent with the dominant social context.

Situated in the environmentally important Fraser Valley ecosystem, the City of Surrey has experienced rapid growth, transforming from a semi-rural municipality to a city in its own right that also functions as a bedroom community of Vancouver. There are many trade-offs being made to accommodate the expected population growth for the Fraser Valley over the next 50 years. Some land formerly used for agriculture, providing space for wildlife, is being used for greenhouses, housing and industrial complexes. Remaining trees are removed as housing densification occurs. The many small streams that support fish, birds and wildlife are under pressure. A local resident reported seeing a displaced black bear roaming through a suburban neighbourhood after a large forested area surrounding a gravel pit was converted to industrial parks. While it is known as Surrey: City of Parks, existing and new parks are under tremendous

pressure as the populations using them increase. The City of Surrey has a division called Nature Matters on their official website. Programs include teaching how to reduce environmental impact, the Surrey Nature Centre, public park programs, school programs, student employment programs, special events such as Earth Day celebrations, nature parks and guided walks, and offer volunteers places to get involved in protecting the local environment. While encouraging residents to get out and enjoy nature seems like a worthwhile goal, much of this must be in a structured parks environment to protect the park from overuse. An example of overuse that may occur is described in a flyer distributed by email to teachers from the Friends of Semiahmoo Bay Society entitled *Field Trip Overload! Please tread lightly on the crabs* (2010). They estimate that in May and June student visits total about 400 daily and 6000+ annually to a single area of the beach. This does not include visits to the beach by families during the very busy summer season. The organization has created a program called Beach Heroes to teach children, and their accompanying adults, how to explore the beach without destroying it. However, the sheer number of visitors creates tremendous pressure. K. Kilbride, leader of the Green Teacher network in Surrey remembers a time in the 1970's when all students in a certain grade in elementary school went on an outdoor education overnight field trip with district supplied equipment. This program was cancelled many years ago, leaving environmental education up to individual teachers. With a burgeoning population of immigrants, refugees, and urban poor, and a pro-development economic and political viewpoint, there are many people to educate about environmental issues who may perceive meeting their other needs as a more urgent priority. Considering growing concerns over environmental degradation at local, national and international levels, creating a timely coordinated plan for environmental education appears essential.

Surrey has facilities and programs to support arts in the community. The city webpage profiles the Surrey Arts Centre which includes galleries, studios, and a theatre. The arts centre hosts school district wide arts events. There is a city cultural plan which includes public art throughout the city and provides opportunities for volunteers. The Surrey Children's Festival is an annual event with diverse art forms and opportunities. Arts opportunities are also provided through the city recreation program. There are town centre meetings to set direction for arts and culture in the city. However, engaging students and families with arts opportunities in Surrey is dependent on the interest and involvement of the individual families or individual teachers. A plan to increase the value and role for the arts in education and in the community should be developed.

While individuals may have an interest in literacy, arts, or the environment, there is no coordinated school district or community-based strategy to create a synergy of energy and resources to influence the direction of growth for the City of Surrey or beyond to a wider community. One hope of this study was to create a space for this to begin to develop.

#### Statement of the Problem

The potential of situating literacy learning in contexts that are purposeful and significant to children, to engage them in developing their own contemporary literacy appears to be neglected. Rather than improving literacy, focusing mainly on text-based instructional methods and materials may limit participation and achievement in literacy learning, particularly for struggling learners whose background isn't congruent with mainstream culture (Ferreiro, 2003). The definition of literacy could be broadened to include the arts and environmental learning and thus provide a more contemporary view of literacy that situates literacy in a concrete and key issue for our planet. Including the arts as part of literacy reflects recent changes in

communication that are connected to the way technology allows text to be combined with the arts, such as music, graphics, and photography for example (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Mixed media communication may help messages cross some cultural divides, which is why it is a powerful tool used in advertising and politics. Rigorous instruction in the arts also has the possibility of developing attention, reflective and critical thought, as well as joy and passion (Greene, 1995). Some scholars in the environmental movement are now recognizing the power of the arts to create alternate ways of seeing and thinking about problems and creating solutions (e.g. Sobel, 2008). They welcome the emotional connections that can be fostered by work and participation in the arts. Combining the arts with scientific ways of thinking about our relationship with the rest of the natural environment and how we might make positive changes for the health and wellbeing of our environment offers many exciting possibilities for social change and for education. Such a framework of literacy goes beyond printed text to include aesthetic and experiential ways of knowing and communicating. Since literacy is central to so many areas of life, it is important to offer diverse ways into achieving the level of literacy that will enable students from diverse backgrounds to live full lives (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

There is a need to pull together the areas of literacy, the arts, environmental knowledge, and school-community relationships to create a contemporary and meaningful framework for child literacy to help re-focus education and open up public dialogue about child literacy. And yet there have been few studies which attempted to expand the discourse of child literacy by bringing these areas together. This study aims to fill this gap.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this participatory arts-based study was to begin constructing an expanded framework for child literacy learning in the schools and community of Surrey with participants

who educate children in formal, nonformal and informal ways in literacy, the arts and environmental education. Although as noted above the definition of child literacy is often narrowly conceived, for the purposes of this study, child literacy is defined as the use of multiple forms of language and texts, including reading, writing, oral language and the arts, to inquire into, construct, and communicate knowledge based on experiences in schools and the community that are interesting and important to children, including developing ecological knowledge and empathy.

### The Research Question and Objectives

The question that guided this study was:

How is literacy understood and articulated by formal and nonformal educators teaching children in the fields of literacy, the arts and environmental education in Surrey schools and community organizations? A secondary aspect of this study was to begin to engage the community in a broader public dialogue about the goals and means towards creating literate students and citizens. Public opinion is expressed through voting for governments that set education policy, through participation in increasingly influential school parent committees and directly to teachers, other parents and students. Public opinion directly and indirectly influences educational policy and its outcomes. Informed public discussion is essential to the democratic process.

The study probed into the ideas that overlapped between formal literacy and non-formal learning in each of these contexts. The three main objectives were,

To identify key elements that could inform a new understanding of child literacy needs and development through aesthetic and environmental lenses.

To understand how schools and community organizations could better partner to develop children's literacy.

To uncover the reactions of people in the community who attended the exhibit in terms of their reflections on child literacy through this visual exposition. The use of photography and an exhibition of the photographs taken by the participants were integral to the study. The study also aimed to encourage more inter-action between the diverse community agencies and groups, and the schools, which are so interested in creative well-being of community members and the future of our planet.

### Knowledge Base and Literature Review

Freire and Macedo (1987) see literacy as able to empower or disempower people.

Literacy, in their eyes, is the ability to read and respond to texts but it is also reading the world – the experiences that are part of the context of the community, society and beyond. They suggest this literacy relationship with the world takes place where learners travel; for children this 'world' is most often their school, their home and their community. Building literacy through community interactions is a way to value diversity. In this research, community refers to the local physical, social and emotional place the school is situated in and includes the interactions between people and between people and their environment. Literacy education ideally affirms and respects the life experiences of the students in their school and home communities.

According to Ferreiro (2003), preserving cultural diversity is as important as preserving biological diversity. Listening to and respecting students is one step towards acknowledging and

building on their literate experiences within and outside school. Four key areas of literature addressing the call for diverse forms of literacy informed this study.

The first area of literature I examined was cultural literacies that emphasize different ways of knowing and living in diverse communities, including child literacy discourse. While some scholars argue that texts and ways of reading them do rest solely with the individual, others place them in social and historical contexts of groups of people (Freire & Macedo, 1987, 2003). This area includes the socio-cultural analyses of literacy described by Gee (1996) and Lankshear and Knobel (1998, 2003). They view language and literacy as part of discourses or contexts that include values, beliefs, and social identities along with the physical representations of those, such as ways of moving and dressing. Children coming to school from discourses outside the mainstream are at a disadvantage as they need to learn the expectations of mainstream discourses at the same time that they are being taught other skills that are traditionally viewed as part of literacy instruction, such as phonics and sentence structure (Gee, 1996). Changing economics and demographics related to the economic globalization and accompanying right wing social policies have impacted the discourses that children in many neighbourhoods are bringing to school. Diversity is the norm. Pre-packaged curricula aimed at intervening and improving literacy for struggling learners does not take the social and historical context of children's lives and experiences into account. Disconnects that can occur between school and home/community discourses may undermine children's own literacy skills and alienate them from school (Ferreiro, 2003).

Literacy skills themselves are in a state of flux. While there are calls for back to basics, others understand that changing social expectations and the impact of technology have broadened literacy expectations. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) suggest that schools are far

behind society in technological understanding and the changing ways of creating and distributing texts that accompany those changes. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) assert that literacy is multimodal, including areas once seen as belonging to the arts such as sound, visuals, space, and gesture. They note that communication today, from home computers to shopping malls, often places text in relation to art, drama, or music. Developing a critical understanding of how such messages are created, especially when they are designed to influence consumer and/or political behaviour, is an important part of contemporary literacy. These theories address the relevance of school based literacy practices and identify broader, more contemporary views of language.

The second area of literature that informed this study was aesthetic ways of producing and reading texts, including the arts and their role in facilitating curiosity and attentiveness in the classroom as examined by Greene (1995), Dewey (1934), and Eisner (2002). They note that specific instruction in the arts and aesthetics may develop students' ability to attend to patterns and details and includes a critical thinking dimension. The creation of artwork in any of the artistic domains requires knowledge, reflection and reworking of ideas and skills. All of these skills are important to creating literate people who can read information, consider its meaning, and communicate their responses. In the school setting, the arts are invaluable in building classroom community in a diverse context and in providing a variety of ways and opportunities for students to develop and communicate their thinking. Cope and Kalantzis (2000) state that the role of the arts in an expanded view of literacy, and in helping envision solutions for the problems of culture, economy and the environment should not be overlooked.

Greene (1995) also discusses the role of the imagination in facilitating social change, which is highly relevant to an increasingly diverse and complex social world. She suggests that

using the multiple languages of the arts may increase communication across cultures and begin to build a more inclusive society. She states that by participating in rigorous arts training, there is also the potential for students to expand their imaginations, leading to more possibilities to develop positive diverse communities. Engaging diverse social groups in understanding and proactively responding to environmental degradation, as well as other social challenges, is an important goal that may be met through engagement in the arts both in schools and in the community.

The third area of literature that informed this study was literacies for sustainable living on our planet, including environmental education theory. Scholars world-wide have for decades argued that our health depends on the health of our natural environment as we are an integral part of that environment. We ignore growing environmental concerns at our own peril. While some remain sceptical, arguing that environmental problems will correct themselves, pure science will be able to deal with the problem or that the concern is over-inflated, others believe the environmental crisis is growing worldwide and that more needs to be done. In particular, scholars argue that education needs to be introduced at all levels and in a variety of sites as described by Orr (1992) and others. Situating literacy education in the context of environmental education offers the opportunity for potentially meaningful communication situated in the local community (Orr, 1992; Hutchinson, 1998). Environmental education can be divided into subthemes of environmental and sustainability education, nature education, and citizenship education. Sustainability education focuses on building a connection to a place by spending time getting to know it's cultural, historical and technical context physically, emotionally and intellectually. The arts are often a crucial part of observing, building empathy, and communicating understandings about a community or place (Sobel, 2008). Nature education

focuses on developing both scientific and aesthetic languages to describe and understand the natural world on school grounds and in accessible community locations (Sobel, 1996; Williams & Dilafuz, 1999). Environmental citizenship or social justice education takes the view that environmental processes are influenced by culture and that a moral point of view, or developing an ethic of sustainability, is as important as teaching recycling or raising money for worthy causes (Smith & Williams, 1999). There is a lot of potential for embedding literacy education in any or all of these forms of environmental education to increase immediacy and relevancy for students.

A fourth analytical lens used in this study was civic literacies including community-school connections and school leadership that focus on integrating school in the community with the goal of increasing the relevance of learning and the possibility of social transformation (Grainger, 2003; Gelsthorpe, 2003). Building connections between schools and communities is one way to increase the overall health of both. Gelsthorpe (2003) recommends moving towards a view of achievement in terms of benefit for society, communities and individuals, which may be fostered by school-community engagement. West-Burnham (2003) suggests that understanding that children are the link between school and community, and advocating for social justice, is an ethical basis for school leadership. Greenfield (1993) proposes that school leaders look critically a

t the social context and local needs of a particular school and be aware of discrepancies between those needs and official educational goals. Increasing achievement in education in the whole community requires a transformational style of leadership. One aim of this study was, as a teacher-leader and researcher, to begin to build relationships amongst community literacy

educators and between literacy educators and the public of the community to broaden the dialogue about literacy education to include the arts, and environmental education.

### Methodology, Methods, and Procedures

This study was situated in qualitative research methodology because I wanted a deep, holistic view of the problem from the participants' perspectives (Blaxter, et al., 2001; Creswell, 2009; Janesick, 2000; Leavy, 2009; Morrison, 2005). I used participatory arts-based research practices because of the potential to provoke emotional reactions, spark dialogue and build coalitions between different groups of child literacy educators and the possibility of engaging non-educators in a dialogue about child literacy (Leavy, 2009). Kemmis and McTaggart (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) describe participatory research as oriented towards social transformation and characterized by shared ownership of research projects, community based analysis of social problems, and an orientation towards community action. Participatory research was demonstrated in my study when the participants from the community created and analyzed the data about literacy education in our community during the focus groups and art exhibit and through our discussions about how we might work together to build a broader understanding of literacy. McNiff (2009) describes arts-based research as, "the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both the researchers and the people that they involve in their studies" (p. 29). Leavy (2009) adds that arts-based research uses the arts throughout all phases of research in order to address research questions in holistic and engaged ways which combine theory and practice. Since this research is about how the arts can create depth and diversity in thinking, I thought it best to use the arts to examine literacy education in the community fields of education, arts and the environment. The design of this research study was intended to demonstrate how the arts can be effective as a means of attending, exploring, and communicating ideas. I chose photography as an art medium to engage participants in thinking and discussing their

conceptions of child literacy development. Photography is a familiar and readily accessible medium for most people to work with and respond to.

### *Participants*

The five focus group participants were community educators from the areas of nonformal child literacy, environmental education, arts education, formal literacy educators, and other adults and children. These participants were recruited through my personal and professional networks and, in the case of the art exhibit opening, were community members who happened to be at the library when the opening occurred. Participants at the arts exhibition consisted of formal educators, an formal educational administrator, an administrator of an arts-education organization, library staff, and community members of a range of ages. Participants for the semi-formal individual interviews were people from my network that attended the exhibit opening.

### *Data collection and analysis*

This study incorporated three methods of data collection. The first method of data collection was a series of focus groups. In these meetings, the participants engaged in arts based participatory activities, including discussions, analysis of photography, and a visual word sort. During the first focus group, I asked participants to examine photographs I had brought from a variety of educational settings and to select one that represented optimal literacy learning and one that did not represent a literacy learning opportunity. Participants began examining the photographs, talking and thinking together. We then shared our thoughts. Participants were asked to take photographs representing literacy learning in their areas to share during the next focus group. They were also asked to journal any thoughts that came to them on the topic, between the focus group meetings. At the second focus group meeting, I had printed the photographs so we

could examine them together. We used the photographs to generate key concepts for literacy education using a visual word sort. I asked participants to generate a words or very brief phrases in response to the photographs. Participants recorded these on large paper strips. We later used these words or brief phrases to sort our thinking about literacy into concept groupings. Finally, together, we came up with a main idea that captured the essence of each grouping of words or phrases.

The second method of data collection was during a public art exhibit created by the researcher with the data (photographs and text) generated through the focus group meetings. The art exhibit was displayed in the children's section of a community public library. An opening for the exhibit was held on a weekday afternoon in the library. Data collection during the art exhibit opening included researcher observations, informal interviews with attendees, and a comment book for attendees to write in. Building on this, third method of data collection was through semi-structured interviews with attendees of the art exhibition. These interviews took place shortly after the art exhibit opening.

As this was an arts-based research design, art was part of the collective thinking and constructing process. Photography was the art discipline I chose to use because it was familiar and accessible. The focus group began by examining photographs I brought in with the guiding question, "Choose several photographs that represent literacy learning or that do not represent literacy learning in your field." This provoked a critical discussion of the photographs and what they communicated as participants began to try to justify their choices and explain their thinking about literacy and photography to the group. Participants then used photography in their own environments to try to illustrate their thinking. This process continued as I, the artist-researcher, used principles of art and research to create and install the art exhibit within the constraints of the

venue. During the art exhibit opening, participants responded to the art verbally and in writing. After the exhibit, interviewees were shown smaller versions of the photographs to remind them of what they had seen at the exhibit. Each part of data collection had art, thinking and discussion embedded in it.

Both the collective and researcher analysis focused on identifying significant or recurring statements or meanings and using these to construct themes that represented our thinking about children's literacy learning in each of our fields.

### Significance of the Study

There are a number of reasons why this study is significant. In terms of teacher/educational leadership, the study is significant because it recognizes the context and impacts that a broader framework for literacy learning can have for student learning and for the relationships between students, schools and communities. Understanding students as active constructors of their knowledge and their school and local communities rather than as passive or powerless people trying to survive in a potentially hostile environment changes the means and goals for literacy learning. Providing students with school experiences that are related to their lives outside of school and that will have significance and meaning outside of school is a different goal for literacy learning and sets different leadership aims than trying to play catch up to meet arbitrary standards. Extending education outside the framework of school to include community partners in a broader framework for literacy gives students a fuller experience of learning and introduces them to learning in and through community leaders and spaces. Educational leadership is reframed to focus on building connections between school and community learning, as well as managing the school environment, to support a view of learning as something that is part of life rather than simply part of school. If students are to be prepared to

live fully and contribute in a rapidly changing world, they will need to understand how to network in communities, read the word and the world, think creatively, and imagine new ways of doing things to create future sustainability for themselves and others. Broadening the framework of literacy to include the arts and ecological issues may be one way to help meet the challenges facing our global community. Finally, this study will make a contribution to arts based research vis-à-vis how it can link community and school.

The core concepts of literacy in established frameworks of child literacy, environmental education, and the arts will be examined and analyzed through arts-based research to establish factors that can be combined to create a broader framework for literacy. The resulting framework will be designed to contribute to both the field and the body of knowledge about literacy in both school and community settings.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

As I have established in chapter one of this thesis, my belief is that as educators working within an increasingly diverse and complex social world, we need to have broader conceptions of what literacy means, how it is demonstrated, and the ways in schooling could better acknowledge these diverse literacies. To support my claims, in chapter 2, I provide a theoretical overview of how a range of scholarly fields have addressed this call for diversity. I have organized their approaches into a call for a broader set of multi-literacies. The multi-literacy categories that will be highlighted in this chapter include: cultural literacies that emphasize different ways of knowing and living in diverse communities; literacies of and about aesthetic ways of producing and reading texts; environmental literacies that acknowledge our place in living sustainably on this planet; and civic literacies, a form of literacy that calls for leadership and engagement in building relationships with and across diverse communities. I will begin by expanding on the notions of community and diversity in relation to child literacy learning.

