The role of people, places, and practices in mediating children’s use of multimodal literacies

Throughout the project we have kept coming back to ask what the conditions are that invite children to use a multitude of ways to express their knowledge, their thoughts, and their questions (Taguchi, 2006). This has taken us from considering the affordances of particular modes and modal combinations to considering the affordances of particular environments and practices. These affordances incorporate the role played by particular people and relationships. Kei Tua o te Pae identifies the learning community in an early childhood setting as “children, families, whānau, teachers and others” (Ministry of Education, 2005, 1, p. 3). We have examined the roles and relationships of each of these agents, paying particular attention to the children, families, whānau, and teachers who participate in the local kindergarten community.

Through this analysis we aim to contribute to understanding more about the dynamics of teaching and learning, especially how literacy learning happens and the affordances offered within an ECE setting.

Affording teachers

Rinaldi (2005) emphasises sensitivity along with openness as key elements of the Reggio Emilia project’s commitment to what is termed a pedagogy of listening, a listening not just with the ears, “but with all our sense (sight, touch, smell, taste and orientations)” (p. 20). We found these ideas useful when we were thinking about how teachers and adults might facilitate multimodal pedagogy.

In reflecting on the drawing episode involving James and Noah (pp. 29–34), for example, we came to thinking about the role of the adult as listener, and the implications of being there or not being there to hear the explanations James and Noah offered as they were drawing. Being there certainly enabled the adult to more fully appreciate what the drawings were intended to communicate. As Wright (2007) points out, the combination of telling and drawing is important. Wright says of the role of the adult, that “whether the adult is simply observing or actively engaging with the child during the drawing process, the very presence of an adult serves as a form of facilitation” (p. 38). The idea that the mere presence of an adult or teacher may serve as form of facilitation got us thinking about the compunction teachers sometimes feel, that they have to be talking in order to be teaching. Wright cautions that “the observer can protract (or perhaps even thwart) the [drawing] process. Consequently, dialogue between adult and child must be sensitively considered” (p. 38).

Jack’s clown enquiries discussed in the last chapter show how teachers gave Jack support and encouragement to pursue and express his interest in clowns in and through a wide range of modes and media: conversations, writing, diagrams, paintings, drawings, emails, websites, the electronic
whiteboard, dramatic performances, costume making, and design. Yvette positioned herself as fellow enquirer alongside Jack in pursuing his interest. When Yvette opened Harry’s first email one day after the kindergarten session had finished, she was so delighted that Harry had replied, she rang Jack’s mother, Jo, immediately. “We’ve heard from Harry the clown!” she exclaimed. We believe that children know when teachers are genuinely interested in their own enquiry, and that teachers’ interest acts to reinforce a child’s interest.

Greater sensitivity to children’s preferred modalities and teachers’ heightened awareness of the affordances of different modes as avenues of enquiry have helped to further consolidate the commitment to children’s project work which was a feature of Wadestown Kindergarten prior to the COI project. The heightened awareness has strengthened the positioning of children’s individual and collective interests and enquiries as the staple of kindergarten curriculum.

**Relationships pedagogy**

As Peters (2009) points out, reciprocal and responsive relationships are “at the heart of the Te Whāriki curriculum” (p. 23). The role of the teacher is relationship-based, taking part within a social context that is inclusive of the participants within the kindergarten environment, and incorporates relationships formed with parents, whānau, and people from the community.

Goouch (2009), discussing relationships in children’s play, gives examples of two exceptional early years teachers where “play is led, directed and orchestrated by the children. The adults support and maintain play rather than hijacking or redefining the purposes of action” (p. 139). The examples above from Wadestown Kindergarten illustrate how teachers enabled children to follow their own interests within play.

Teachers’ efforts to encourage children to listen and to enable children to be listened to were also a regular feature of their interactions with children. Yvette often says: “I wonder what so-and-so means” or “I wonder what so-and-so is trying to say”, as a way of giving an opportunity for a child to restate what they are saying, or another child to listen. Both Mandy and Yvette ask children to “hold their thoughts” when several children are talking at the same time. André uses gesture to orchestrate children having a turn at expressing themselves.

These interactions convey an underlying idea that children can get their views across if they are given opportunity to contribute and reinforcement for their contributions.

**Children’s relationships with each other**

Children are also encouraged to learn about the use of different modes by learning from each other. This process of children learning from and teaching each other about the use of a particular mode is evident, for example, in Aidan and Ben’s interactions when they work jointly together to write Ben’s name on a list. Aidan, who is doing the writing, first asks Ben how he spells his name. When Ben launches in on spelling out the letters of his name too quickly for Aidan to keep up, Aidan offers Ben a bit of coaching in the art of giving spelling instructions. Aidan starts the spelling again from the beginning, on the letter he is writing, and models slowing the pace: “B-------e”.
A little while later their interactions centre on listening, checking, writing, self-correcting, and explaining. At this point, Aidan, who has misheard what Ben has said and mistakenly written an “m” in Ben’s name instead of “n”, decides something is not right:

Aidan checks with Ben: Did you say “m” or “n”?

Ben; ‘n’.

Aidan: Oh (Aidan tries to correct the ‘m’ by rubbing it out with his finger). That was a mistake.

Shortly after this, Ben contributes some writing terminology, i.e. the terms “capital” and “spell”, and gives instructions and a demonstration on how to form the letter “t” correctly:

Ben: You’ve got to spell ‘t’.

Aidan: t…t. (He writes ‘T’.)

Ben: No, not a capital ‘T’. What you do ‘t’, what you do, you go down, and th[en]… (Ben traces the letter ‘t’, first in the air, then on the table top.)

Aidan: Oh yeah I know that.

While this is going on, Yvette, who is videoing, keeps mainly in the background. At one point when Aidan becomes confused because Ben carries straight on from spelling his first name, to spelling his last name, Yvette does offer assistance: “So now you’re spelling Stirling, Aidan. So it’s ‘t’ after ‘s’.”

When Ben gets to the “i” in his last name and is unsure what letter comes next, he looks over to Yvette and asks “And then…what is supposed…?” Yvette answers: “An “I” “. Ben and Aidan both look expectantly up at Yvette for the next letter. “What else?” asks Ben. This time Yvette doesn’t tell them the letter. Instead she encourages them to see what they can come up with. She answers with the question, “What next?” There is a brief pause until Ben lights upon the resourceful idea of using the sign-in sheet (where his name is written) to check for the remaining letters of his name. In addition to highlighting the affordances of a print-rich environment, this episode highlights the importance of providing children with sufficient space to work together and encouraging or scaffolding children to take individual and “collaborative autonomy”.

When considering how such affordances come about, the context surrounding the list is significant. This particular list was initiated by Ben, Aidan, and Heather in the middle of their play drama of the arrival of new baby (Ben). The list had a purpose of the children’s choosing. As Ben tells Yvette, the list is “so we know who’s tomorrow being a baby”. Hence the list connected to and was part of the children’s dramatic play. The activity of writing names is not occurring as an end in itself, although teachers would see gaining greater proficiency in writing and writing names as an anticipated outcome and clearly intend to foster this. In general, the writing of names at the kindergarten tends to occur as part of some sort of practical purpose such as on a painting, coat peg, locker, or photo board, rather than an end in itself through templates or writing drill.

Teachers make the point that there is quite a history of list making at the kindergarten. It is a practice teachers instigate, regularly model, and actively encourage. Hence, rather than seeing the
children’s list writing as an isolated or one-off strategy, teachers think it better understood as something of an embedded kindergarten practice. List making, for a variety of purposes, is part of kindergarten culture. Lists are regularly drawn up for activities that require turn taking, such as going on the swings, riding bikes, and using the computer. Maggie recalls being asked by Aidan to make a list of the children who come down the slide backwards. The list-writing episode is one of many examples we could use to illustrate the way print-based literacies become woven into everyday activities at the kindergarten. For us the episode also illustrates that a focus on multimodal literacies can provide situations that generate, complement, and support print-based and oral communication in ways that are meaningful for children.

**Relationships with families/whānau and community**

As the COI research has progressed, parent input and the ways in which parents and whānau engage with teaching and learning have developed. The developments are mainly in the ways that parents and whānau participate in the education programme, bringing social/cultural capital and interests from home, and contribute to interpretation of children’s learning and development. Teachers say they have become more aware of transformational possibilities as they have viewed themselves as learners as well as teachers, and children and their whānau as experts. Learning has been strengthened and those involved in the learning community have been empowered to contribute more extensively.