### Community, Diversity and Child Literacy Learning

Freire and Macedo (1987) suggest we need to go beyond the focus on the technical processes and etymological content of the acquisition of reading and writing skills and view literacy as, “the relationship of learners to the world, mediated by the transforming practice of this world taking place in the very general milieu in which learners travel” (p. viii, 1987). The world that child literacy learners travel in is their community.

The concept of community is difficult to define and often contested. For the purposes of this research, community refers to the local physical, social and emotional place the school is

situated in. I believe that community is created through the interactions between people and the environment. Ideally, community includes positive interdependence, belonging, respect and caring. Creating such a community involves, among other things, identifying and naming injustices and seeking ways to correct power imbalances through problem solving (Freire, 1970). Placing literacy education in this type of community context affirms and respects the life experiences of the students both within and outside of the classroom and school community (Miller, 2007). Affirming belonging and respect for all people is important because, as Ferreiro (2003) states, “Cultural diversity is as important as biodiversity: if we destroy it, we will not be able to recreate it” (p. 35). However, she suggests that free public schooling often includes a trend to homogeneity in the service of equality, resulting in the favouring of a single model dialect and the negation of differences in schools (2003). Rather than acknowledging the potential learning difficulties associated with the cultural standards upheld in schools, Ferreiro describes how differences and difficulties acquiring literacy in this homogenous environment were,

found within the child himself (a deficit or pathology) or in something outside the school (lack of stimulus in the family setting). The school was never responsible for differences. The school struggled to eliminate them, without ever being able to compensate fully for social, family, or individual deficits (including linguistic ‘deficits’) p. 72.

Rather than seeing diversity as an unwieldy problem situated outside the realm of the school or education policy, the challenge for literacy educators and school leaders is to embrace diversity and turn it into a pedagogical advantage. Educating with a focus on community interactions is one way to embrace and value diversity while developing literacy with children.

### Community Connections

Cope and Kalantzis (2000) describe literacy as the “pivotal element in the project of modern education” and assert that “literacy is a matter of design or transformation; drawing on available designs of meaning, to be sure, but always adding something of yourself and thus changing the world in your designing” (p. 234). The power of this conception of literacy lies in the potential for change. Reaching beyond the walls of the school may offer potential for community situated literacy learning, the kind of learning that may engage children and offer them skills that they will continue to use beyond the context of formal schooling. This is one of the key points of investigation in this study. One of the goals is to work towards children being introduced to people and places in their communities that they feel a sense of connection with and to facilitate with the children the development of a sense of ownership and influence over what happens in their communities and to teach literacy skills in this concrete and meaningful context.

#### *A Disconnect? Literacies In and Out (Side) of School*

Scholars argue that children engage in literacy practices in their homes and communities, but these do not always inform or connect with their school literacy practices, contributing to the misconception that difficulties acquiring literacy are situated in the children or in their social surroundings (e.g. Ferrerio, 2003). Laying the blame for low levels of measured literacy outside of the practices of schooling contributes to a lack of examination of the practices of schooling. Schools may try to eliminate perceived deficits in society, families or individuals without ever being able to fully accomplish this. This is an attempt to flatten diversity rather than working with it, which reinforces to some students that they do not have a place in school or in the social strata of schooling. Schools can recognize the reality of student’s lives and design instruction

that includes students' experiences in their neighbourhoods and families as well as their experiences with a wide variety of texts or language encounters such as oral culture, television, computers, video games and music. Children who are successful with language in their context may have difficulty relating to or working with language in the often different context of schooling (Taylor, Dorsey-Gaines, 1988)

Neglecting the literacy practices of students outside of school does not support their overall literacy learning and does not prepare them to engage in literacy practices after formal schooling. Kersten (2007) engaged grade five students in a photo documentation project of the reading and writing activities they observed in their homes and communities and found that students were engaged in literacy in the street, in grocery stores, restaurants, worship places, and homes. They were engaged in playing school and mimicking other adult activities such as writing grocery lists and other work related tasks. They read television schedules, video game instructions, and email. Some kept diaries or wrote stories to share with their families. The students' perceptions of how these tasks related to school literacy varied and often seemed to include responses they were taught about the importance of reading and writing. Based on their self-reported community literacy experiences, Kersten argues that it could be seen as "unreasonable to assume that ...these...children are academically behind because they live in environments that do not include literacy use or because they are not engaged in literacy practices outside of school" (p. 152). Rather, she states, "we need to consider the relationship of the school to the life and development of the children in the school...in order to value the knowledge and literacy practices they bring to the classroom" (p. 153). The district and school her study were situated in had high stakes testing and pre-packaged curricula which "limit the freedom of the teachers to shape pedagogy to the needs of their students" and leave "less time for

authentic textual production and authentic activities related to reading” (p. 153). If the goal is to raise the level of literacy for learners who are struggling, this study and others like this one, suggest that focusing on literacy instruction that acknowledges children’s learning in their homes and communities and seeks to expand their experiences has more to offer than searching for blanket outside intervention programs.

In 1996, Gee argued that schools were social institutions that introduce children to the public sphere and the literacies and discourses of public institutions. This is a necessary and worthwhile goal, as knowing how to interact/engage with the mainstream public discourse may help children to better participate in a democratic society. However, it increases the complexity of literacy teaching and learning when children are not initially familiar with this discourse. Children who have not been socialized into mainstream school-based literacy practices are expected to develop and practice these skills at school while they are concurrently learning other literacy skills (Gee, 1996). There are often gaps between the discourses of those who design and deliver literacy programs to be used in schools and the diverse discourses of the students. These gaps and the double learning load may result in students falling behind the established standards for literacy development and subsequently becoming frustrated and alienated. Unfortunately, the tendency is to situate the problem in the children rather than acknowledge the socio-cultural aspects of literacy development (Ferreiro, 2003; Greene, 1995).

When teaching literacy in diverse contexts, Ferreiro (2003) reminds us to consider, “that children *think* about writing, and that their thinking demonstrates interest, coherence, value and extraordinary educational potential. We’ve got to listen to them (p. 34).” As teachers, this means we need to be, “ready to go beyond the futile battle over methods that ignore the person doing

the learning” (p. 34). Programs and books are resources with the potential to be adapted to the child’s learning needs, not the other way around.

*The Basic Truths about Child Literacy*

While globalization is creating more diverse and challenging socio-cultural contexts for literacy education, the restructured economy and social setting is also demanding higher levels of basic literacy (Ferreiro, 2003). The bar for literacy has been raised due to the increased complexity of social experience. “Learners need new operational and cultural ‘knowledges’ in order to acquire new language that provides access to new forms of work, civic, and private practices in their everyday lives. At the same time...learners need to develop strengths in the critical dimensions of literacy as well” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 11). This is a more complex version of literacy that doesn’t easily lend itself into breaking down into instructional bits. Lankshear identified the old basics and the new basics in his review of literacy reform documents. The old “basic literacy is framed in terms of mastering the building blocks of code breaking” (Lankshear, 1998, p. 358). This means learning important tasks such as knowing the alphabet, how to decode words using letter sounds and phonics, and understanding the meaning of conventions such as punctuation and sentence construction. The new basic literacy consists of critical thinking (comprehension, problem-solving and analysis) conjoined with communications (reading, writing, listening and speaking). While the old basics remain a critical part of literacy, on their own they are considered inadequate for effective participation in contemporary economic or social life. It is the ability to analyze communication that enables people to bring their own knowledge and viewpoints to information they are receiving. Knowing how to effectively communicate their own thinking takes people into the sphere of potentially influencing others with their own thoughts, ideas opinions, or information. Being literate in the new basics may

allow people to understand issues affecting themselves and their communities and to advocate for themselves.

*Text Messaging: Multiple Modes of Communication*

Changes in text construction due to technology profoundly influence how texts are read and interpreted (Ferreiro, 2003). Literacy now requires a skill set which goes beyond the skills used to read a traditional print based text from beginning to end. The flexibility of some texts can be seen in examples such as video gaming, reality TV which solicits viewer input, iPod playlists, and DVD's that have multiple pathways, as well as in more traditional texts such as the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series for children. Texts can be readily accessible and easily portable. Healy points out that, "the mobile phone is also a diary, a camera, a TV, an email provider, and often much more. . . texts are as visual, spatial and auditory as they are linguistically centered, and often as transportable as the space in a pocket" (2008, p. 6). The linguistic remains important, but we must also recognize how other text design components such as audio, visual, spatial, and gestural combine to create meaning (Kress, 2000). While students may be comfortable receiving messages, they may lack the skills to understand how meaning is constructed and the power of influence that these combined elements have in their lives. An understanding of how the various text design genres work will also allow students to begin to create their own messages (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). In some ways, technology and the capability to reproduce quality still and moving images electronically and in print could be seen as enabling a return to early forms of communication including the use of images such as pictographs, widely recognized symbols, dramatizations, mobile town criers, minstrels and musicians. Multiple modes of communication are present in society and can be an effective strategy to bridge socio-cultural gaps in a highly diverse context. A significant impact of

technology and multimodality on literacy is the inclusion of modes of communication commonly associated with the arts (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000),

...literacy is in its nature multimodal – a matter of visual as well as linguistic design. And multimodality itself is becoming more significant in today's communications environment where, from multimedia desktops to shopping malls, written text is represented in a dynamic relation to sound, visuals, spaces and gestures. Globalisation and local diversity also progressively transfer the balance of meaning away from language. As a consequence, literacy teaching and learning need to be an increasingly interdisciplinary endeavour, in which the boundaries of literacy with art, drama, and music are no longer so clearly defined. (p. 234)

If children are going to develop a current and broad facility with literacy, the arts must be effectively taught as part of the necessary skill set.

#### Aesthetic Ways of Producing and Reading Texts

Cope and Kalantzis describe the importance of being able to imagine new possibilities through an expanded range of literacy concerns in terms of,

...our contemporary crisis of meaning and futures. Clearly, we in the modern world do not have the conceptual and cultural resources to be able to face the future in such a way that we can be confident that there will even be a future. There is great relevance, then, in alternative ways in being human; in alternative designs of meaning and meanings for social futures...it's a question of the possibilities inherent in hybrid experimentation and re-creation as we tackle the

problems of culture, economy, and environment...It is also a question of who's in control of the change in communities (2000, p. 222).

It is this understanding of the potential of the power and influence of the arts that moves them from the margins to the core of contemporary education.

Greene (1995) affirms the value of communicating across diversity with the multiple languages that the arts offer, "Some children may find articulation through imagery; others, through body movement; still others, through musical sound. Mastery of a range of languages is necessary if communication is to take place beyond small enclosures within the culture" (p. 57). She takes this further by suggesting that by increasing opportunities for communicating experiences through the arts, a more inclusive society can begin to be created: "Students can be provoked to imaginatively transmute some of their stories into media that can be shared in such a fashion that friends can begin looking together and moving together in a forever expanding space in their little world" (p. 42). Through the arts, Greene suggests, "We can bring warmth into places where young persons come together...we can bring in the dialogues and laughter that threaten monologues and rigidity" (p. 43). This is not something that just happens if children are handed tools for making art.

If engagement in the arts is to have this impact, there must be rigor and thoughtfulness in teaching and learning. Greene describes art education in, "the spectrum that includes dance education, music education, the teaching of painting and other graphic arts, and (I would hope) the teaching of some kinds of writing" (p. 138) as leading to increased ability to attend, to use the imagination to create, and to be aware of our feelings. These skills can be transferred to thinking about ways to approach personal and social issues and expand possibilities for creating a positive diverse community. Included in arts instruction is aesthetic education, "the deliberate efforts to

foster increasingly informed and involved encounters with art (p. 138).” which may also empower students to attend to the world.

Art education and aesthetic education are both rooted in the process of critical reflection and decision making, which are considered by Lankshear and Knobel (2003) to be key contemporary literacy skills. Thus the arts and literacy reinforce in each other the potential for both increasing communication skills and critical thinking skills, both of which can be used to influence the development of an inclusive diverse community. My study takes this further by exploring how the arts can be integrated into literacy education with the aim of strengthening connections between students with diverse backgrounds and in terms of developing a range of means of expression.

### *Artful Social Change*

While the arts enable communication in diverse socio-cultural contexts, their value extends beyond the initiation of dialogue and the discovery of common themes among us. Greene (1995) suggests that engagement in arts and aesthetic education may offer opportunities for social change,

It is not enough to emancipate individuals or to enable them to disclose their lived worlds for their enlightenment and our own. Lived worlds must be open to reflection and transformation... They may through their coming together constitute a newly human world, one worthy enough and responsive enough to be both durable and open to continual renewal. Of course, this has to begin in local places, in school-rooms and schoolyards and neighbourhood centers (sic)... But it can reach beyond, toward an enlarging public space where more and more common interests are articulated. It can radiate to inform the “conversation” and

to empower individuals to open themselves to what they are making in common.

Once they are open, once they are informed, once they are engaged in speech and action from their many vantage points, they may be able to identify a better state of things – and go on to transform (p. 59).

The construction of stories and experiences through the arts can help envision a new story. For Beyer (2000) this may happen as, “The arts ... through the imaginative rendering of people, events, values, places, feelings, and ideas, help disclose worlds that are not yet in place, and thus serve as a force to bring about their creation” (p. 85). For the arts to potentially have this kind of impetus for social change, Greene (1995) exhorts schools to strive for excellence, “I would try to seek out multiple excellences, to think of academic rigor in connection with the cultivation of qualities of mind in diverse domains” (p. 179). She asserts that, “There can be spaces of excellence where diverse persons are moved to reach toward the possible. Through the exercise of the imagination, individuals can gain that sense of significance that enables them to realize that ‘there is always more to experience, and more in what we experience than we can predict’ (Warnock, 1978, p. 202).

#### *A Locked Toolbox? Challenges to the Arts*

Greene (1985) suggests that education not be confined to teaching facts and techniques but also should include a range of intelligences, passion and imagination. She defines excellence in education as including the ability to take a set of intellectual tools and use them combination with the imagination. Encounters with diverse art forms enlarge,

the spaces – the perceptual, the imaginative and conceptual spaces – in which the young come in touch with and try to interpret their worlds. What we are doing is expanding the range of literacy, introducing people to what standards can mean

and what discipline can mean, even as we introduce them to the symbol systems that define our culture, even as we are provoking them to move beyond, to realize untapped possibility (1985, p. 139).

Lack of wide recognition of the cognitive role of the arts in literacy and critical thinking has often pushed the arts to the margins in both the curriculum and teacher education. In the current social climate of neo-liberal economism, which situates education in the form of training and the direction of schools in the form of investment and business management, the arts are often viewed as a frill to be indulged in if standards are met in a series of discrete skills (Abbs, 2003; Bai, 2003).

### Literacy for Sustainable Living

One aim of this study is to explore connections between the arts, literacy and environmental learning. Sustained, inquiry based, integrated environmental education that nurtures a sense of curiosity, wonder, and passion for our place in the natural world (Sobel, 2008; Carson 1998; Orr, 1998, Joicey, 1986) is a model that provides a purposeful context for literacy that is not often found in schools. Instead of focusing our questions about literacy and schooling on helping our children learn basic skills better or faster in the fragmented technocratic model that currently frames our society, we should be asking what the fundamental values, skills and fields of knowledge are that children should learn in school and how we should teach those (Orr, 1992; Hutchison, 1998). If we are to move beyond a technocratic view of the world which views the world as existing in discrete bits that can be manipulated by technology, we need to teach languages that can enable this kind of thinking.

Cobb theorized that, “the development of language is not simply an exercise in communicative competence. As an instrument of exploration, language also provides the means

by which the child can structure a world” (Hutchison, 1998). Many Canadians would argue that one of the vital areas needing social change and transformation is in our relations with our natural environment. Our modern, urban lifestyle has often isolated some people from the natural environment. Yet people remain an integral part of the environment, as has been recognized by other philosophies around the world (Cajete, 1999). Indeed, “because of our vital need to breathe, eat and drink, we are always embedded in the cyclical processes of nature. Our health depends on the purity of the air we breathe and the water we drink, and it depends on the health of the soil from which our food is produced” (Capra, 2004, p. 230). The effects of loss of contact with nature are uncertain, but people are troubled in particular with potential impacts on developing children (Louv, 2005; Kellert, 2002; Chawla, 2002). These concerns have led to calls for a refocusing of modern education from the environmental movement (Capra, 2004; Hutchison, 1998; Orr, 1992).

### *Literacy as Nature Immersion*

Education that aims to immerse students in the natural world in their school grounds and communities through physical and aesthetic experiences is the type of nature education I, and many others, are advocating for. When I use the word nature, I refer to the places and processes that take place all around us rather than to a remote area relatively untouched by humans that has been set aside and classified as ‘natural’ and to be preserved. One of the aims of nature education is to offer the opportunity for guided exploration to develop an understanding of natural processes, including human activity.

It is important to teach children to engage with the natural environment on both a scientific level (observation, taxonomy, classification) and an aesthetic level (joy, wonder, appreciation). The languages of the arts expand the way in which children can perceive and

respond to the natural world (Graham, 2008; Leslie, 1996; Sobel, 1996; Williams & Dilafroz, 1999). Creating a pleasurable emotional connection to the outdoors may also lead to a sense of ownership and responsibility.

### *Know Your Place*

In order to build a connection to a place, children need to get to know it (Joicey, 1986). Spending longitudinal time outdoors, mentored by teachers, parents and other community members may help provide the kind of experiences that children do not appear to be having (Sobel, 2008). Many environmental educators have found that the arts are a crucial part of observing, building empathy, and communicating understandings about the natural environment for children (Sobel, 2008; Williams & Taylor, 1999; Cajete, 1999; Joicey, 1986). Community or place based education is a model that includes a cultural, historical and technical context for experiencing the natural environment (Sobel, 2008; Cajete, 1999).

### *More Than a Barbie World*

Environmental education as citizenship or social justice is concerned with developing students' awareness of broader social issues that influence both their local and global environment. Smith and Williams (1999) situate scientific and social studies of environmental issues in the broader context of culture suggesting that, "we need to craft an ethic that reengages culture and ecology by challenging the status quo of Western notions of progress and promoting genuine multiculturalism" (p. 2). While they applaud efforts to raise children's awareness of issues related to the degradation of the environment and the implementation of actions intended to impact these issues, such as recycling, raising money for causes, or letter writing campaigns, they believe, "missing in most of these efforts, however, is a recognition of the deeper cultural transformations that must accompany the shift to more ecologically sustainable ways of life" (p.