**Parents and whānau contributing to the education programme**

Early into the project, teachers questioned whether families were being “welcomed” on teachers’ terms or theirs. Was the environment one in which families felt they could contribute? The following scenario encouraged teachers to recognise the importance of being open minded about family contributions that did not totally conform with their ideas about “good” pedagogy and practice. In this scenario, allowing a nonconforming contribution by a grandmother was enjoyable, enriched children’s learning, supported her grandchild to feel safe and secure, and enhanced family relationships.

Yvette reflects:

Jacqui had just started kindergarten and her grandmother came with her every day to help her settle into this new space. Grandma Betty had a keen interest in crafts and helped out at the children’s programme at the local church. Grandma Betty suggested that she could bring crafts in to do with the children, as a way to be present for Jacqui and also to help out throughout the sessions. We thought this was a good idea. Grandma Betty offered a range of craft activities for the children to engage with. They were ‘structured’ in nature, requiring a process of ‘direction’ and ‘instruction’ from an adult in order to complete the task. This was not consistent with current ideas about interest driven learning experiences, or activity based learning in early childhood. We discussed this as a teaching team. A range of options were available. We decided we would like Grandma Betty to continue with her interest in crafts and we decided to observe the ways in which the children interacted with them. Foundational to our thoughts was our underlying value of relationships. We did value the fact that Grandma Betty wanted to be a part of the kindergarten, and we did want her to participate and share her skills and knowledge. We didn’t want this to be compromised or for Grandma Betty to feel uncomfortable so we decided to see what would happen.
Over the following weeks and months we began to notice the way that not only Jacqui responded to Grandma Betty’s presence (in terms of her feeling safe at kindergarten) but also how other children began to value her presence. Grandma Betty very quickly became a ‘star’ in the programme and as she carried her craft box into kindergarten a line of children would soon be following her, questioning ‘What are we going to make today?’ Children willingly chose to participate, and Grandma Betty was able to share her skills with the group, many learning craft skills such as gluing, sticking, organising, sewing and designing. Alongside this was Grandma Betty’s enjoyment. She seemed to take pleasure in being involved and sharing her skill, and we began to appreciate having Grandma Betty with us. She gave careful thought to the crafts that were prepared. As different kindergarten projects and interests arose Grandma would often tailor her craft making activities to fit in with the children’s interests, e.g. during a project on the ‘jungle’ Grandma Betty made animal masks with the group. She quickly became very much a part of ‘what happens at kindergarten’ for many children. Grandma Betty through her crafts supported children’s learning.

Deans, Brown, and Young (2007, p. 2), whilst referring to drama within the education programme, state that “reflection in action is evident when the teacher adopts an open-minded, flexible approach informed by regular self-monitoring, that allows the children’s ideas to direct the emergent story”. We would go a step further in suggesting that it is also allowing family ideas to contribute to activities and learning experiences within the environment. Within the Grandma Betty scenario, teacher reflection, flexibility, and open-mindedness were required. The discussion between teachers enabled teachers to reflect on and challenge their own pedagogy and to see benefits of welcoming Grandma Betty’s input. As the teachers reflected on this, they came to realise that the underpinning value of their teaching philosophy was the idea of the nurturing of relationships. Groom (2003) talks about looking beyond the physical environment to other aspects, to think about meaningful work practices, and enriching human interactions that affirm existence. What potentially could have been a dilemma turned out to enrich the teaching and learning programme at the kindergarten and in turn strengthened relationships. This example encouraged teachers to think about the limitations they can put on families based on their pedagogical views on how learning should happen.

Parents are more likely now to notice possibilities for contributing, and to offer their input, rather than needing to be invited to contribute by teachers, as is exemplified in Jack and Tom’s story below.

We introduced Jack and his interest in clowning in Chapter 4. From early on we discovered that Jack loved to perform. Jack’s interests seemed to cover a range of areas and one of those that seemed most prevalent was his interest in music. His family has a strong musical literacy and interest. Jack’s father Tom plays in the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and from a young age Jack, too, had a strong “leaning” towards music. At age three he began to play the violin and about a year later began to play the cornet.

Yvette reflects on an investigation of the famous children’s musical story “Peter and the Wolf” which engaged Jack and his family:

Over a period of approximately four weeks we had been investigating the story, characters and instruments with the children at group time. Tom became aware of our current interest in
‘instruments’ and our discussions about ‘Peter and the Wolf’. He wondered whether we would like him to bring in some of his brass instruments to play for the children. We automatically jumped on this opportunity! There was much anticipation in the week leading up to this event! Jack told us that he and Dad would play together!

The day arrived, and what a grand affair! Jack and Tom arrived both dressed in tuxedos, Jack with a black bow tie and Tom with a white one, just as Jack had told us. Their dress expressed the importance of the event. Everyone was seated indoors. Jack and Tom made their entrance from outside. Tom began with a fantastic rendition of a solo trumpet piece which resonated throughout the Kindergarten. The audience were captured! Both Tom and Jack entered. They played an array of brass instruments together, explained what each instrument did and shared their musical knowledge with us. It was really a special occasion. Jack’s confidence in music was evident, and reflective we’re sure of the confidence of other family members. This experience was captured on video and watched the days after. Jack and his friends re-lived the experience and it was a topic of conversation for the weeks after.
What an amazing privilege to have had Tom and Jack share their talent with us. This is an example of the many opportunities that are before us, if we but only tap into them. What a waste it would be if we do not use these valuable resources from home that are readily available.

Gould and Pohio (2006) give light to Te Whāriki and current pedagogy, highlighting that children are empowered when we hear and respond to their voices and the voices of their community. It was clear to us, as we watched the video footage of Jack and Tom sharing their instruments that Jack was so proud to be performing with his Dad. This scenario is an example of parent contribution, parent partnership and of family engagement. Without welcoming and valuing this contribution teachers would not have discovered the richness of this musical literacy evident in this family. A focus on multi modal literacies has encouraged teachers to view parent contributions in a broad context. If we value the multiple ways in which children communicate we too must value the multiple ways in which whānau contribute and communicate their knowledge to the teaching and learning programme. Teaching and learning as a result has been enriched. This is a progression from where we began: where parents were once invited, they now offer.

**Parents interpreting children’s learning and development**

The Effective Provision of Preschool Education study (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004) found that children had better cognitive and dispositional outcomes when ECE services encouraged continuity of learning between ECE settings and homes, and where a special relationship in terms of shared educational aims had been developed with parents.

The insights parents provided about children, and the discussions we had together, enabled us to better understand and interpret the origin and meaning of children’s literacies, and how they are valued and encouraged at home. Asking questions and being ready to learn from parents, as well as teachers sharing their professional perspectives with parents, has become part of the culture at Wadestown Kindergarten that enables parental input into pedagogical discussion.
One powerful way in which we found out about parent views and home experiences was through our discussions with case study parents. These were planned as semi-structured interviews, and began with us asking parents their views of a video recording of their child, and then of their child’s portfolio. Families offered interpretations and perspectives on their child that were different from those of the teachers and research associates, and emerged from the different knowledge that parents had of their child and the parents’ own “funds of knowledge”. The families also contributed data from their home contexts that enriched and added new dimensions to the data gathered in the kindergarten.

Ben M.’s parents, Andrea and James, had watched a video episode of Ben swinging on the kindergarten swings at the same time as he held a lengthy conversation with Yvette. The episode lasted for almost 10 minutes, ending with Ben volunteering to show Yvette his “special flip jump” on the monkey bars.

Andrea is an occupational therapist. She explained her understanding of the progression in competencies that Ben was making through his physical actions, and of the concept and complexity of sensory integration. Here, the interactions between literacies and the ways in which literacies support each other, features that we discussed in Chapter 4, were highlighted by James and Andrea:

. . . he got on the swing himself, and he started swinging himself, and he maintained it, and Yvette said ‘You are swinging quite high now Ben’. . . . And equally [his progression] was shown by the flicks he was doing. I mean physically he is pushing the limits of jumping… The thing that I thought was quite interesting from an occupational therapist’s perspective was how he was swinging and talking and talking, so that was a sensory integration element1. . . . I just thought it was an interesting thing that he was doing something quite physical . . . and he was able to have that long conversation, detailed, while he swung, while he is getting quite a lot of sensory input, like quite a lot of physical balance sensation and physical movement. That he could do these two complicated things at one time and that was quite an achievement.