3). Gilliam and Lane-Zucker (1996) state, “Nature literacy – the ability to learn from and respond to direct experience of nature - means seeing nature as a connected, inclusive whole. Furthermore, it means redefining community as an interwoven web of nature and culture...” (1996, p. vi). Environmental education as social justice includes a moral point of view, “bringing ecological interdependence and an ethic of care in from the margin to the centre...” (Smith and Williams, p. 16, 1999) with the overarching goal to develop an ethic of sustainability.

### Civic Literacies: Leadership and Engagement

According to West-Burnham (2003), school leaders understanding that the school is situated in the community and that children are the link between schools and their communities have a,

profound ethical base to...leadership. This is extended into the belief that a crucial component of the educational process is the fight for social justice.

Economic, social and cultural poverty is a major barrier to educational opportunity. Leadership in this context is about more than fighting discrimination – it is about the active promotion of a society based on positive acceptance and engagement (p. 9).

Greenfield (1993) proposes a theory of educational leadership based on a phenomenological view of organizations which describes organizations not as separate entities, but as entities invented by individuals seeking to interpret and order the world around them. He directs educational and teacher leaders to look critically at and reflect upon the social context of the school, being aware of discrepancies between official educational goals and the needs of the particular school in a particular social environment. In this view of educational leadership, one

goal could be to understand that the school and community can work together as a resource for learning. This goal is based on values and purposes for schools which are broader than raising scores on standardized tests or a narrow, economic focus on building employment skills.

Schools are learning communities, and as such they are concerned with achievement.

Gelsthorpe (2003) suggests that

...achievement needs to be defined in much broader terms for society, communities and individuals. It is necessary to reassert the key purpose of producing individuals who can manage their own learning, who are active citizens, enjoy academic success and are employable, enterprising and entrepreneurial. In order to achieve this, the practice of educational and community engagement together is paramount, with consequent leadership, organizational and pedagogical transformation (p. 16).

School leaders must be prepared to lay the groundwork for building community connections by developing community within the school before reaching out to families, places, and organizations within the community. Sanders (2003) cites numerous studies that indicate that,

Schools that have successfully built community within their walls, that is, schools that are collaborative, communicative, and inclusive, appear to have the greatest success in developing strong connections with the community outside their walls...educators who have been prepared to collaborate will have the dispositions, resources, skills and strategies to minimize and resolve (these) challenges (p. 174).

This is a different style of educational leadership than one focused on school management.

Gelsthorpe (2003) suggests that,

There is the need to inspire and aspire to a culture and climate for leadership which is more experimental, risk-taking, innovative and creative and not to train, for example, school leaders who then become marooned and isolated in their individual institutions, reacting to central authorities and policy determination with a passive or, at best, token and restricted responsiveness and performance targets. Hence, performance and achievement of education for the whole community requires transformational styles of leadership as part of that very community. Much of this is about attitudinal change, but the key broad goals and shared understandings of practice need to be strong and clear, not least drawn from a fully proactive community base. (p. 28)

When schools and communities work together, there can be mutual benefits. In her review of literature on community involvement in schools, Sanders describes studies that suggest community involvement may benefit students by increasing their social capital. Building relationships in which knowledge, guidance, and values are shared can provide anchors and hope for students. Community involvement may also help build and maintain healthy communities through the creation of educational, social, cultural and recreational networks (2003).

As a teacher-leader, in this study I aim to build relationships with some community educators to explore how schools and community organizations can work together to situate a broader form of child literacy that views diversity as a strength and is set in a meaningful community context. Further, I want to use the arts to communicate our vision to the community for feedback, including community members in the process of discussing literacy. In the next chapter, I will discuss how my study attempted to meet these goals.

## CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

### Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this arts-based study was to begin constructing an expanded framework for child literacy learning in the schools and community of Surrey with participants who educate children in formal, nonformal and informal ways in literacy, the arts and environmental education.

The question that guided this study was,

How is literacy understood and articulated by formal and nonformal educators teaching children in the fields of literacy, the arts and environmental education in Surrey schools and community organizations?

The study probed into the ideas that overlapped between formal literacy and non-formal learning in each of these contexts. There were three main objectives of this study,

To identify key elements that could inform a new understanding of child literacy needs and development through aesthetic and environmental lenses.

To understand how schools and community organizations could better partner to develop children's literacy.

To uncover the reactions of people in the community who attended the exhibit in terms of their reflections on child literacy through this visual exposition and begin a public dialogue about literacy education.

### Participatory Action Research

This study was situated in the practice of participatory action research which Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) describe as associated with social transformation and characterized by

shared ownership of research projects, community based analysis of social problems, and an orientation towards community action. They state that this type of research takes a reflexive-dialectical perspective on practice that recognizes that “people’s actions are caused by their intentions and circumstances, but also that people cause intentions and circumstances” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 578). Participants often see something from their own point of view, from the points of view of relevant others, and “see the local setting as connected to wider social and historical conditions” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 573). Participatory action research is often chosen by those who want to make thoughtful changes through “collaborative reflection, theorizing, and political action directed toward reconstructing the setting” (Kemmis & McTaggart, p. 585). I chose this research method to inquire into questions about literacy instruction and learning for children that emerged from my teaching practice and previous action research. I wanted to understand the challenges I was having with literacy instruction from a wider variety of perspectives than simply my classroom own situation and teaching practices. I also aimed to begin to build a network of support within the community of Surrey. Basing the study in theory and considering social context, such as the changes effected by economic globalization, allowed me to situate my experience, and the experiences of other participants in a socio-cultural-historical context. My previous investigations of integrating environmental education into the curriculum I was teaching brought me into contact with nonformal educators and settings, which is why I sought to include participants from the areas of libraries, environmental learning, and arts learning, as well as teachers. As active educators, we were well positioned to co-investigate our experiences. By bringing in other educators’ perspectives on what literacy learning for children included, I planned to provide a broader base for our ideas on children’s literacy learning. I also aimed to effect some change through the experience of

communally critically reflecting on our own practices. I hoped we would continue to be encouraged to make changes or sustain parts of our literacy practices that we were experiencing as becoming marginalized. Together, perhaps we could help each other resist the growing emphasis on separating literacy education into discrete measurable bits as part of the accountability agenda which tends to ignore context.

### Arts-Based Research

I chose to combine participatory action research with arts-based research as arts-based research demonstrated the broader conceptions of thinking and communication that I have argued are necessary for a more diverse conception of literacy. Arts-based research is an appropriate strategy for this research because it is consistent with the aims of creating a broader framework for broadening child literacy which includes using the multiple forms of communication and ways of thinking that are embedded in the arts. This provided congruency between the form and content of the research. In using arts-based research, I modelled the potential of the arts for literacy and communication.

I have an extended minor in visual art with a background in photography and installation. This background, combined with several graduate level research courses and my experience leading participatory workshops with adults, qualified me as an artist-researcher for this study. As artist participants, focus group members had a varying amount of training and/or experience with art-making, but all of them were familiar with photography and comfortable using cameras. My role as the artist-researcher in the group was in making the final choices of which images to print and to make final decisions on how to locate them in relation to the ideas, to each other, and position them meaningfully within the exhibition space. This combination of artistic, research

and leadership skills made me qualified to meet artistic as well as academic standards in this research.

As an artist researcher, I choose arts-based research as it is well suited to meeting the study's third aim of provoking community dialogue on children's literacy learning. Arts-based research is a qualitative research strategy that offers a holistic, engaging process to access particular issues and to represent them effectively. According to Patricia Leavy (2009),

*Arts-based research practices* are a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined. Arts-based methods draw on literary writing, music, performance, dance, visual art, film, and other mediums. Representational forms include, but are not limited to short narratives, novels, experimental writing forms, poems, collages, paintings, drawings, performance scripts, theatre performances, dances, documentaries, and songs (pp. 2-3).

Arts-based practices became more recognized in the 1990's, emerging from work in arts-based therapies in the fields of health, special education, and psychology. In the field of education, the work of Eisner and his students, including Barone, were among those who built the discipline of arts-based research (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008). Arts-based practices build on the commonalities between research and art making such as, "reflection, description, problem formulation and solving, and the ability to identify and explain intuition and creativity in the research process" (Leavy, 2009, p. 10). The ability of art to capture viewer's attention and elicit emotional

reactions about certain aspects of social life make it well suited to creating critical awareness, building coalitions, and challenging dominant ideologies (Finley, 2008; Leavy, 2009). Arts-based practices enable, “research questions to be posed in new ways, entirely new questions to be asked, and non-academic audiences to be reached” (Leavy, 2009, p. 12). Arts-based research representational strategies have the potential to serve the public good by bringing research to a wider audience, disseminating knowledge and provoking dialogue (Leavy, 2009).

As in any developing field, tensions exist in arts-based research (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008; Eisner, 2008; Leavy, 2009 ). The first area of tension is around aesthetic standards. This includes debates around the value of aesthetic quality of participant created art and the aesthetics of researcher created art. According to Finley, the aesthetic quality of the work is secondary if the art practices are participatory and intended to initiate introspections, reflection and representations of participants experiences in the community context. She states that, “the critical, revolutionary arts-based researcher needs to develop passionate respect for the insights of street artists and street critics (Finley, 2008, p. 76)”. However, when the artist-researcher creates her own representations that may be brought into the community to open dialogue, the issue of having sufficient knowledge or technical skills in the art discipline to render quality representation is valid (Leavy, 2009). Finley asserts that, “in representing what the researcher learns, facility with specific research methodologies as well as specific artful forms of representation may allow the arts-based researcher broader audience” (Finley, 2008, p. 77). A minimum of an undergraduate minor in the discipline has been suggested to establish competence for research purposes (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008).

The second tension is between the interpretive or metaphoric quality of the work and it’s potential applicability or usefulness to the field (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008; Eisner, 2008). In this

study I argue that interpretation of text is always situated in a particular context and open to the interpretation of the viewer. Recognizing that all work is open to interpretation, one method of assuring the researcher's accuracy in interpretation is to analyze the data with the participants. By analyzing together both the photographs that I brought to the first focus group meeting and photographs taken by the participants at the second focus group meeting, by informally interviewing people at the exhibition opening, by inviting participants to record their impressions in the comment book, and formally interviewing people after the opening, I ensured that I had input from a broad base of participants and was not relying solely on my own interpretations of the data. This contributes to the reliability of the study.

Representing the data in a combination of text and art forms can help create context for interpretation in a public setting. Multiple understandings created by the metaphoric qualities of the work may also be seen as contributing to dialogue and creating a rich understanding (Leavy, 2009). One of the aims of this study was to create public dialogue about children's literacy learning. Using the arts ensured that the ideas in the study were potentially accessible to people in the community such as children themselves, and adults who don't have an academic background, or those who would not normally engage with an academic study. Participatory research considers that valid and important knowledge is held by people about their own contexts. In this case, children and their parents are people who may be outside the normal structures for input about children's literacy learning but are directly involved in formal and nonformal literacy activities could engage with the images and brief text and talk to the researcher and each other about their thinking on literacy learning. In this way, arts-based strategies directly facilitated the participatory approach.

Participatory arts-based practices can help build coalitions across groups since, “The arts ideally evoke emotional responses, and so the dialogue sparked by arts-based practices is highly engaged” (Leavy, 2009, p. 14). Through the process of engaging in meaningful dialogue about the practices and frameworks of child literacy in the respective fields of the participants and viewers of the art exhibit, the opportunity for creating bridges between each area may have been created. One of the aims of this research was to spark dialogue and build coalitions between child literacy educators in different fields, including the arts as part of creating the broader framework and in disseminating the knowledge through exhibiting the art-data. While participants were sometimes initially unsure of how to respond to the photographs and later the art exhibit, once a few comments had been made, or questions had been asked, about images participants generally became quite animated in the telling of their own experiences relating to children’s literacy learning in a variety of settings. Many of the stories were quite personal and responses did reflect a variety of emotions connected to their experiences.

### *Photography*

Photographs are rich sources of information in and of themselves and in how viewers interpret them. Berger (1972) asserts that, “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (p.8). When we, “look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights...The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject...Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing” (p. 10). The act of taking a photograph implies thought and choice at different levels. Sontag (1977) identifies photography as art and photography as documentation stating that,

both are logical extensions of what photography means: note-taking on, potentially, everything in the world, from every possible angle...according to one attitude, there is nothing that should not be seen; according to the other, there is nothing that should not be recorded. Cameras implement an aesthetic view of reality by being a machine-toy that extends to everyone the possibility of making disinterested judgements about importance, interest, beauty (p. 176).

Photographs can be seen as both beautiful, useful, or a blend of both. When exhibited as art, the photographs taken in this study can be seen as falling into any of these categories. Photographs also gain meaning from the context in which they are displayed. Becker (2006) describes context as, “what has been written about them, either in the label hanging beside them or elsewhere, other visual objects, physically present or just present in viewers’ awareness, and from discussions going on around them and around the subject the works are about” (p. 88).

Displaying the photographs framed as art, in groupings with accompanying text derived from the visual word sort from the focus group, in the context of the public library, added to their meaning. Further Becker (2006) states, “The images themselves, sequenced, repetitive, variations on a set of themes, provide their own context, teach viewers what they need to know in order to arrive, by their own reasoning, at some conclusions about what they are looking at”(p. 89).

In this study as The researcher I deliberately chose to limit the amount of written explanation of the topic to allow the images and brief text to stand in context for the viewers to interpret. Several viewers did ask to have the exhibit explained to them and were quite persistent in asking for a brief synopsis of the main ideas in verbal form. This emphasizes the need to include arts instruction and instruction that emphasizes the visual-spatial aspects of

communication in literacy instruction. We are surrounded by visual images, both political and commercial, that demand our attention and interpretation. These are important means of communication in today's society.

### Participants

The five participants for the focus groups were drawn from the areas of formal child literacy education, libraries, environmental education and arts education.

Nancy – pseudonyms are used for all - is a learning support teacher at the elementary school level. She works with English language learners in small groups in an area of Surrey where many families are recent immigrants. She has a diploma in art education and her family is involved with the arts in a variety of ways. Beth is a children's librarian in inner city Surrey. She works with children and their parents formally in activities such as storytelling sessions and informally by assisting them in the library. Susan is a program coordinator with Surrey Environmental Programs and is an experienced environmental educator. She has worked with groups of students in schools and parks as well as with the community in park programs.

Rina is an artist and art educator. She exhibits her paintings at a local gallery, works with schools through an arts agency to develop and implement art projects such as murals, and teaches children's art classes at the Surrey Art Gallery. Rina was only able to attend the first focus group. However, the participant from formal child literacy education also had a strong arts background so was able to speak from an arts perspective as well.

Participants in the art opening and comment book included people invited through my networks as well as adults and children present in the children's area of the library during the weekday afternoon exhibit opening. Participants in the formal interviews after the art opening were not part of the focus group meetings. The study included a wide range of participants.

## Data collection and analysis

As this is an arts-based research design, art was part of the thinking and constructing process. I, the researcher, also used art to analyze and represent the results. There were multiple forms of data collection that involved using arts based forms which are described next.

### *Focus Groups*

The focus group data consists of notes taken by the research assistant during each focus group meeting, the photographs taken by the researcher and participants, journals of the participants, the visual word sort, and video footage. Researcher notes were recorded in a notebook using a two-column format where the left hand column has descriptive notes of the setting, participants, activities and dialogue or other relevant details, and the right hand column has reflective notes consisting of the researchers thoughts, impressions, feelings, and speculations. A heading identifies the time, place and date of the observations. A digital video camera mounted on a tripod with an external microphone was used to record the second focus group meeting. The data was recorded on DVD so it could be viewed and analyzed. Following is a fuller description of each stage of data collection during the focus groups.

The first data collection tool of this study was focus groups engaged in arts based participatory activities, including discussions and photography. Art was created by the participants through photography and as such was part of group analysis and representation of concepts. Throughout the focus groups, art was present as pedagogy, as we worked with arts based instructional strategies. In a series of two focus group meetings, the researcher and three or four participants collectively analyzed experiences and conceptions of literacy through the lens of their area of expertise. The researcher brought photographs that represented a variety of

potential aspects of child literacy in the participant's fields to the first focus group meeting. These images and open-ended questions generated by the researcher formed the basis for the initial discussions and introduced the process of working with photographs. Participants were asked to journal their thinking between the first and second meeting and to take photographs representing both their current and possibly expanded conceptions of child literacy in their fields. The researcher provided the participants with journals to use for this purpose and the journals were returned to the researcher. It was suggested that journal notes could consist of visual or text reflections of the participants and include quotes or poems that the participants feel are relevant to their reflections on the topic, but participants found exploring the ideas through photography was their preferred method of gathering information and reflecting. Most participants used the journals to record a few of their thoughts during the focus group discussions. Participants were asked to use their own digital cameras to take photographs. They were asked to transfer the images to the researcher on a USB flash drive so the images could be printed before the next focus group meeting. The researcher provided USB flash drives for the participants to borrow for this purpose. The participants were provided with release forms to have anyone sign that appeared in the photographs they took. Managing the forms and having them returned was a limiting factor in the photographs the participants were able to take and use. There were difficulties due to the nature of the relationships between community educators and the groups they were working with on a one-time basis, difficulties with English as a Second Language parents understanding the process, and difficulties with the short time between focus group meetings.

At the second focus group meeting images taken by the participants formed the basis for the discussions and analyses. A visual word sort using key words chosen from the discussions by

the researcher and the participants during the discussions were used to help identify key common concepts and issues between our conceptions of literacy. As they were generated, words or phrases were recorded on large strips of paper then communally sorted into related groupings by the participants. Rich discussion happened during this process most of which was recorded on video camera and later viewed and transcribed as part of the data analysis. Once the words or phrases were grouped we talked until we could identify the key concept which could act as a title for each grouping of words or phrases.

As the researcher I suggested we try to prioritize these concepts in terms of importance, but the group objected and suggested instead that we place them in a non-linear, non-hierarchical circle. Part of this focus group meeting was videotaped to capture voice and gesture cues and analyzed for points of convergence or common pressures. Some participants were interested in meeting for a third time, but not all were available due to time constraints and other commitments. This is typical of the time and energy boundaries inherent in school-community collaboration (Wedgewood, 2003).

### *Art Exhibit*

The second data collection tool was a public art exhibit created by the researcher with the data generated in the focus group meetings. I used the data gathered through photography, journals and video and analyzed during the focus group sessions to construct a final art piece that represented the results of the study. The art exhibit was located in the children's area of the Newton Branch of the Surrey Public Library, which is the education context of one of the research participants and is open to the public. There was an afternoon art opening which was advertised through social networks and was open to the public. The participants were invited to attend the art opening. A table with food and flowers in the middle of the children's section of

the library invited adults and children in the library as well as those who came specifically to view the exhibit to mingle and attend to the photographs and text in exhibit. There was a welcome, celebratory atmosphere. Signs on the table informed viewers about the research component of the exhibit and opening and asked for implied consent.

### *Conversations with Viewers*

The third data collection tool was informal conversations with viewers at the opening of the art exhibit. I, the researcher, circulated throughout the art exhibit opening engaging in conversations of varying lengths and depths regarding the exhibit and the ideas behind it. I was able to approach about twenty people during the opening. The people I spoke with included library staff, invited guests, and adults and children who were present. Informally, I asked questions such as:

Have you seen the photographs?

What did you think when you were looking at them?

How do you think literacy learning is shown in the photographs?

What do you think of learning this way?

### *Comments Book*

The fourth data collection strategy was a comment book at the art exhibit opening in which viewers were invited to write their responses to the exhibit. A comment book was on display during the afternoon. As I spoke with viewers about the exhibit, I invited them to look at the photographs and text and to comment to me personally or to record their reactions and comments in the book. A sign beside the comment book informed viewers that their comments

would become part of the research and asked for implied consent. I did not collect identifying information from the comment book participants.

### *Interviews*

As the researcher, I chose people to interview who attended the exhibition who had a variety of personal backgrounds in order to delve into opinions. I contacted viewers from the exhibit and arranged to interview several of them about their reactions to the exhibit and possibilities for a broader framework for child literacy. The interviews were in an unstructured, open-ended format and were audio-taped. I asked questions such as:

Are there any similarities and differences you saw between your own ideas of child literacy and some of the ideas in the art exhibit?

Going back to when you were a child in school, did you notice any similarities or differences between your own experiences with reading and writing in school and the things that you saw in the photographs?

Did looking at the pictures or attending the exhibit change your thinking about what literacy learning is for children, or confirm your thinking?

In terms of having the exhibit up in the public library, do you think there is any value in having those photographs there?

Is there anything else that stand out in your mind that you'd like to add?

Each participant responded uniquely and I also asked questions individual to each interview to delve into and clarify for myself aspects of child literacy learning they were talking about.

Photographs from the exhibit supported the interview discussions. Data from the art exhibit

consists of photographs of the exhibit, the comment book, discussions with viewers recorded in notes by the researcher during or at the end of the opening, and notes from the interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis took place in stages. The focus groups consisted of a type of group analysis. In the first focus group, the participants and I began with a brief discussion about the importance of literacy from their perspective. From there we moved into analyzing the first data set which was photographs I had taken in a variety of educational settings. Participants were asked to find a photograph that best represented literacy in their area and one that least represented literacy in their area. Lots of discussion took place as people began looking at the photographs and evaluating them. Participants were asked to share the photographs they chose and to say why they chose them. In this way, we began to understand each others' thinking and ideas around literacy. Participants spoke of the difficulty of deciding something was *not* an opportunity to develop literacy. The discussion was lively and engaging as definitions or ideas about literacy emerged. At the end of this first focus group, I asked participants to take photographs in their own fields to bring to the next focus group. These would form our second data set. As noted earlier, I printed the participant's photographs so we could use them to continue to analyze and develop our ideas about literacy, search for overlaps, and try to identify ways we might work together or influence each others' literacy education practices. During the second focus group session, participants shared some background about the process of taking their own photographs. Group analysis of this data set began as we examined the photographs as a group and recorded our thinking in a visual word sort. Participants were provided with strips of chart paper and markers. They were asked to record in a word or very brief phrase what they

thought was represented in the photograph in terms of literacy education. It took a few examples to get participants started, but once they caught on to the idea, words were flying out of their mouths and onto the paper strips. When the examining, thinking and writing slowed down, we stopped recording. This was our third data set.

The next step of analysis was to sort the words into concept groups. We laid the strips out on the tables and placed the first few on the floor. This group process was accompanied by much discussion and deliberation, which helped us clarify our thinking about literacy education.

At times we were in agreement, at times we weren't. Generally, we did not have difficulty agreeing. As the word sort continued, we identified some concepts that overlapped and negotiated changes in groupings. It was a fluid process and there was a balance of input from each participant. If we seemed to be stuck, one of us would often pose a question to move the thinking in a new direction. This was also a physical process. Focus group participants were standing and walking around the floor area as we talked, distributed the strips and arranged the groupings.

Once the words were sorted into like concepts, the next step of analysis was to examine each set of words to identify a main idea. This process involved minor resorting of some of the words. Again, participants engaged in discussion of the concepts, further clarifying key ideas about literacy and the education process. Despite our different literacy areas, agreement between us about what was important was remarkable. This overall sense of agreement was, in some ways, a detriment to lively provocative discussion.

Once the main idea for each word grouping was identified and a title created, the next step of analysis I proposed was for us to rank the concepts in order of importance. We would agree on one concept as key, then turn to the next concept and decide that was just as important.

Then someone would bring another concept to our attention as also key to beginning. As we alternately discussed and mused, one participant pointed out that she didn't see the need to rank the concepts numerically. She related this process to the kind of hierarchical thinking we were disagreeing with. This was a significant moment in the discussion and there was a sense of relief present as we agreed. Alternately, we decided that we could arrange the main ideas in a circle, as each influences the next one. The order they were placed in was not considered important. We decided that an educator could start with any concept and move through the others, as long as most or all of the concepts were present in one or a series of learning situations.

This process was one of the most satisfying moments during the study. After working collaboratively, We taped the concept groups together and photographed them to preserve visual evidence of our thinking. Our discussions and actions were recorded on video for further analysis of body language and voice cues by me.

During my transcription and analysis of the video that was preserved, I noticed that focus group members shared the talking and acting fairly equally. When we were having difficulty with a concept, different members took the initiative to ask a question or suggest a way forward. Tone and volume of voices and body language or physical positioning of the group members also suggested a fairly egalitarian process of analysis. I was looking for points of tension that might be indicated by animated voices or gestures, but since there was general agreement, I did not find the tension I assumed would be generated. This in itself however, is an important observation about the process of participatory research.

While two of the participants expressed an interest in another focus group meeting, there wasn't enough time or resources available from each participant to make this happen. If I had

been able to organize a third meeting, I would have liked to do the same word sort activity with a focus on barriers to educating according to the identified concepts and suggest this as a worthwhile extension of this research.

With the focus group process completed, I put the art exhibit together using the photographs, words, and concepts identified during the data gathering and analysis process directed by the focus group. As I circulated amongst participants at the art exhibit opening, I engaged in conversation with them about the literacy exhibit I had prepared. The content of these conversations informed my reading of the comment book and gave me possible directions for pursuing during the semi-formal individual interviews I later held. The comment book was an important addition to my own conversations and observations of the participants' experiences of the art exhibit opening and their ideas about education.

There were sixteen entries written in the comment book. I read them and looked for common words or themes. Eleven entries were about appreciating the photographs themselves for their colour, beauty or subject matter. Six entries commented directly and positively about representation of literacy in the photographs, active learning, curiosity, or the ideas represented. Four entries supported the need for teachers who embraced these ideas. The comment book entries responses support the data analyses from the focus group.

The individual interviews held after the art exhibit opening were transcribed. I went through the transcriptions and examined them for recurring words or phrases. I compared these to the concepts and conversations from the focus groups and the art exhibit opening with the idea of finding confirmation of earlier findings or of finding outliers that would suggest disagreement or new areas to be explored in further research. The data from the interviews support the rest of the data.

### Role of the researcher: ethical concerns and constraints

As the researcher, I was both a participant and a facilitator during the research. My aim was for participants to state and examine their own understanding of literacy in their field and work together to create a new understanding of literacy that combines the key elements we have identified. The quality of this research depended on the trustworthiness of the participants and the authenticity of the process. I, the researcher, needed to be open and transparent about the role I was taking and the expectations I had of the participants. My values shaped the experience of the focus group and contributed to the inquiry outcomes. Disclosing my intentions and being aware of my role contributed to ensuring the study was consistent with maintaining the ethics of the study.

Since I invited participants through social networks, some personal interactions may have produced power issues or problems of confidentiality and anonymity as well as other interpersonal issues. I minimized these potential difficulties by being aware of them and by being transparent about my values and intent. In addition, the egalitarian approaches used in the data analysis ensured participants could validate to the accuracy of the analysis. The art display I created after the group process also provided opportunity for feedback from the participants and others. By collecting and analyzing the data in stages in collaboration with participants, I ensured participants have a significant voice in the study while also informing them of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time should they feel uncomfortable with any part of the research process; this was consistent with the ethics requirements of the University of Victoria (a copy of the ethical approval is attached in Appendix XX).

## CHAPTER FOUR FOCUS GROUPS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

In this chapter I share the data that emerged from the collaborative discussions and analysis at the two focus groups. As outlined in chapter three, for the first focus group, the participants and I perused and discussed photographic images of children and adults in a variety of educational settings from my own collection. For the second focus group, participants collectively explored photographs they themselves had taken in response to the research questions. From these two sessions emerged three interconnected themes we felt were key to expanding and re-conceptualizing contemporary child literacy. The first was Relationships and Experiences with/in/through Nature, including connections to animals. The second was Aesthetic and Imaginative Experiences within, but particularly outside, the classroom. The third was Cultural Sites and Community Engagement that focused primarily on learning in libraries. Sub-themes focused on language, experience, integration, connections, and embodied learning, and media/technology. We also recognized limitations and problems and I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the ‘Challenges’ we identified in terms of working with this broader definition of child literacy within the school system and community.

### Relationships and Experiences with/in/through Nature

As I had included environmental educators and activists in my study, it is not surprising that experiences and relationships with the rest of nature would be a major aspect of a renewed and invigorated children’s literacy – one that would not only broaden children’s understandings of nature and conservation, but something that would include new and different types of relationships. We began our session by brain-storming a number of words/ideas, as they emerged

from the photographs in particular, although others were also catalysts for our thoughts. Some of them are included here.

senses  
touch  
risk  
wonder  
games  
play  
objects  
puppets  
pictures  
books



One of Susan's goals as a community-based environmental educator is for children to feel a sense of connection – to have a stronger 'relationship' - with both place and with nature. She felt this was key to developing a nature and conservation 'literacy', something that children will need to help them solve the complex environmental problems they are likely to encounter given the lack of political will that exists at the moment to turn things around. Susan felt time and many different types of experiences were required to develop these stronger relationships or connections to nature, which was more than her work time with children often allowed. She also

made an interesting connection between the ‘time’ factor and nature terms as a metaphor for literacy:

We make connections, certainly. I don’t think it’s absent, but it’s like for them it’s on a big scale to feel ongoing connection with nature. We’re just a piece of it, but we see, yes, certainly all the time like just a very simple, ‘I’m planting a tree today.’ and you do see a connection. You see the little, you know, light bulbs going off for some kids where they’ve never done this before. That’s the big one, ‘I’ve never used a shovel before.’ So there are connections being made, but when we look at what is our long-term goal it’s certainly for them to make a bigger connection than these little ones that we’re able to see.

By engaging directly with nature through tree planting, for example, students have an intimate, first hand, up close, connection and relationship that environmental education scholars suggest can evoke lasting memories (e.g. Sobel, 2008; Williams & Taylor, 1999). We also discussed how children could associate the nature relationship with the educator and thereby feel a greater sense of connection to that person and the ideas they represent. Susan illustrated this from her tree planting days: “I was the one out tree planting with kids and certainly a year later they’d come to Earth Day and say, I planted a tree with you last year. And it’s a year or more later.” She brought to the focus group, photographs of students’ responses to tree planting. One showed a large red painted heart with the word trees beside it. One showed two footsteps with pictures of a person. Some students have made emotive and personal connections through participation in the environmental program.



She argued that these photographs illustrate “connections are being made, but our goal is a much bigger connection which we can’t possibly be responsible for on our own.” What Susan is referring to here is the shared responsibility of connecting children with nature. But she also went further in terms of talking about the importance of connecting children with community leaders and of integrating formal and informal education for children. In fact she saw nature as a strategic way to develop active citizens, to broaden literacy to mean becoming an ‘active citizen’ who can ‘read’ their community and, respond to and influence their community. This harkens back to Freire’s (1970) much more expansive notion of ‘literacy’ which focused on reading the world. It also connects to the work of other scholars who see environmental education as a critical means of developing citizens (Hutchison, 1998; Orr, 1991) and I will come back to this idea shortly.

### *Experiential learning*

A subtheme of the environment and child literacy focused on the body as a site of learning or what scholars call embodied learning or experiential learning (Dewey, 1938) using our bodies. This subtheme will also be developed in several parts of the Aesthetic and Imaginative experience section which follows. Here, I will be focusing on Susan’s experiences with experiential learning in an environmental setting. A key aspect is sensory perception: “you touch them and smell them and see what’s underneath that log, yeah.” Susan discussed her view of how embodied learning or sensory perception connects with literacy, bringing her own imagination, ideas and experiences to her interpretation of the photographs she chose in focus group one. “We have some where the kids are observing and they seem to be looking at the stream. It seems that that’s what they’re focused on, looking. And then we have this one where they’re actively doing something. They’re obviously collecting something... They’re engaged in

a hands-on activity where they're interacting with the environment, as opposed to just looking. This one I thought was interesting because they're outdoors and they're presumably reflecting in some way. They're, I'm imagining, thinking about what it is they've been doing and now they're putting thoughts to paper. So for me, those four pictures together represented all the pieces in that process between just taking it in, interacting, and reflecting on it." There are links between Susan's description of learning and Dewey's (1938) idea that our mind, body, and the world are not distinct, that what we think, feel and do are indivisible. He states that, for an experience to be considered aesthetic, it must have depth of engagement, attunement and reflection which changes the person involved. This connects to Freire's concept of literacy as developing a person's ability to influence their own lives and communities. Both literacy and aesthetic experience have the ability to be transformative.

Susan stated that rather than talking to kids about the science of why trees are important, they should "experience a tree, touch it, feel the bark [as that is], much, much, much more basic [an] experience...giving them the connection and experience is more important." Again her ideas are connected to Dewey (1938), who suggested that experiences in education play a key role in learning about a particular topic. The whole child, including all of their senses, is brought into an experience as part of a continuum of learning. Dewey argued that experiences could be highly motivating and often, sparked the imagination and/or further questioning and reflection the topic at hand. Susan went on to note how experience of, for example, planting trees could also be more meaningful if it is set in context of the benefits of trees and what ecology means.

As an informal educator who sees children for perhaps a single session only, Susan relies on classroom teachers or parents to teach before and after the experience activity of planting trees. She would like to see children not just learn about trees and their importance but also, to

be taught how to become advocates for trees in their neighbourhoods and beyond. This reflects the democratic or citizenship notion of Dewey (1938) and Greene (1995) who envision how this more active social learning or role can emerge from designed and moderated aesthetic experiences. Susan relies on teachers or parents to develop an action plan with children after their environmental education experience with a City of Surrey program. The need for strong partnerships to be developed between formal and informal educators is evident in this example.

### *Animals, Nature and Aesthetic Experiences*

Another key aspect of connecting/relationships with nature and its links to an expanded notion of literacy was animals. Participants suggested that animals in the classroom could provide students with a connection to nature, caring relationships, and practical stewardship lessons, all of which have significant links within environmental education. Nancy's choice of a photograph of hamsters at her school sparked a discussion in the focus group recognizing animals as a way to create caring connections.



Nancy began this discussion by sharing work from a primary class at her school where students observed the class hamster and then recorded their observations in writing and line drawing.

Then Rina continued, agreeing that animals in schools were important and sharing her experience: “There was a counsellor at Berkshire Park. She used to bring her dog every day. And when kids did well, they would get time with the dog outside.” Nancy explained that she was also encouraged to bring her dog to school. She felt that animals were important because, “it’s just an example for them to see a caring relationship, how to care for something.” Interacting with a pet animal is recognized by many environmental educators as a way to experience caring for something from the natural world. This corresponds with Huddart and Naherniak’s (2005) findings that an animal in the classroom can promote caring for something beyond oneself, empathy for a creature from the natural world, and observation skills. They note that often the non-judgmental presence of an animal helps relieve stress and motivate students. They link their ideas to Wilson’s (1984) theory of biophilia which links the development of human thought, language and socialization to relationships with nature, particularly with animals.

### *Wonder and Awe*

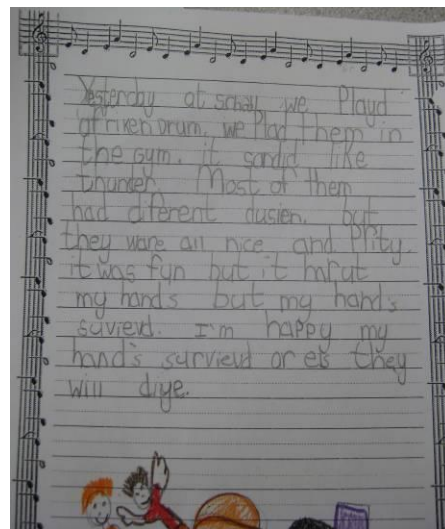
Another sub-theme of environment and child literacy was creating the idea of what we called moments of wonder and awe. Susan felt that by helping to draw out a sense of wonder and beauty, the arts can help make connections between an environmental experience and other related topics. She told us, “I think that’s an important point. And that’s something that I think, in my operations, we’re going through a bit of a change and trying to focus more on that ourselves.” They are looking for what she called the “so what factor.” There is a growing recognition of the arts as a way to create transformative experiences, in addition to teaching valuable information about the environment. As Susan shared her own photographs later on, she talked about how her organization has set up opportunities to extend learning through drawing and poetry as response activities. This corresponds to Sobel’s (1996) assertion that a foundation

for learning begin with the aesthetics of learning. He writes of a refocusing of environmental education from premature abstract lessons on distant environmental crisis such as the loss of Brazilian rainforest to a concrete and local focus. His suggestion is to begin with developing empathy for the local environment by taking time to explore, play and respond through the arts before moving to facts and social action in higher grades. He writes of cultivating a sense of connectedness with nature for children through stories, songs, drama, dance, drama and writing as part of their exploration of the natural world around them. This is also reminiscent of Carson's (1998) *The Sense of Wonder*, in which she writes of the joys of discovering nature with a young child through exploration.

However, using embodied learning and the arts to create a connection with nature is not the final goal for Susan and those with similar views. The goal is to move from connection to moral choices and the desire to learn more through other aspects of learning. This idea, that experiences connected with aesthetics can lead to moral choices and actions, is described by Brady (2005) who argues that the aesthetic is part of practical and intellectual experience, that aesthetics are not just for the art museum or concert hall, but, "permeate(s) human practice, from engagement with everyday environments, to enjoying wild places, to making moral choices, to scientific study of nature." Part of her argument rests on the suggestions of environmental philosophers, such as Holmes Rolston III and Aldo Leopold, that, "developing a relationship with nature through aesthetic experiences – that is, first hand, multi-sensory, emotional and imaginative engagement – can encourage or contribute to a moral attitude toward nature" (Brady, 2005). This provides a spring-board to the next major area of our discussions: The aesthetic.