Ben’s father, James, commented on another kind of integration, this time between Ben’s physical competencies and his long attention span. “With the physical side of things he is very agile, and if we went on to the . . . cricket and the ball and the eye contact he is there. But I agree with you [interview participants] that he did have sustained conversations on the swing, and the other thing was his [long] attention span.”

James linked Ben’s mastery in physical domains with paying attention, a disposition that is likely to equip Ben for subsequent learning. Brooker (2002), for example, has shown that involvement (being absorbed, focused, committed, and curious) is associated with success at school.

Andrea’s analysis from an occupational therapist’s view focused on Ben’s competent physical undertakings that seemed to provide a platform for other communication to take place. She raised useful questions about the complexities of integration and perhaps the need to master one dimension in order to be able to integrate it with another. There seems to be a link to the views of

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1 Andrea explained “sensory integration” as the “coming together of social, cognitive, physical, and other [accomplishments]”.
Miro’s parents, also discussed in Chapter 4, who thought that the new learning required in the school environment (reading and writing) came at the expense of practising other learning (art). At times it may be that children may need to focus more fully on one literacy as their competence develops.

This is one of many examples that illustrate the importance of taking time to process ideas, to look a little deeper, to share learning “snippets” with whānau, to ask questions that encourage interpretations and insights, and to gather further information about what is happening here for this child. At times teachers experience a “pressure to perform” in documentation, that so many articles of documentation need to be gathered for each child within a period of time. These external pressures seem to be inconsistent with what the teachers are trying to achieve. This raises questions about the purpose of documentation and how it is seen. Documentation can showcase learning and development, and it can also act as a tool to aid thinking about teaching and learning.

**Literacies within family contexts**

McNaughton (1995) has suggested that it is through family activities that children “develop ideas and values about literacy practices and activities and their personal and social identity” (p. 17). We found examples of this, where parents clearly enjoyed, encouraged, and responded to their children’s literacy practices. Many parents seemed to go to some lengths to affiliate with their child’s literacy mode and, to a degree, in a number of instances to share an interest in, or aptitude for these literacies. While McNaughton was referring to print-based literacies, we suggest that linkages between family activities and ideas and values about literacy practices occur across a wide range of literacies.

Linkages between children’s favoured literacy modes and family literacy practices were touched on in Chapters 3 and 4. They were exemplified in Joe’s spatial motoric competence and his family’s interest in, resourcing and encouragement of motor bike riding; in James’s interest and competence in drawing and the influence of his father’s architectural activities; and in Miro’s “orientation to enquiry and analysis” that was reflective of the “culture of conversation and questions” that Miro’s family practised.

In this section, we further explore some of the ways in which family literacies and activities boosted and supported those of their children, and how these in turn contributed to ideas children had of themselves. Examples of Ben M. and his physical and sporting competence show strong linkages with a family orientation to sporting and physical practices.

Ben’s family appreciated Ben’s capabilities and modelled, encouraged, resourced, and supported Ben to develop physical and perceptual confidence through sporting activities and resources:

> James: We have a cricket bat downstairs and he smacks it around the place. . . . And he’s got what he thinks is a little golf club, he calls it, he smacks that as well.

James and Andrea were interested and participated as a family in organised sporting activities and informal physical play and games. They talked of swimming lessons, going to the playground, hitting a bat and ball around, taking Ben to cricket matches, watching cricket on television, and so on. The parents themselves had an orientation to physical sports:
James: In terms of sport, I played rugby and cricket all through school and you know, love them both, and I play squash now so in terms of ball games and racket and bat skills that was something that I was interested in … Andrea played hockey and cricket.

Ben’s parents and his grandmother regarded Ben as highly competent physically and confident about his abilities:

Andrea: But physically we see him just progressing in terms of being very coordinated, getting a lot of feedback from other parents saying you know he is fantastic with a ball and bat and you know that he has got good hand eye coordination and my mother commented to me the other day that he has become more confident in the physical element.