## Aesthetic and Imaginative Experiences

In addition to nature, the arts as a key form of aesthetic experience were seen to be something that could make a contribution to enriching and augmenting a new vision of child literacy practice. Nancy began with a focus on artists. She talked about how encounters with artists may be brief or infrequent, but the connections that are made often had a lasting impact on children's developing literacy. She argued that participating together in the arts brings joy to learning and can help create connections among students. Greene (1995) concurs, suggesting the arts can create opportunities for learning about each other's cultures and experiences. Nancy illustrated the links between shared cultural experiences through the arts and developing child literacy with the story of how drummer Milton Randal once visited her school. He gave an interactive presentation that included students joining him in drumming and dancing. Below are some of the photographs she brought of students drumming together and of a long line of students dancing together, hands on each other's shoulders connecting them and huge smiles on their faces.



Following the drumming, she had the children brainstorm with her about their experiences and create writings that could express their own experiences with drumming and dancing. She noted

how their excitement and feelings that came from the artistic actually enhanced the following writing activity in ways she had not experienced before. She felt it was an entirely different learning experience from her previous ones of simply asking young students to write about a topic. The arts connection gave them more experiences they could bring to their writing and actually, built their vocabulary. As group, we came up with the idea of ‘language as rhythm’:

body  
music  
poetry  
communication  
put your hands in the air  
metaphor  
dancing  
feeling  
soul

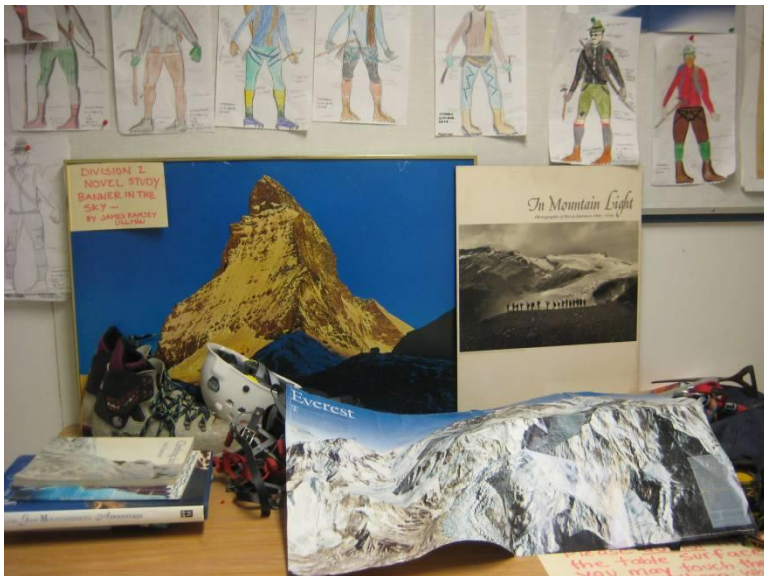


Nancy, who has a post-baccalaureate diploma in art education, also shared some experiences at her school where there was a longer-term integration of the arts in content areas. She described how an artist was hired to teach an active ecology unit using voice. “I’m using that example because its science and the science example worked.” The unit included about eight lessons, a trip to the aquarium to observe creatures, creating soundscapes and writing poetry. Aside from this example, which included a trip to the aquarium, Nancy acknowledged a lack of community

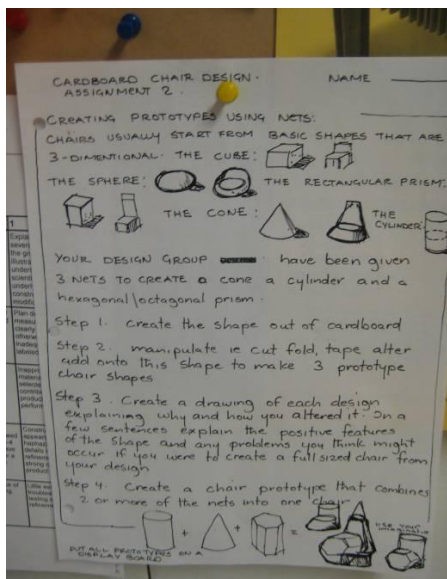
involvement overall, “We did actually go out into the community, but most of the stuff we’ve done; we haven’t gone that extra step.”

When people are teaching through the arts at Nancy’s school, she notices and tries to encourage them. She understands Greene’s (1995) assertion of the importance of friends looking together and moving together in an expanding space. As they combine warmth, dialogue and laughter, friends help each other fine-tune their ability to attend, imagine and create. The sense of engagement that comes from learning together, from co-construction of knowledge, emerges when groups are inspired to rigour and thoughtfulness in teaching and learning. The arts have the potential to reach us in ways that touch our deeper selves. When we experience that in a learning community, there is opportunity for supportive risk taking in learning, one of the keys to child literacy learning. Nancy describes the arts as a way of developing critical thinking or synthesizing information, “If you’re synthesizing information, you bring it together to create something new. So that’s where the art really embraces that.” In her choice of topic to share with us, Nancy is valuing the arts in service to science.

But there are other important examples of aesthetic experiences and one was about weaving literacy, aesthetics and sports. An intermediate teacher at Nancy’s school added aesthetic elements to a novel study about mountain climbing.



A math project combines geometry with literacy, drawing and sculpture as students take on a design challenge. This project approximates a real design challenge and demonstrates how many skills are needed at once. Nancy's photographs of the chair design project show the planning and some of the final products.



However, just because the arts are integrated, doesn't automatically raise the level of thinking and performance the way Greene (1995) suggests. Rina, the artist and art educator, perhaps not

surprisingly, chose a photograph of a child holding a diorama made with modeling clay and a box.



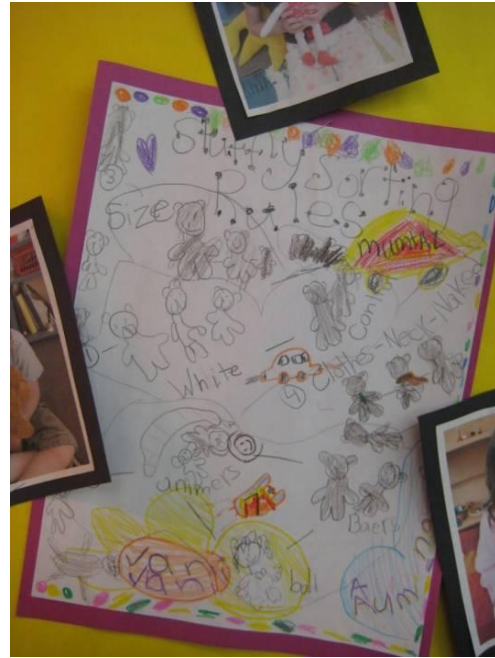
She pointed out how the art portion of the model was under-developed and could not identify any evidence of use of any of the principles of design, or much evidence of care in construction. Her emotion was evident as she shared that, in her experience; children are very quick to say “I’m done!” They don’t take the time to develop their work which therefore does not offer the viewer a rich experience.” She was frustrated by what she described as increasingly short attention spans but also, at the lack of time and commitment that needs to be put into art. She identified these as key to not only learning art, but also, children’s literacy learning.

The undervaluing of the arts for their own sake, combined with a curricular pressure to move quickly from topic to topic, may also contribute to the lack of artistic development that Rina described. Greene (1995) states that curriculum has been narrowed to that which is manageable, predictable, and measureable. She sees this directing of young minds as contributing to a passive reception of mass media messages promoting ideals such as consumerism and laments this direction curriculum is taking to develop young people as human

resources. In opposition, Greene (1995) asserts that arts education can lead to participatory encounters with various art forms which may help capture a sense of spontaneity, foster imagination, and create a small space for young people to find hope for themselves. However, she points out that this will not happen without arts instruction intended to help learners attend to elements and principles of art forms so they learn to engage and interpret meaning for themselves. As Cope and Kalantzis (2000) point out, in a time when we are facing problems with culture, economy and environment, young people need to learn how to understand the world around them and feel a sense of empowerment to address their concerns.

### *Play and Imagination*

Another key aspect of aesthetic experience in relation to child literacy raised by the participants was around what they called play and imagination. I began the conversation, arguing that “It’s that sense of play...like if you said, you must plant this tree and the roots must go this way, but when my kids were out tree planting we were in little groups of two and they were laughing and joking in their little groups. It’s that social part of play that goes along with it.” This prompted Beth to recall her own experiences with play – in particular puppets - in her story-time sessions with children: “Puppets are amazing. When my puppet comes out I like to see their faces. If I said it, I wish I had a picture of their faces.” Beth was able to see strong connections between the children at story-time and the puppets that she uses. There is something about a puppet that strongly appeals to children’s imagination and emotions.



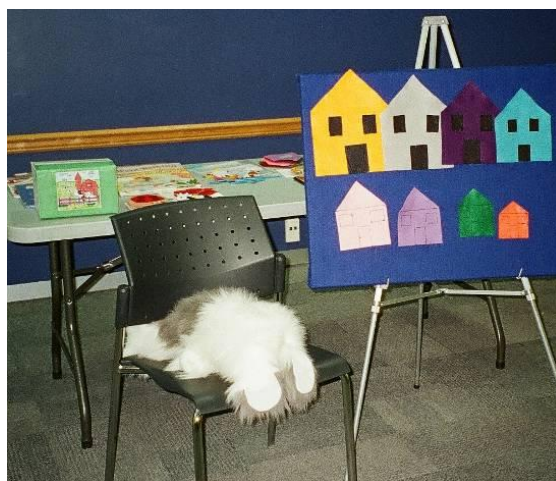
A teacher at Nancy's school uses stuffed animals for sorting into categories in math.

Scholars argue there are potential links between affective dimensions of learning such as desire to learn, positive attitudes, and retention of material, when learning is structured through playful, aesthetic experiences (Parrish 2006, Uhrmacher 2009). I will discuss this further in the next chapter.

### Cultural Sites and Community Engagement

Although community engagement has been alluded to, the idea of cultural sites as key catalysts for contemporary child literacy emerged as a major theme. Beth is a public librarian and she moved us along the 'connections' axis by talking about community educators and the library as a site of literacy. She argued that brief interactions with/in community could have lasting influences on children in terms of building stronger community connections and that community educators played a key role in their lives. Beth spoke of her storytelling work with children and how many months or years later, she had been approached by "people (grown children) who

would say: “Do you remember me? (I don’t obviously) but they remember one story that I read. It takes me by surprise.”



Beth went on to describe the other connections she builds with library patrons as, “the biggest thing we do. We reach out to people and make that connection. I see it over and over again, even if I can’t find what they want. I smile and greet them. I don’t know people by name, but I make a connection. With our writing campaign (protesting cuts to library opening hours) people flocked in.” What Beth is showing here is that although community educators are seldom seen as relevant in the formal discourse of curriculum and school learning, as noted in Chapter Two, they do have an impact on children.

Beth also described the role of teachers, when bringing their classes of students to the library, in developing a sense of connection to the library, with her but also, in expanding the concept of ‘literacy’ as something that goes on beyond the school. The public library is where reading and learning also happen and it is a site of educators who can work with children. When children feel a sense of welcome and connection to the library and the children’s librarian, they are more likely to revisit the library and access the materials that can help them enjoy reading, become more literate, and feel connected to their communities.

thoughtful  
feeling  
process  
behind the scenes  
caring  
connecting  
look  
touch  
respect  
furniture



Whether it is a classroom, library, or park, or any other space, participants agreed that the way the space is set up and how the facilitators of the space interact with people influences how people feel and act in the space. If feeling connected, comfortable and inspired is important to being open to take the risks involved in literacy learning, the organization of space and facilitators have an important affect on these aspects of literacy learning. When participants looked at this grouping of words to summarize with a title, Nancy began the discussion by saying, “We talked about the library being a welcoming space and how our environment and our space really reflects how we feel.” The library was an interesting space for our focus group

meetings. We had personal experiences there with our focus group meetings plus we viewed the library through Beth's photographs. Her office overflows with literacy teaching materials, from books, to games, to puppets and other tools. Her love for literacy and children is evident. It is clear that Beth spends significant time behind the scenes preparing literacy experiences for her audience. Participants felt both comfortable in and intrigued by her office space.



The children's section of the library is equally appealing. Beth gave us evidence of how welcoming the library space was to children, "When they come in, off come the shoes, off come the coats, they slide all over the floor." The stacks of books are attractively labelled and there are a variety of places to sit and work, or sit and read, including a computer station. The library collection includes books, audio books, CD's and DVD's for a variety of literacy experiences.



Beth was familiar with how children interact in the library, but wondered how that might connect when community educators enter schools and classrooms; a more formal site for literacy instruction. Susan began to speak to her experiences going to schools, “Walking into the schools, ‘cause I’m not working in the schools, over the years I’ve had fairly limited experience, going into a school to do a presentation or maybe just dropping things off at the office and you can feel, I love the feel, most schools, you know, they’re different and different classrooms are certainly different, but yeah that feeling of walking into the school. There’s something that brings you back to your own childhood, but it’s also...it’s such a hub of the community, you know. I love walking into schools.” Her comment suggests that Susan had a good childhood experience at school and this is reflected in her current experiences. She also views schools as interactive with the community, perhaps because Susan herself is entering them as a community member rather than as a student or parent.

Each classroom reflects the culture of the school and the philosophy of the teacher. Parents, as community members, are welcomed in varying degrees. Nancy works with a teacher at her school who organizes her room into a variety of meeting, working and playing spaces for

small groups with one larger meeting area for whole class work. This non-traditional organization of a classroom allows for a different type of instruction and exploration. Nancy appreciates this teachers' emphasis on thinking while learning to read and write as well as her inclusion of art as part of the curriculum. The children's work on display throughout the classroom reflects this emphasis. This classroom space welcomes both children and adults to enter and explore. It is one way of extending the space of the school to the community, to begin to build a bridge between home and school literacies. Mornings, parents and other caregivers are welcomed into this primary class to spend time with their children.



Beth thought about the effect of space another way, rather than welcoming, a space can be uninviting. She mused, “Don’t you find sometimes you walk in somewhere and you don’t even know the place and you just know. You have no idea who the people are or what’s gone on or anything but you pick up right away that this is not where I want to be.” If we expect children to open their minds to literacy learning and participate freely, whatever the space is, we want them to feel welcome and comfortable rather than excluded or withdrawn.

Susan agreed that we want children to feel at home when they are learning about literacy, but also suggested that we may need to teach them that feeling at home is more than feeling comfortable. While she wants children to feel at home and play in nature, there is a tension in

park spaces that Susan is aware of, “There’s a balance between respecting it and not destroying it right? You don’t want them to destroy it but you want them to feel it’s a place they can feel comfortable and yeah we struggle with that in parks, because the natural areas specifically are preserved to protect them in their natural state. So in the past, especially, we didn’t want people to go into nature and we still sort of don’t, but a little bit we do, you know.” The challenge is developing a sense of respect for the space or environment. This applies in any literacy learning environment.

### Challenges to Expanded Notions of Child Literacy

Literacy development begins with oral language developed through shared, common experiences (Turner & Kim, 2005). The participants argued that the importance of providing common concrete experiences in educational settings grows when diversity and/or poverty are present. Nancy described how poverty affects her students, “They don’t go anywhere. So taking them out on field trips, we need more money to do that. Back in the day, we did.” Nancy lamented that with school budget cuts, her options for taking new English language learners on community outings were now very limited. She acknowledged the power of these outings for her students in building their English language vocabulary. Poverty is an obstacle for families in terms of providing exposure to a variety of community based experiences, and the knowledge and vocabulary building that accompanies those experiences. This is because some families struggle to find time, money and energy beyond providing the basics. Other reasons are a lack of engagement with their new community, language barriers and different or negative educational experiences in previous settings.

*The Margins: Media, Technology and Popular Culture*

One challenge we identified to child literacy learning through the photographs we chose and our discussions around them was passive learning and its links to technology. The idea that technology and popular culture are replacing active play and engagement with people and the local environment is alarming to some (Laumann, 2006; Louv, 2008). Susan was concerned that common experiences are now rooted in technology such as television, rather than in outdoor community play and exploration. She wondered if television and movies are forming who we are. Beth reported that she sees too many children ‘zoned out’ on Face book in the library and cited the increasing incidence of diabetes among elementary aged children. She spoke about a conference she attended on early literacy learning that expressed concern with the effect of early technology use that might be affecting the development of young children’s brains. An uncritical engagement with popular media to the exclusion of other learning opportunities offering direct experiences is concerning.

This topic is complex and carries differing views as I noted in Chapter Two. My point here, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Six, is that technology has both potential and challenges for a variety of reasons. Therefore, it is not something that should be totally disregarded from child literacy experiences - for what of digital art and photography that we have used in this study? – but simply approached with caution and using creativity. The discussions in the focus group reflect our uncertainty around this topic.

The photographs in my set had limitations. In response to difficulties identifying a photograph that did not represent child literacy learning, Rina suggested,

Maybe if there were pictures of kids watching TV shows, but maybe not. And you know what’s interesting, without catching a bus into the city, there’s all sorts of stuff that provides common experience, you know...I know when my kids were in school it was always, the French projects were about TV shows and we didn’t

have a TV so they'd go to school and say they couldn't do the homework. (laughing) It was always French about TV shows [referring to a unit designed to teach French as a Second Language that is based on television programs]. No common experience.

Several of us then shared our experiences of how lack of knowledge of popular media left significant cultural gaps. The importance attached to the impact of these gaps ranged, with most of us finding it insignificant, while they were highly significant to Nancy's husband as a new immigrant. Knowing popular culture became an important goal for him as a person and as an artist. Nancy shared her son's twenty-fourth birthday request, "He wanted us to make a compilation of movies or TV shows or something that formed who we are today that he could pass on to his children. Like a legacy." Her son recognized the strong role popular media had in shaping his parents identities. Having established the significant cultural impact of popular media, Rina stated, "That is interesting. Because I think, yeah, I think it's a whole area of our literacy that maybe needs to be addressed along with the so-called "acceptable" stuff."

Kersten (2007) prompts us to consider the relationship of school to the life and development of children out of school. Children are engaged with a wide variety of texts beyond books. The skill set for literacy has changed (Ferreiro, 2003). Texts are portable, interactive and can include visual, spatial and auditory elements as well as linguistic elements. Many of these new elements are common to the arts (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). Rather than neglecting popular forms of texts, literacy education could teach children how to draw on various designs of meaning and to add something of themselves as well, thus creating potential for change.

One area considered outside the boundaries of acceptable art and literacy is graffiti. Often graffiti is composed of visual and textual elements and is used to convey counter culture messages. One of the photographs in the collection we were working with is of students that Rina worked with facilitating an interactive, publically created mural at an environmental educator's conference

during public hours at Science World. The mural project was designed to provide an opportunity for conference attendees and other Science World patrons to communicate what was important to them about the natural environment. Elements of protest were included. The mural demonstrates Rina's interest in graffiti as a legitimate art form and the possibility for this type of text to be considered as social action.



Students presenting the mural at the end of the environmental educator's conference

### *The Challenges of Educational Goals and Structures*

Many of the participants felt that a narrowing focus for education meant that only certain skills were being taught – that learning was increasingly segregated and fragmented - and many questioned why this would be. The validity of particular forms of literacy research were questioned and some expressed the opinion that there is money available, but it is not being directed properly. Rina described how when she worked as a visiting artist developing a mural with a school, there were big expectations for combining a lot of curriculum into the experience. This raises the question of what our educational goals are. Is it more important to cover, or hit on, many curricular outcomes briefly, or to focus on developing understanding and fluency with topics? Susan states, “we hear a lot from teachers about their need to hit on all the curriculum

and if we can't for that hour or hour and a half that we have with them out in the park planting and physically doing the work, if we can't teach them the benefits of trees and what does ecology mean and all of the other things, they can't do it." The pressure to teach curriculum can be a barrier for teachers wanting to engage students in aesthetic experiences or in integrating the arts.

Linked to the above is the issue of scheduling in schools. With the tight curriculum and need to 'get through' the information so students can pass the test, there are real difficulties for teachers to fit in real life experiences, such as participating in developing and creating art murals to planting trees. This of course leads to the issue of academic pressure to get through, as noted above, the curriculum.

### A Challenge

Something very interesting happened at the end of the study which gave me pause for thought. At the conclusion of the second focus group, I asked the participants to rank the themes we had identified in order of importance. After much discussion the participants rejected this type of hierarchical ranking in favour of a more circular organization. They felt each theme was equally important, legitimate and valid to a contemporary view of children's literacy learning and each impacted the other.

My aim in ranking the themes was to create a priority list for literacy development. The idea of ranking is opposed to the rest of the study, but possibly came from both a desire to determine importance and from years of training in this type of 'scientific' thought throughout my own education. The relief felt by all of us when ranking was rejected is an example of the

amount of hidden tension that exists due to an overemphasis on certain types of thinking in our current society.

While we were attempting to numerically rank the themes, Nancy asked, “Why do these have to be in numbers? I’m having a hard time, because then integration gets like off to the side and integration, it’s all about integration.” Aside from being a turning point in our discussion about the role of ranking, Nancy’s comment brought us back to the need to create a meaningful context for children to develop literacy. When children are unable to see a purpose for reading and writing, motivation is low. Set in a meaningful group context, students may mentor each other and build each other’s understanding.

The participants all agreed there may simply be too much pressure. This, they felt, led to increasing demands for homework at home which would take up parents’ valuable time, making them unable to participate in outside or arts-based activities with their children. Beth shared that in the summer, when children could be outside playing, all of the math books were checked out, and parents were asking for DVD’s to help their children with reading. Beth argued, however, that good literature encourages children’s imagination and creativity, including what she called “the skill of visualization.” She concluded by arguing that: “as educators we do set the agenda and that if we felt others weren’t listening it did not mean they can’t listen. What she is calling for here is for teachers to become more ‘engaged’ politically as well as in the decision-making in schools. Indeed, one could argue that if good child literacy is about children’s active engagement, then good child literacy would also mean teachers actively engaging in learning and engagement activities that could at least challenge the existing neo-liberal paradigm encroaching upon and strangling creativity and the imagination.

Participants seemed to enjoy the research process and were intrigued by the idea of sharing our experiences and working together as educators. Nancy commented that it was important to be reminded of the learning experiences she values as an educator, as they are quickly lost within the stream of information and workshops about literacy teaching and learning brought to teachers by the school district. Susan and Beth were interested in hearing how their practices compared with ours and how many of our values in education were similar. We did not choose to meet a third time due to the constraints of work and other commitments, underlining both the value and the difficulty of creating partnerships between schools and community organizations beyond informal, personal connections.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ART EXHIBIT, OPENING RECEPTION, COMMENTS BOOK, INTERVIEWS

I haven't had a chance to talk with you and truly understand the intention behind this project. My perspective seems to be revolved around the five senses. As a mother of two, I've learned that my children learn literacy through sight, touch, and using the hands on approach. All your photo's involve more than sitting and reading books. Its been great seeing your photos...it reminded me of my children's learning curve. Nice for others to have an opportunity to learn all avenues of literacy. Thanks for the treats, my sons appreciative too! SB (written in the comments book)

The above quotation is an excellent example of the critical responses that were a goal of this arts-based research project: to broaden the conversation about child literacy by engaging community members in dialogue and reflection through a public exhibition. This element of the research project aimed to bring the broader conception of children's literacy learning as envisioned through the focus groups to the public and to uncover reactions. One of the advantages of arts-based research and accompanying exhibits or performances is the potential to make issues normally reserved for professionals in a field more accessible to the public in order to mobilize and disseminate knowledge more widely (Weber, 2008). One of the criticisms of arts based research is that it is more open to interpretation than text based research. Responses to the exhibit suggest that the ideas represented through photography and text by the focus group carried the intended messages as well as leaving room to include participants' own thoughts.

In this chapter, I begin by briefly describing the process of the art exhibition, drawing attention to some of the ways it 'captured' people's attention but also, discussing some of the things I might have changed. This is followed by a discussion of an expanded view of child literacy in four thematic areas that emerged from the in depth interviews I did with audience members as well as comments from the comments book: The learning community; transmission versus transformation; arts and child literacy; and nature and aesthetic learning.

*Art Exhibit: Selection and Process*

The art exhibit consisted of photographs taken by the focus group participants, including myself, accompanied by a number of words we had generated in the focus groups. From this data set, I selected photographs that most creatively represented each of the themes identified in the second focus group. We did not select these as a group simply because the participants were unable to meet for another focus group session.

Each of the themes was represented by approximately five photographs. The photographs were printed as 8x10"s. They were framed in plain black 13 x 16" frames with white matting, a common way to display photographs as 'art'. The title and associated words for each theme were arranged on a piece of paper that was framed the same way as the photographs. I chose this format because the exhibit was planned to be at eye level and I wanted a variety of photographs to represent each theme or concept, however, this was not the final product and I will return to this shortly.

The photographs were exhibited in the children's area of the Newton Branch of the Surrey Public Library. As one characteristic of participatory arts-based research is ongoing and varied types of collaboration with participants (Leavy, 2009), I worked with one library staff person with an art photography background to curate the exhibition. Originally, Beth, the librarian, and I had spoken of using the book display shelves spread throughout the children's section of the library, which are about five feet tall, allowing the exhibit to be more or less at eye level for both adults and children and form an integral part of the library space. However, when I arrived with the photographs the curator and librarian informed this would no longer be suitable for the library as the frames included glass, which could break if, knocked down and the space was needed for other library displays. Based on this, the photographs were hung from a formal

display rail about three metres high, surrounding the exterior walls of the children's section. Although I was at first reticent about this change, it did result in a major strength. If the exhibit had been on the display boards as I had envisioned it would have remained for only a brief time as it would have interfered with the workings of the library. Where it was now placed, above the work-a-day life of the library, meant it was able to remain although the study has ended. This means people entering the library still have the opportunity to reflect on the photographs and their meaning.

Another change I would have made, due to the change in spacing, would have been to have fewer photographs in a larger format. This would have had a more significant impact in the space because the larger images would be more eye-catching and clearer. Another possibility to consider for future exhibitions is to combine photographs and text as one image to represent each theme. Currently, the theme words are framed separately in a more poetic list form. Combining these words into the images would still leave room for the viewer to interpret the art based on their own knowledge and experiences, but possibly would strengthen the connections between the images and ideas

### *Opening Reception*

The opening reception was arranged with Beth to fit her schedule and the children's library schedule. It was held on Thursday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010 from 3:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. This time was effective for involving children and parents visiting the library to participate in the opening, but was a limiting factor for some adults wishing to attend who worked until after five. Once the date and time were set, I emailed a flyer advertising the opening to my contacts and invited the focus group participants to do the same. Beth and I were the only active focus group participants able to attend because the other focus group members had other commitments to

work and family. This underscores one of the difficulties of inter-agency collaboration – already full schedules leave little time for sharing and inspiring each other.

The exhibition team curated the exhibition during library hours, which really generated interest amongst the library patrons. Also, in the middle of the children's section of the library we had a table with a tablecloth, flowers and refreshments. It is not often a party-like atmosphere appears in the middle of a library! In fact, the 'code of silence' that shrouds libraries is often an inhibiting factor in terms of it becoming a space for dialogue and creative collective engagement (Lerner, 2009). By simply creating this livelier exhibition in a library, we were already suggesting an expansion of the concept of 'literacy' from a quiet solitary process to one of celebration and collectivity. Responding to the active interest of patrons, we took time to carefully explain both what we were doing and the research project. Based on this, a number of people chose to participate in the opening of the exhibit who may not have had they not been engaged by us through our artistic curation endeavours. This is an example of what scholars see as the broader educational outreach and component research data through a public exhibition can have (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008).

As people approached I offered refreshments and was careful not to imply that in order to enjoy the refreshments they would have to participate. Although I believe the refreshments were an initial attraction, I made people realize their participation in the opening would be valued and this had an impact. In addition, whether participants think of their own education or to children's schooling, everyone has had an experience with some type of education, making it a common topic.

Signs in the middle of the refreshment table informed viewers about the research component of the exhibition, letting them know they were consenting to be involved if they

agreed to be interviewed and/or add something to the comments book which was also on the table. Due to the public nature of the opening - from set-up to wrap-up - I interacted with people continually. While it was exciting and positive to have so much interest, the drawback was the lack of time to note observations photographically or to take detailed notes, although I did observe various interactions. One thing I definitely noted was how socio-economically and culturally diverse the participants were, reflecting the complex demographics of the Newton community. Participants who were actually invited, as noted in Chapter Three, were potentially from a higher socio-economic group and were generally Caucasian, as were all of the focus group participants. However, people who spontaneously took part appeared to be of varying racial and socioeconomic groups. Having participants from a variety of backgrounds may contribute to the validity of the study because the opinions and ideas belong to more than a single dominant group. I also consider it important because one of my aims is to create this broader view of child literacy learning that embraces diversity.

#### *Comments Book*

The comments book was a 6 ½ x9” brown faux leather journal with cream lined pages. It was left open on the table with pens and a sign explaining implicit consent, as discussed above and in Chapter Three, nearby. As I engaged in conversation with people, I invited them to write a comment in the book if they wished. Seventeen participants chose to write a comment. Judging by the printing, three of the participants who wrote comments were children. Most of the comments included positive recognition of the photographs as works of art. A few focused solely on the artistic value of the photographs whilst others on the ideas coming through in the exhibit. Below, I have organized and discuss the comments into themes that, as noted in Chapter Three, had come from my analysis.

### *Interviews*

I interviewed in depth four people who attended the exhibit opening. The semi-structured interviews took place off-site for the convenience of the interview participants. I began by asking participants to identify any images or themes they noticed in the exhibit. Next I asked participants if they noticed similarities or differences between their own ideas of child literacy and the ideas they identified in the exhibit. The discussion after that focused on participants' responses to the first questions. We explored their personal responses to the exhibit with participants often including references to their own literacy experiences. I ended the interviews by asking participants to give their opinion on the value of having an art exhibit about child literacy in the public library.

I use, as noted in Chapter three, initials to designate the interviewees. EP is an actor, artist, and an educator and program administrator with Learning Through the Arts (LTTA). LTTA is an organization that assists and teaches how educators can incorporate the arts to support learning in other academic disciplines. KG recently completed a Bachelor of Science in Nursing at a Surrey university college. ST is an aerospace engineer who completed most of his grade school in Malaysia, then finished his education in Canada. AC is a dancer and an experienced primary school teacher who has begun working with LTTA.

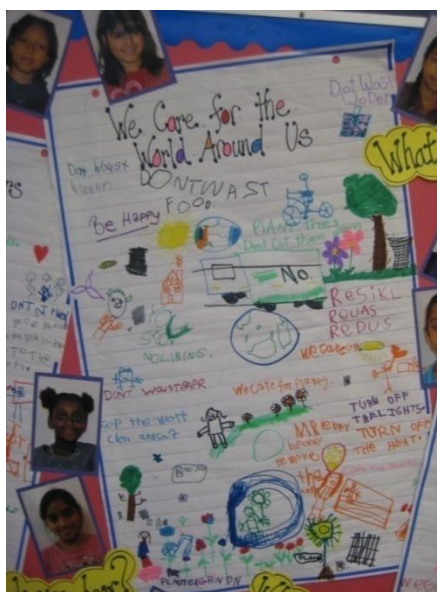
As one comment in the book noted, "Beautiful photos. Thanks for explaining your ideas – they certainly make sense. JT" This entry is an excellent platform for my discussion below of the four thematic areas that came out of the interviews.

### Discussion of the Four Themes

*The Learning Community: relationships, student agency, citizenship*

Well, things or ideas that came out (of the exhibition) were just the idea of literacy not just being about reading. It's something you do, not just because you have to and you don't get anything out of it. It's more just exploring ideas you've read and maybe applying that. KG

This comment, illustrative of a number of others, suggests that reading needs to be understood beyond what the teacher or education system might decide is important. Many suggested that what they saw in the photographs and words of the exhibition was a need for students to be able to make their own decisions about what they are reading, to think about what that means to them in context, then to use that knowledge appropriately and effectively. This photograph demonstrates personal involvement by primary students in caring for the environment.



The value of student agency in literacy and the world is was reflected in AC's entry in the comments book,

Clear, very nice pictures. Definitely a good example of the value of active learning – going beyond the program and outside the classroom. My LTTA experiences have given me many ideas for extending learning experiences. Keep up the good work.

Other interviewees at the exhibition understood the connections the photographs were trying to make between literacy and citizenship. ST described that like this:

Well, the theme that jumped out, it showed me that literacy is taught to kids and how they embrace what they learned from the teachers and how they will become future leaders, hopefully, in their undertakings.

Gee (1996) argues that all literacy instruction carries socio-political implications and with many crises looming, we need to be thoughtful about the kind of citizens and leaders we want to develop (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Orr, 1991).

Student agency, including an emphasis on thinking, decision-making and creating is key to child literacy learning as we discussed it in our focus group and explored through photography.



When choice is lacking, students may disengage when tasks are both difficult and unappealing as this comment illustrates so well:

Well, I always did a lot of reading in my spare time and I enjoyed it. It definitely made me a better reader because now I am able to just scan information and pull out what I like. I think with reading for me is that everybody will like reading if you find the right book for them. In school, I'm sorry, a lot of books are very boring, not very intriguing. They might have good messages and stuff but xxxx, he didn't ever like reading. But there's James Patterson, you know, entertaining reading, has some value in terms of learning how to read and how to like reading. KG

Students with diverse interests, backgrounds and abilities can be included by giving them choice, or excluded by demanding that they learn through teachers choices, reinforcing streaming and social structure as argued by Gee (1996). Rather than the teacher dictating student learning experiences, the teacher can thoughtfully create structures that allow, that require, student input. Here, KG explains her experiences with open and limiting project structures and reflects on the impact each one had on her,

Like the idea that you have to do a project around, I don't know, any kind of topic, right. You can just go wherever you want with it, present it any way you want. You can research it any way you want. You can just do your own thing. Not so structured, like a, b, c, d, e, f (laughs) to get your mark... It's harder. It's easier to just do a, b, c, d, e, or whatever, because it's just following steps. You're not really thinking at all for yourself. It's harder when you have to decide where you want to go with the project. Then you're actually thinking about it. KG

While there may be a perception that students designing their own projects requires less effort and rigour, her comments indicate that more effort is required. The key is in the structure given,

...this semester my teacher said, Okay we have to do journals. I know you hate journals, but this is going to be different. Then all she did was give us three categories, What happened, So what, and Now what. So you have guidelines, but you could just pick any experience you wanted to write about, and include anything in that, because it was a pretty base thing that she gave us. KG

The structure prompted students to go beyond recording an experience and their reactions to it to include analytical thought and transformation from those experiences. This structure mentors students into being active participants in their future workplaces, advocating for change, and perhaps achieving some social justice in their situations. This type of teaching and learning does require a significant change in thinking and doing education. Teachers, students, and other stakeholders need to recognize the effort required. This kind of transformation is not easy,

We did have a teaching and learning class, but even that class was so useless because the teacher of that class taught in the exact opposite way that she was trying to teach us. Don't get me started on that one. (laughs) KG

There is no way of knowing what lay behind this experience for the teacher, but students are quick to see what teachers actually value. While acknowledging changing teaching and learning conditions, this teacher continues to replicate existing socio-political norms (Gee, 1996). One of the aims of this research project was to begin community dialogue about literacy instruction and what possibilities there are for change, including stakeholders who aren't often included in educational policy dialogues. Positive responses about these ideas in the exhibit were written in the comments book, including this one by SY, "Great work! We need teachers like you! Awesome!" and this one by S, "Really good to do!"

*Transmission versus Transformation: old basics, new basics and learning structures*

As outlined in Chapter Two, there are two conceptions of basic skills – the "old basics" and the "new basics" (Lankshear, 1998). The old basics include skills such as decoding and encoding text, spelling, grammar, form, and genre. Traditionally, these have been delivered in the transmission form of teaching; the teacher transmits the facts to the students who absorb them (Freire, 1970). The old basics may be more familiar and easier for some community members and parents to understand. In the current competitive environment, many parents want to help their children be successful at school. Without a complete understanding of the new basics of literacy, this can lead to out of context practice of basic skills taking away from other types of valuable learning experiences and this was a theme addressed by a number of the interviewees and through the comments in the book. For example, KG argued,

I guess sometimes the parents are concerned about their children, not doing as well in school so they want them to catch up in the summer, that type of thing...Especially in the summer you know, when the kids are out of school.

That's when the workbooks just fly off the shelves. They want their kids to do these workbooks. They have them for spelling, math, everything, and...then you don't get a chance to play. Summertime is off. I mean, you can do learning, but I don't think it should be structured learning like that.

She recognizes the need for children to experience play and unstructured learning – to move away from 'transmitting' towards engagement - beliefs that are widely held by numerous literacy scholars (e.g. Elkind, 2007; Laumann, 2006; Louv, 2005; Cobb, 1993).

She went on to describe an alternative to workbooks in developing literacy,



...what we used to do is go camping and go on those stupid nature talks or whatever (laughs) but they were actually good. You got to do artwork there and they'd teach you about different animals and stuff. It was fun and it was still learning, but it's not like classroom learning.

ST spent most of his public school education years in Malaysia, where the education system was based on the transmission model. There, he noted, the teacher and the textbook were the authority. Responding to this photograph of a classroom set up for broader ideas of literacy learning, he commented,



Yes, we didn't have such nice interesting tools, so to speak, or stuff on the wall that they could see. Our classrooms were pretty much bare. There were desks, chalkboard and everything was all taught verbally from the textbook. We didn't have such tools or aids to enhance visuals or colours to bring out the creativity in us. We were taught pretty much straightforward from the textbook.