James commented that Ben becomes absorbed in his interests and he and Andrea enable him to pursue his interest single-mindedly:

James: He is almost like a one man band you know when he is playing with something, that is the thing that he plays with and plays with all the time. And so with the cricket thing . . . when he is outside that is pretty much what he wants to do all the time is play cricket, or if he is inside, you know we play cricket downstairs as well and most people won’t let their kids play with balls inside, but we have to, we haven’t got much choice.

Is this similar to ways in which Jack’s family and teachers enabled Jack’s interest in clowns to be sustained over time and across places (see Chapter 4)? We think that the willingness of adults to offer opportunities for children to follow their interests in a single-minded and impassioned way across different contexts may be a condition that supports children to develop competency in a literacy mode. This relates, too, to the emphasis of Wadestown Kindergarten on projects emerging from children’s interests that extend over time and take children into different contexts. Projects allow a purposeful focus that is not interrupted at the end of the day.

Another example of the way in which a family literacy or practices within the home contribute to and support children’s expression was illustrated through Kate’s development of an orientation towards humour.

Kate used and enjoyed drawing and was also very interested in drama. Her time at kindergarten involved a lot of dramatic play. Imagination and language played a key part in Kate’s drawing and drama. However one characteristic of Kate or an interest of Kate’s that we became particularly interested in was her use of humour. Kate also enjoyed playing with words. In an interview with Lucy and Andy (Kate’s mum and dad) they highlighted that this was something they, too, had noted. They explained that Kate “got the idea that there are more ways to communicate than just your words, like she says to me ‘Mum, you’ve got your angry eyebrows’”. An observation that we made that also illustrates this enjoyment with words was made when Kate began to sign her name in backwards (as a print practice at kindergarten, children have the option of signing themselves in each day). Over a period of approximately a week Kate chose to sign her name in backwards (e-t-a-k) and called herself Etak! Again, it was during our interviews with parents that we discovered the full extent of where this humour had come from:

Lucy:
… the backwards thing (writing her name backwards) at one stage she was talking about ycul and we had started working out everyone’s name in the family backwards and ycul is Lucy backwards and for quite a while they were calling Andy, what was it? Ydna….everyday when he got home they’d go ydna, ydna. And Kate’s etak.

This play with names extended to her interactions with her peers. Lucy goes on to explain: “Like this morning ... at school she said, she saw Heather and she said hello Heather Miller and then Charlie Plimmer walked past and she went ‘hello Charlie Miller’. You know they just thought ‘weirdo’, but she knew that she was calling everyone by the same surname today and that’s that was going to be her joke…

Yeah so she is a jokester. She does love to play with words and rhyme.

Kate enjoyed joking in situations and seemed to find a funny side of many things. She enjoyed “nonsense/silly stories” and would often involve these in her conversations with her peers and adults. It became evident to us, as we watched Kate interacting within the kindergarten, and after discussions with Andy and Lucy, that there was a real family culture of humour. They explained: “There’s a lot of, there is a lot of silly humour in the house…so there’s a lot of figuring out what a joke is you know…executing that…and she has got into jokes. Like it’s, it’s quite recently that she can tell a knock knock joke and things like that properly.” Kate’s jokes would find their way back to kindergarten and she would test them out on the children and adults within the environment.

We also discovered that a key player in Kate’s developing interest in humour was her older brother. A big brother who, as Lucy and Andy explain, “in terms of humour, accents, that sort of thing...you would get, you know Mr Bean videos and them mimicking…he would take the lead on that and she would follow”. At kindergarten, Kate would often quote her older brother and share stories of the nonsense rhymes and jokes he had taught her.

These findings about linkages between family literacies and practices and children’s competencies have implications for everyday practice. They highlight the importance of finding out about parents’ understanding of their child, the value parents place on literacies, and the family literacy practices that are closely linked with those of their children.

Jonathan, another of the case study children, illustrates a coming together of affording practices and relationships, parent involvement, learning from parents, and affording environments. In particular, we draw attention to Jonathan’s use of material resources available within the kindergarten environment, how interviews with Jonathan’s parents offered insights about Jonathan’s interests and dispositions, and the involvement of Jonathan’s dad in the kindergarten. We suggest that these factors together contributed to Jonathan’s growing self-esteem and confidence.