ST experienced a very traditional style education in Malaysia and more creative, analytical style of education for his last few years in Canada. He offers his perspective,

...seeing both worlds, the North American style allows you to be more creative in your thinking and gives freedom to kids to design, to create, to use their minds. Where I came from we were never really given that chance, to think for yourself. It was all mostly driven by learn everything from the textbook and this is how it is and it is what it is and there you go. So, coming here, I could actually use my mind to actually think and be creative. So I got a chance to see both worlds and I actually like the way the kids are allowed to think and create and that's where your literacy really helps us by having the freedom of your own thoughts and creativity. And of course with the help of the teacher.  
ST

His acknowledgement of the role of the teacher in teaching students to think and create is important. In the search for new ways of living in the face of looming environmental crises we need educators who will facilitate and allow students to develop creative thought and problem solving skills. One of the aims of this study is to open community dialogue so that parents and

children, among other community members, understand how to develop literate citizens who can understand local and global issues and advocate for social justice for themselves and others.

### *The Arts*

A third theme is, not surprisingly, literacy with/through the arts. AC describes how she was mentored, through collaboration with an artist, into embedding literacy skills into art or aesthetic experiences,

From my experience with Learning Through The Arts, that shows that you can have a starting point away from just the books. You know, start from the art perspective. There were quite a few things, they started with an object, or they started with some kind of an art project relating and then they sort of branched off from there into the literacy part of it. AC

Rather than the arts being an enrichment activity after the ‘real work’ is done, they can provide a context and a different approach to learning.



AC describes how a topic was approached through several arts disciplines as well as science, enriching learning:

I mean the art project that we did was related to our science that we were studying, so that shows that you can sort of combine the two things and learn from it. And then the drama that we did was also, you know, a different way of looking at things.

Students can use their bodies to interpret experiences and demonstrate their understanding as described by EP as she responds to an image in the exhibit,



And then there was some other images involving, there was one with, I can't remember exactly the composition of the photo itself, but it made me think of movement tying in with literacy as well, which is something that I'm quite passionate about - understanding ideas or sequences or stories and acting them out...Just the idea of doing things like silent pictures of a story, or a tableau, they use their bodies to show what they think a character looks like or feels like. They can create frozen silent pictures of scenes from a book to check for understanding in that way. EP

Students need to receive specific instruction in the skills and meta-languages of drama to be able to use their bodies to effectively interpret and display their understanding of a text, under-scoring the need for sound arts instruction alongside other studies (Eisner, 2004).

Using the arts as part of language and communication can be worthwhile and effective. This is acknowledged in M's entry about the exhibit in the comments book, "Intermingling of images and words is very effective way to represent the essence of libraries." and in KG's entry, "Great job! Beautiful pictures and phrases that make your ideas about literacy clear and easy to follow." There are other examples of inclusion of the arts in education, but there are also

challenges. KG describes her post secondary education experiences with this type of communication,

Well, the best ones (presentations in nursing classes) have just a ton of different ones, like song and pictures and text. So it depends I guess on how much effort you're willing to put in, because it's easy to just put a PowerPoint up with text, right. If you want to do a really good project and put a lot of effort in you have a poster, a PowerPoint, a song, and some people have done plays and stuff. Those are the really good projects that stand out and you remember the stuff more, right.

Notice the assumption here is that projects are done in digital format for sharing with the class, paper based text is not even mentioned. Her comments describe how students work together in groups as a learning community to benefit from each other's research and presentation skills. She goes on to describe the amount of effort required to put together a project using multiple forms of communication, also commenting on the increased effectiveness. As nurses in a very diverse community, they will need to communicate across many boundaries, often in stressful situations. Having a variety of communication strategies, especially for community education on health issues, was a focus for their learning. However, KG goes on to say she herself has faced limitations in developing arts based or multi-modal presentations,

But me personally, I've done a lot of text presentations (laughs) and I've done other ones too. It really depends on how much work you want to put into it. It's harder to think of all these other cool ways to share the information, for me at least. Some people, I think it comes easier to. (laughs) KG

A limiting factor for her is the time and effort required to develop variety in communication for a project. However, her comment about how difficult it was for her, and her perception that it was easier for others to develop this type of communication project is revealing. Perhaps lack of

skilled arts instruction and a focus on text has developed certain skills and left other important communication skills underdeveloped.

Greene argues the arts have a way of opening up communication and thinking (Greene, 1995). ST describes his experience using creativity and teamwork as an engineer,

I went through art school and everything. The creativity actually does help. It helps you to open up your mind to see things. So it's not only numbers and science and stuff, you need the certain parts of your brain to allow you to create, because when you sit down to design something, that's when you have to create something from nothing. There's some creativity involved because, when we do some designs we have no idea what it's going to be like or anything so that's where you brainstorm. You hash out, you create a whole bunch of ideas and thoughts and you hash it out with your peers and whatnot. And that's where all the wonderful creativity comes to the table and we are certainly, creativity does certainly play a big part in engineering and it will always be that. ST

ST acknowledges the role of creativity in opening up the mind to new possibilities alongside the need for numeracy and science. He also brings up the role of teamwork and communication in creating new solutions to problems. While he is referring to an engineering situation, this could also be applicable to arriving at new solutions to the social crises facing us.

### *Nature and Aesthetic Experience*

All of the photos represent the importance of literature. It is so great to see all of the ways teachers teach literature to young children. I love the photos. Curiosity, prepared environments, poetry, wonderful pictures. LD

This entry in the comments book demonstrates an understanding and appreciation for the links between aesthetic experiences and literacy as represented in the exhibit. These were also recognized by EP. With her colleagues at LTTA, she has working with an *Active Ecology* program stream designed to include a sense of place, knowledge of ecology, and social action. She responded to one photograph that connected with her work,



There was one image of a little girl. She was crouching down and she was surrounded by everything...about nature. I thought that was really striking imagery. I think that it tied in with the work that I've been doing recently. EP

Her choice of this photo connects with Kress (2000) in his opening up of what constitutes language where he describes how language is rooted in human perception through the senses. Irwin (2003) refers to this knowing through the senses as aesthetics, including attunement and wonder as part of her definition.

Some scholars suggest aesthetics is a sensory based way of coming to know (Eisner, 2004; Greene, 1995). The importance of recognizing and including aesthetics in literacy learning was acknowledged by EP in the comments book,

The photos remind me how important it is to think about literacy in a larger context than simply the printed word on the page. There are different types of literacy as well. Literacy in nature, literacy of the body, etc. I thought your images are very thought provoking. Great work.

When asked during the interview about her experiences with the types of literacy learning portrayed by the exhibit, KG replied,



I find I'm always looking at my early primary years for this and for that it was definitely more hands on pictures, or not even pictures, but like those 10 unit blocks for math and stuff, but as you get on in the later years it's just pretty much all text I would say, or way way more text and way way less pictures. KG

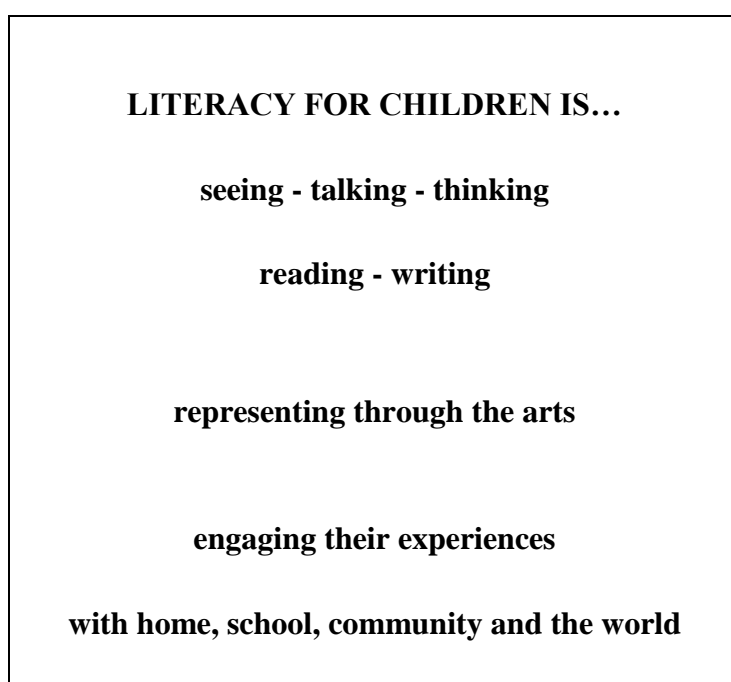
She recalls her primary experiences with this style of learning,

Yea, well, I think I had really good teachers who did a lot of stuff. Like different ways of stuff. Like you know, in elementary school, Mrs. Xxxx, we didn't go on a lot of field trips, but we did a lot of creative projects. The Pioneer one always sticks out in my mind. You had your own plot of land and you got to choose what you wanted to grow on it. You could pick the things you wanted to put in your covered wagon. You'd think, why would I want to pick these things over other things. KG

This project combined imagination, analytical thinking, and choice to allow students to connect with the experiences of early pioneers. A question to consider is why the emphasis on aesthetic experiences in learning seems to be more acceptable in primary years than in further years.

Others at the exhibition drew attention to importance of the concept of play as learning as it was illustrated through the photographs. Learning in the context of exploration or play can make space for students who may struggle with a particular skill to enter the state of flow as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). During the state of flow an individual is completely absorbed by the activity at hand. As stated in the comments book, "I loved that you included

board games. Literacy is a holistic learning experience and your photos really capture that.” EP described her experiences with writing, including the lasting impact her struggles with the basic skill of spelling have had on her self-concept as a writer and how different her experiences were once there was an element of play included. She noted how this text, framed and displayed as part of the art exhibit reminded her of another literacy experience,



There was one picture that just had words surrounding the word, literacy, and that made me think of a writing exercise that ties in with fridge magnet poetry and how accessible writing can be because sometimes there is a, in my experience or in my past experience, I had this idea that writing had to be right, you know, and I wouldn't see myself as able to write. And when I saw that picture I thought back to fridge poetry and how easily I could start thinking and working right away and how accessible it was...I've always been a terrible speller. I'm a bit self-conscious about my spelling. I'm very aware of my spelling.

Without focusing on the basic skill of spelling, EP was able to become absorbed with the task of creative writing and experience success. When students in a classroom have a

range of skill levels, it is important for each one to experience success with literacy tasks to feel that they belong.

I conclude this chapter with one comment that I feel sums up the overall reflections from the interviews and comments: “The photos are amazing. It has been an honour to be part of this project and to work with this great group of dedicated people. RW.” It speaks to a delight in photography, literature and collaboration. The evident pleasure many of the participants had in being part of the project, and of the art exhibit opening in particular, was for us a recognition of the value of the inclusion of the arts, aesthetic experience and nature in child literacy learning.

## CHAPTER SIX DISCUSSION

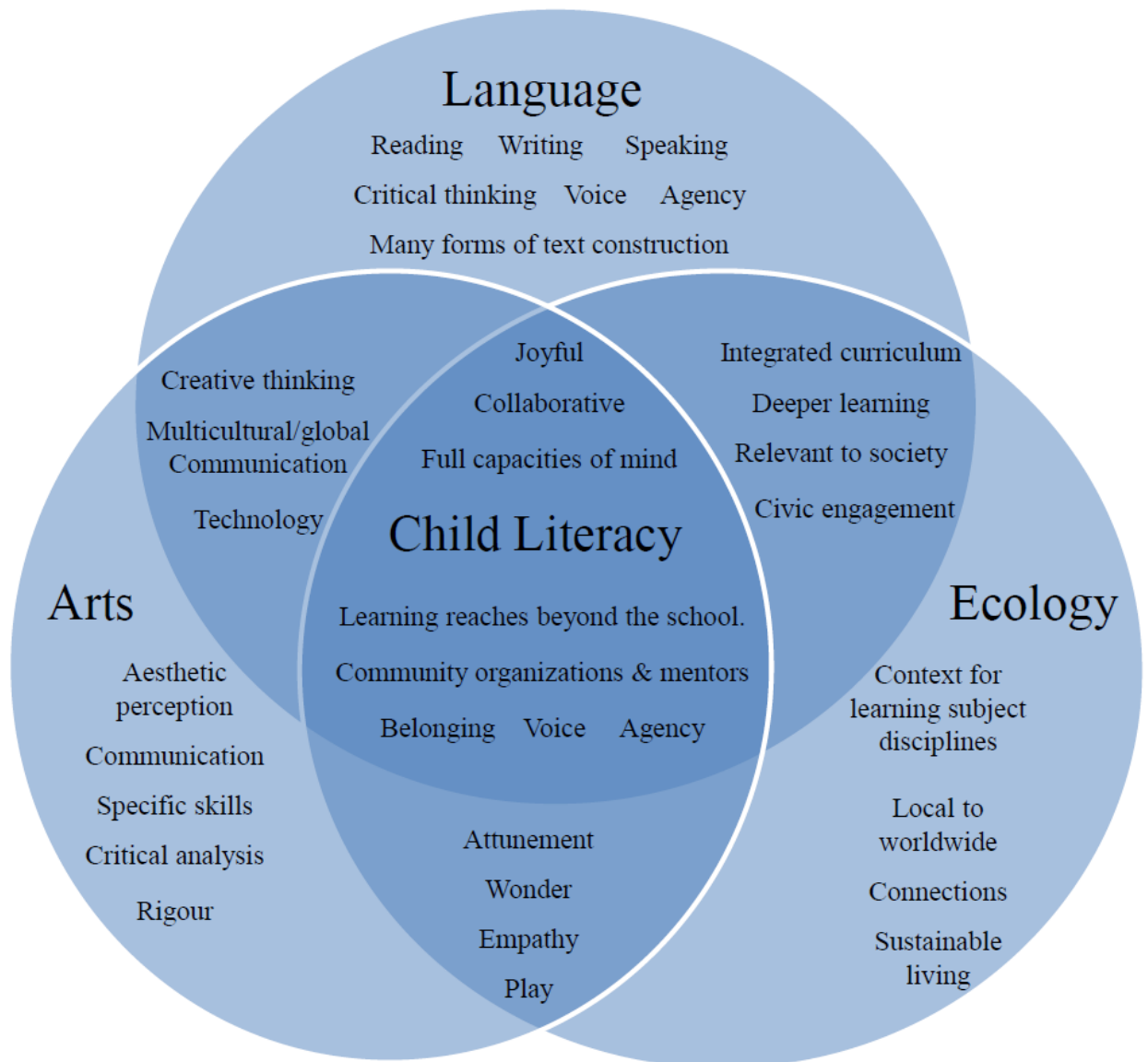
In this chapter I will discuss the results of the study in relation to my original questions and objectives as stated in Chapter One. As I outlined in the introduction, the study developed from questions I was asking in my own teaching practice. I was working with diverse learners in an inner city context in Surrey, British Columbia. By diverse, I mean culturally and racially diverse, as well as varying mental, physical, and emotional abilities, and interests. Many students were designated English Language Learners, meaning that English was an additional language they were learning. In this context, I began to search for ways to improve my literacy instruction, and my teaching overall so I could better meet the learning needs of the students in my classes. I met formally with literacy committees and informally with colleagues as we grappled with the questions around how we could improve literacy teaching and learning. At the same time, I was meeting with two other colleagues who were interested in environmental issues and learning as well as how to organize teaching and learning in a way that would be more active, engaging and promote deeper learning. At the time, we didn't see a connection between the two investigations. In fact, we were concerned that our hands-on, outdoor and community focused environmental program might detract from the children's literacy learning. In fact, this turned out to be a turning point in my literacy and teaching investigations. The three of us working on integrating environmental education into our teaching and learning for the year, realized that rather than detracting from children's literacy learning, our educational focus appeared to be improving it. I wanted to find out more. I wondered what other educators were experiencing.

Discussions connecting literacy with environmental education were difficult to find. There are conversations about combining environmental education and the arts, and some about combining literacy and the arts, but very little connecting environmental education and literacy.

As an artist myself, I had been incorporating the arts into my educational program and decided this was a key component to add to a wider study for reasons I have referred to earlier in the study and will describe later in this discussion. This study was designed to take these ideas to a wider audience to see how others understood children's literacy learning in the context of environmental education and the arts.

In this chapter, I take the results from the focus groups and the exhibition and discuss the understandings of child literacy articulated through these three major lenses. The first is Child Literacy Practices with attention to aspects of belonging and voice. What is the current social context for literacy and how does school literacy relate to that? The second is Arts and Culture. Cut-backs to arts and culture in schools and communities will have a devastating impact on the human creative potential. What are the best ways to re-engage our children in the arts and how is this relevant to child literacy learning? The final area is environmental destruction. There can be little doubt that the children of today will need to be the environmentalists of tomorrow. So what is an 'Ecologically Literate Citizen', and how do teachers prepare children for this in the context of child literacy education? I will begin with a graphic representation of the study results.

Figure One: The Study Results at a Glance



Each area of literacy explored has its own values and strengths. When any two areas are combined, they work together to develop aspects beyond what each contributes alone. When all three areas are combined, education is focused on developing the active citizens that democracy relies on and who can work together towards a sustainable and just society.

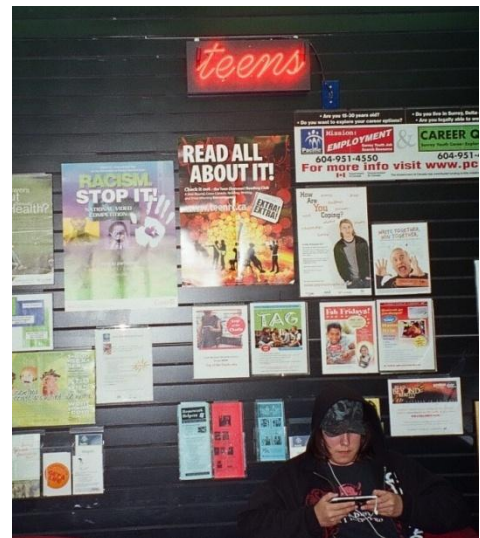
## Child Literacy Practices

The study results confirmed and extended my original thoughts about literacy being beyond what the education system decides is important. In each area of the study, educators and community members agreed that children's literacy learning can be enriched by going beyond programs, books, the classroom and school.

Situating literacy learning in children's experiences rather than solely in texts created for 'children anywhere' creates a meaningful context which children can connect with in a social setting (Healy, 2008; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1996). In Chapter Five, I described how photographs showed how children, in examining their own experiences critically, in collaboration with others, may feel a sense of belonging to a community and a sense of voice. This photograph from the art exhibit shows a guided critical interpretation and response by a primary class to images of British Columbia through the years. When children are invited to think critically and their responses are valued through activities such as this, they learn to think about what they are reading and what is around them and may realize they have a voice in the community.

Effective child literacy creates the opportunity to build bridges between, and acknowledges, children's literacy practices and experiences at home, in school, and in the community. By situating learning in various aspects of children's lives, respect for the literacy skills that children have and use in contexts other than school is conveyed (Ferreiro, 2003; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1996). The power of community educators to influence children's literacy learning was described by Beth in Chapter Four when she described how children remember their interactions with Beth at the library and recall them fondly for years. Beth valued

the bridges that are built between home, school, and community literacy learning when teachers bring their students to the library.



When literacy learning is structured for children to make thoughtful choices about learning and presenting their knowledge to others, children have the opportunity to learn basic skills of reading in a meaningful context as well as learning to think critically and follow through with decisions (Healy, 2008; Kress 2000; Greene, 1995). The emphasis is on skillful creativity rather than rote reproduction, as reported in Chapter Five. These photographs from the focus group show how children were guided to make observations and express their thinking by creating a variety of texts. In Chapter Five, KG's interview statements reflected both the increased difficulty of assignments when they are structured to include student choices and the reflective decision making and the increased sense of engagement, purpose and ownership that may occur. Children need appealing spaces which allow and encourage them to engage in play, thinking, and problem solving as part of literacy instruction. Providing a welcoming, safe setting for learning is the responsibility of the educator, no matter what the setting. As described in Chapter Four, focus groups participants appreciated the variety and volume of literacy teaching tools that filled Beth's office at the library to overflowing and the effort she made to create a

well laid out and welcoming space at the library. Both Beth and Susan argued that there is a need to teach children to respect shared learning spaces wherever they are. Other focus group participants agreed that teaching respect is an ongoing part of child literacy learning.



In a competitive environment, parents are familiar with the basics and may feel more secure when they see children confidently performing exercises with the basic skills of literacy. In Chapter Five, I reported how KG saw many parents taking home drill books for their children from the library and lamented the lost opportunities for children to engage in exploration, play and art which foster different types of responding and thinking than rote learning. The exhibition was designed to initiate community dialogue about children's literacy learning to gauge the response of people to the idea of a broader framework of children's literacy learning as represented by photographs. The response from children and parents, as reported in Chapter Five, was positive. Perhaps by building this bridge between what happens in school and other community sites when children are learning literacy and parent's experiences of child literacy learning, some fears can be addressed.

## Arts and Culture

The arts contribute to child literacy through aesthetic and imaginative experiences, both within and particularly outside, the classroom. Participation and learning in the arts touches children's deeper selves, bringing a sense of joy and building connections between diverse groups of children (Greene, 1995). Encounters with artists in schools or in the community have lasting impacts on children. In Chapter Four, Nancy described the joy and connections built when children participated in a drumming and dancing session with artist Milton Randall. She commented that their writing reflected the emotions and physical joy in a way that doesn't happen without this type of aesthetic experience. Beth and I both shared experiences with the focus group of how including imaginative and social play increased engagement in literacy by addressing the affective side of learning.



Play and imagination open ways of thinking and communicating (Greene, 1995). The arts provide access to different ways of thinking. In her interview, AC explained how she was using the arts as a starting point to learning in other subject disciplines because they provided a different context for learning and other ways of looking at things. Beth shared, as discussed in Chapter Four, experiences and photographs showing examples of how the arts had been integrated into other subject disciplines. She valued this type of integration because

participating and creating in the arts requires a higher level of thinking and the ability to synthesize information. In her interview, KG reported that combining different art forms in educational presentations was very effective as they were most engaging and retention of the material was higher. Participants' entries in the comments book noted that intermingling words and images was an effective method of presenting ideas. In the current time of global and multicultural communication, combining words with the arts can be an effective way to exchange information and ideas (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2000). KG also commented on the higher level of commitment required when incorporating the arts in presentations.

The arts require rigorous thought and application of skills to be engaging and effective (Greene, 1995). A lack of time and commitment by children engaging in arts and literacy activities was reported by participants. In the focus groups, Rina reported that children participating in art with her have little skill and short attention spans. They haven't developed the level of understanding in how to combine the elements and principles of the arts to create work that is visually appealing and meaningful to the viewer. Unless children develop competence in the arts, integrating the arts into other subjects will not lead to the kind of thinking and communicating that is possible. This lack of focus on the arts themselves reflects the current low position of the arts in schools and communities as there is a direction towards production of competent workers as the key social goal as opposed to fostering democratic, connected, creative and resilient communities.

Art is an important discipline in and of itself. Skilled and rigorous art instruction is needed (Greene, 1995, Eisner, 2002). In an interview, ST described how the arts are linked to creative thinking and problem solving, which is applied in engineering and other fields. The ability of the arts to open minds to new ways of looking at problems and solutions also suggests

that the arts are critical in developing active citizens who can envision new ways of being in a sustainable and vibrant community.

### Environmental Education

By spending time in their local place, children have the opportunity to develop relationships with nature, community mentors, and each other (Sobel, 2008, 1996). In the focus group discussions described in Chapter Four, Susan advocated for children creating a stronger connection to nature by spending time observing, engaging with, and responding to nature as a basis for developing a conservation ethic. She reported that time is a factor. Experiences in nature take time, and are built up over time. The role of community mentors is important. As Susan described in the focus groups, when children meet community educators, a long lasting impact or bond is formed for the child, which supports nature education in their lives. She made it clear that connections between formal and informal educators and home are necessary for children to begin to build connections between their experiences. As a formal educator, I rely on the experiences that Susan can arrange to base ecology and literacy instruction in. Susan relies on these connections to add ecology and literacy to the aesthetic experiences she arranges as an informal community educator.

Education in and about nature provides an opportunity for children to experience aesthetic learning. Children may develop a sense of attunement, of awe and wonder as they engage in aesthetic and experiential learning in nature (Carson, 1998; Sobel, 1996). Many participants recognized and commented on these ideas as shown in this photograph of a small child in nature.



This photograph is one that Susan brought to the focus group. She had responded to several other photographs of children engaging with nature and described how they are learning engaging in a sensory based way of coming to know and the importance of this in nature education. Aesthetic experiences build connections between the world, body and mind and include attunement, wonder and awe (Dewey, 1934). From this place, the ‘so-what’ factor, as Susan described it, emerges. She described how responding through the arts contributes to this deeper connection with nature. EP’s entry in the comments acknowledged the importance of the body and the arts as part of learning. In her interview, KG raised questions about the emphasis on aesthetic experiences in primary years that seems to disappear by the senior grades. It is as though education gradually removes the mind from the body and the world to focus solely on so-called rational thought. The result is that we appear to be losing acknowledgement of a big part of what makes us human – our ability to be creative and problem solve in community (Greene, 1995).

Aesthetic learning experiences touch us at a deeper level and can be identified by the depth at which they transform us. The end of an aesthetic experience in nature or with the arts does not end with this sense of wonder, awe and connectedness. A response of some kind that reflects how we have been transformed is necessary (Dewey, 1934). This is where the connecting relationships between educators and children themselves are important. In the focus groups, Susan stated that her end goal is for children to have the knowledge and desire to advocate for nature in their communities. As a community educator she relies on teachers and parents to add to the experiences she provides in nature to develop that fuller understanding and help children act for their community in positive ways.

#### A Return to My Story

The results of this study both confirmed the ideas I had when I began this story and extended them. The dialogue that emerged in the focus groups and the art exhibit opening, comments book and interviews affirmed the directions I was developing in my teaching practice. However, they also highlighted some of the tensions I feel working as part of an education system that is largely modeled on what Freire describes as the banking model. I work within the system, but I am also shaped by the system, as was highlighted when I suggested we rank the themes that emerged from the focus group in order of importance rather than quickly acknowledging their interconnectedness. To transform my teaching practice to the extent at which is suggested by the results of this study would be a dramatic and scary change. For myself, being engaged in continuing dialogue with like-minded educators is essential to transforming aspects not only of my teaching practice, but also of myself, one small piece at a time.

## CHAPTER SEVEN CONCLUSIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

This study focused on beginning to develop, with formal and non formal educators, a broader framework for child literacy. Chapter four shared the results of our focus group project that used photography as a way to develop a more inclusive framework for child literacy including the arts and a wide variety of text forms; how the community, including libraries and parks, could provide a context for child literacy learning. Chapter five expanded these ideas by bringing our work to the community and inviting them in to the conversation. Chapter six discussed the results of the study as a whole, particularly in relation to my own context and needs.

The purpose of this chapter is offer a few concluding remarks and talk about a way forward. I begin with a discussion of the significance of this study in terms of my own learning and development as a teacher, but also, in terms of the area of child literacy. What has this study brought to my own practice and how has it enlarged or contributed to my notion of child literacy? From there I move to a discussion of arts-based research, discussing what I feel this study has brought to that discourse but also, what I have learned about this methodology. I conclude this chapter with a discussion about school leadership and the notion of community-school partnerships. Although this was not a focus of the study, little will change in terms of expanding and re-focussing child literacy practice in schools unless the will to change is there. This makes leadership a critical component that must be addressed.

### Learning Literacy: The significance of this study

This study has increased my awareness of the multitude of aspects of child literacy practices. As I had been searching for ways to engage the diverse groups of children in my classes in literacy learning through a theme of environmental learning and through contact with many types of experiences and mentors in school and in the community settings, I found I was only beginning to learn about child literacy, only touching the tip of the proverbial child literacy iceberg. As I investigated and trialled different ideas, I found that many of them did not sufficiently engage the children in my classes and raise their levels of literacy. Encountering thinkers such as Gee (1996) who situated literacy learning in social contexts changed and expanded how I think about and address issues of diverse learners in my classes. Creating a trusting connected literacy community and actively getting to know each other sets the stage for students to reflect their own experiences and lives through literacy and the arts (Greene, 1995). The arts have a role to play in establishing this kind of literacy learning environment, as does spending time outside the classroom connecting/learning about nature. By engaging in different places and activities, space is created for the diversity of talents and interests to take a leading role. Stepping out of the rigid hierarchical roles set up in schools by traditional educational practices makes room to recognize a range of strengths. The clarification about how and why literacy practices are changing from Lankshear and Knobel (2003), Cope and Kalantzis (2000), Healy (2008), Ferriero (2003) and others helped me understand the context of changing child literacy in an increasingly multicultural and global world. These authors reinforced my belief that children are intelligent in their own right. With appropriate instruction and learning structures, children are capable of critical and creative thinking and writing and representing, using a variety of tools, including the arts and technology. Such open structures can provide

opportunities for children to engage from the position they currently occupy, rather than requiring similar backgrounds and experiences to participate in literacy instruction and learning (Gee, 1996). As a teacher, I need to develop learning structures for children that support their literacy development and I need to teach the basic skills that children require to learn within these structures. By learning structures I mean the kind of structures described by KG as she told of the journal assignment that asked three basic questions to guide her experiences and reflections. The questions were broad enough to allow her to choose which area to focus on, but narrow enough to guide her thinking and include an aspect of transformation. The role of the teacher in this learning model has been described as that of a mentor or coach. Like any effective coach, as a teacher I need to be aware of each student as a whole person and know when and where to question and prod them in their literacy learning journey. This requires me to be attentive and present to each child.

The aspects of learning that I am seeking to bring to my students must also be established amongst my colleagues and I. Widening the dialogue about child literacy in relationship with educators in community, arts and nature education has provided valuable insights and support for me. This is important because, as the focus group participants noted, as educators we are continually being presented with ‘new and improved’ programs and teaching ideas to foster child literacy. Continuing the dialogue with other formal and informal educators, as well as in the community will be essential for my literacy teaching practice to stay focused on what we have identified as important. This includes taking time with others to build relationships in and with nature; to engage in the arts as part of the community; finding joy through play; and developing new connections and relationships. It is difficult or impossible to teach something that is not part of your own practice. This was illustrated by KG in chapter five as she spoke of the instructor

who used traditional educational methods to deliver a class on alternate teaching and learning methods. Students were able to go through the motions for their presentations, but were very aware, and frustrated by the fact, that the instructor did not use the very methods she was teaching. We have no way of knowing what was behind this teacher's practice, but there were likely many factors influencing her teaching.

I have a greater understanding of the many factors underlying educational practices and how they impact me as an educator. Rather than seeing myself as a single teacher, or part of a group of teachers, or part of a school or district initiative or community, I have a sense of the broader educational and social contexts of my practice. I can take steps to change my own practice, but dialogue and/or engagement at a different or more political level is necessary to affect the kind of change many believe must happen for effective child literacy education to occur.

#### Arts-based Research: Contributing to the discourse

This study has added evidence that arts-based research is an effective method for investigating questions that include depth and diversity. Using photography as a primary method of attending, exploring and communicating our ideas was successful (McNiff, 2009), as the focus group discussions and exhibit analysis demonstrated. Throughout the study, the arts offered a way to spark dialogue, build coalitions, and engage non-educators in discussions about a framework for child literacy that include the arts and nature education (Leavy, 2009). The ability of arts-based research to have shared ownership and be based in the community as described in Denzin and Lincoln (2000) was also borne out by this study through the focus groups and the art exhibit opening. The art exhibit opening was a joyful lively event that brought together diverse

participants to dialogue about child literacy, the arts and nature education and, in my view, was a highlight of this arts-based study.

Personally, through designing and carrying out this study, I have learned how rigorous the process of arts-based research is to be effective and how engaging and joyful participating in it can be. As an artist and an educator I am familiar with the power of the arts to open discussions and thinking in ways that don't necessarily happen in other subject disciplines. However, to experience the arts combined with research brought me to a new level of understanding regarding the power of the arts and analytical/reflective thinking. I also gained a new appreciation for the power of informal artists, particularly when combined with skilled artists, in communicating through the arts. The resultant art exhibit is an example of the power of such a combination in bringing educational or social issues to the public for dialogue. Additionally, the outcome of connecting relationships developed through participation and reflection in and through the arts was rewarding to me and others in the focus group. The art exhibit, as a single opportunity to observe and talk about child literacy, the arts and nature education, did not have the same impact on developing relationships as active participation in art-making as the focus group did. The power of the arts is through purposeful and attentive participation. Having used this methodology to investigate my questions about child literacy, I have learned how powerful it is.

### The Question of Leadership

I had not really viewed this study through a lens of school leadership but it is critical that I do so. To begin, involvement of formal school leaders was limited to one administrator who attended the art exhibit. His response to the exhibit and a brief outline of the study was

encouraging, but he chose not to write in the comments book so there is no detailed record of his comments. So while school leadership (or leaders) did not significantly enter the discussions of the focus group or the art exhibit opening, I believe school leadership is imperative to change – to setting the goals for and facilitating the new and expanded processes of child literacy education. I began this study by describing my experiences with both literacy programs and literacy development in community contexts. In my experience, the literacy policies school leadership focused on were based on programs and tests to measure specific skills, which are aimed at developing what we want children to know, but don't include a focus on taking the children and their community context into account, or what our overarching goals for education are.

In his discussion of leadership, Greenfield (1993) suggests that school leaders look critically at the social context and local needs of a particular school and be aware of discrepancies between those needs and official educational goals. Building connections between schools and communities is one way to increase the overall health of both. This concept was understood by the participants in the focus groups, but we struggled to make those connections between ourselves, as work and family commitments filled much of our available time. We valued, and shared that children who participated in connections arranged between formal and non formal educators valued, the brief opportunities we had to collaborate as educators. The time we spent in the focus groups reinforced for each of us some of our educational values and introduced us to new ideas and ways of thinking about child literacy. When we collaborated as child literacy educators, each of us was strengthened as an educator, with children ultimately benefiting as well. This is line with Gelsthorpe (2003) who suggests moving towards a view of achievement in terms of benefit for society, communities and individuals, which may be

fostered by school-community engagement. Instead of focusing our questions about literacy and schooling on helping our children learn basic skills better or faster in the fragmented technocratic model that currently frames our society, we should be asking what the fundamental values, skills and fields of knowledge are that children should learn in school and how we should teach those (Orr, 1992; Hutchison, 1998). Increasing achievement in education in the whole community requires a transformational style of leadership. I recommend that further research be done with local and district level school leaders who are working towards this type of leadership and who are making those connections with the local community and facilitating others to do the same.

Investigating testing and measurement of literacy goals was beyond the scope of this study, but is strongly tied in to the framework of child literacy that is promoted by school leaders. As I have mentioned frequently in this study, a broader framework of child literacy that includes the arts and community connections also promotes critical thinking, decision making and high standards. I am not opposed to assessing student achievement; however, what we choose to measure as literacy achievement needs to match the framework of instruction and our over-arching goals. Schools are learning communities, and as such they *are* concerned with achievement. Gelsthorpe (2003) suggests that

achievement needs to be defined in much broader terms for society, communities and individuals. It is necessary to reassert the key purpose of producing individuals who can manage their own learning, who are active citizens, enjoy academic success and are employable, enterprising and entrepreneurial. In order to achieve this, the practice of educational and community engagement together is paramount, with consequent leadership, organizational and pedagogical transformation (p. 16).

What we choose to measure reflects our goals. I suggest further research with a school where assessment practices reflect child literacy learning in context of the school and community.

School leaders must be prepared to lay the groundwork for building community connections by developing community within the school before reaching out to families, places, and organizations within the community. Sanders (2003) cites numerous studies that indicate that,

Schools that have successfully built community within their walls, that is, schools that are collaborative, communicative, and inclusive, appear to have the greatest success in developing strong connections with the community outside their walls...educators who have been prepared to collaborate will have the dispositions, resources, skills and strategies to minimize and resolve (these) challenges (p. 174).

Ideally, community includes positive interdependence, belonging, respect and caring. Creating such a community involves, among other things, identifying and naming injustices and seeking ways to correct power imbalances through problem solving. This is a different style of educational leadership than one focused on school management. A research study with a school community working towards building this type of collaborative and caring environment would be supportive in a move towards a broader framework of child literacy.

#### Final thoughts

While we are currently in a problematic time of cutbacks for education and almost all districts are struggling to balance budgets, there are still significant funds directed to schools.

Districts need to be held accountable for their spending priorities and public dialogue, I would argue, is one way to help add voices to the discussion of what is important for children in literacy learning. We need to look to the community, as I have done in this study, for creative and collaborative ways to restore skilled arts instruction for all children and support teachers in including the arts in literacy instruction. Concurrently, we need to move beyond theoretical explorations of how to technically rationalize literacy instruction towards increased practical mentoring of skills for those teachers interested in integrating a variety of texts and communication styles in their teaching. Schools need to move from outdated computer labs to flexible use of shared technology with appropriate support. I suggest that school communities receiving technology grants also work with researchers to document the outcomes of such pilot projects and make recommendations for the future. Technology should not be used to replicate what could be done in notebooks and on white-boards; literacy instruction itself needs to reflect the use of technology and communication in the community and broader contexts. As suggested by Freire (1970) and Ferreiro (2003), the best reflection of this is a move to a literacy practices that more deeply reflects the community.

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