Jonathan had a strong interest in the visual. During his time at kindergarten it became increasingly clear that Jonathan was very keen on using technology to explore images and ideas in order to make sense of his world. The digital camera became an important tool for Jonathan to explore the environment with. It was interesting to note that he seemed particularly interested in capturing images of his family including finding old photos where his sister (who came to Wadestown
kindergarten before him) was present, photos of himself, and of Michael, Jonathan’s father, who spent much time being at the kindergarten.

As with many children at kindergarten, Jonathan became interested in face painting. Face painting has become a culture of the kindergarten, as a way to explore character and as another prop for dramatic play. Jonathan seemed to really enjoy this. He would often choose to have his face painted as a character such as a “puppy” or a “Wiggles™ character” although he never seemed to be “tied” to a particular character. We wondered what face painting afforded for Jonathan. We do not really know, but as Yvette reflects:

> Was it that he could be in role? It was interesting to note that when Jonathan did have his face painted he didn’t necessarily act out the character he was, or involve himself in dramatic play opportunities. Was this a place of comfort for Jonathan? When face painting you don’t necessarily need to verbalise your thoughts or act them out, you could ‘just be’. One thing we do note is that when face painting there are always lots of children around! Part of the process is waiting for a turn, talking through what you are going to be, and participating within a group. At these times Jonathan seemed to enjoy the connections he made with others while participating.

One example was the day Jonathan sat for 40 minutes while friend Phoebe painted his face. This is also an example of the task persistence that is evident in many of our observations of Jonathan. During an interview with Angela and Michael they shared that: “He’s quite happy in his own space and in his own activity…he could sit and do four different jigsaws in 40 minutes and not want to communicate with anyone and not actually want, wouldn’t be bothered but he’s just so focused on the activity and that’s the same with the computer, the camera… Football, he has been known to kick a football on a big field for an hour. Just kick it and run and kick it and run… He’s very content playing games by himself and it’s almost like he gets so focused and he just loves repetitive tasks…”

Halliday (1975, in Leland & Harste) express that language is just one part of a culture’s semiotic system, and that there is a combination of aesthetic, cognitive, and psychomotor elements that come into play when we think about children’s abilities. In thinking about Jonathan, this seems particularly pertinent as oral language was quite often not the mode that Jonathan would choose to operate in. Angela shares her insights by saying: “It’s just Jonathan, it’s just the way he is but he is quiet, I mean you know, like all kids they’re all sort of cute but because of this strong, silent personality people are quite drawn to him. They find him quite interesting…We’re not worried about it…you know they all get there and he’ll get there at his own pace and that kind of thing. He’s quite a determined strong, you know, he’s a really neat sort of kid…”

Our interview with Michael and Angela highlighted for us their valuing and acceptance of Jonathan’s individual learning style and development:

> I often wondered [about] the repetitive nature of his tasks and his play, if that’s the way he learns. I mean a certain amount of passion is quite, you know like…behaviour is a way that children do, and they need to be, to pattern that behaviour in… You know when you’re talking about kicking a ball or you know, an example, they actually have to gain the skill.
Michael was a huge part of the kindergarten community. He spent a large amount of time at kindergarten and was a regular part of most sessions. On a day-to-day basis he would involve himself in the programme, in all sorts of ways—working or playing with children, involving himself in teaching and learning, tidying the gardens, doing handyman jobs, running errands, etc. He built strong relationships with the children and families at the kindergarten. It wasn’t long before Michael’s presence became a regular “part of what happens here”, and something really valued by all within the community.

*Te Whāriki* states that “The wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 42). When children sense that their families are valued, what is the impact on their sense of belonging within the learning environment? We wondered what the impact of Michael’s presence within the environment had on Jonathan’s sense of belonging. *Te Whāriki* supports the notion of whānau engagement, suggesting that the acceptance of whānau within the learning environment contributes or adds to a child’s sense of belonging, wellbeing, identity, and security. We had originally noted that Jonathan was a quiet boy, yet during his time at kindergarten we watched a quiet confidence grow within him. This confidence was evident when Jonathan headed off to school and was highlighted to us when Yvette asked Michael how Jonathan was going at school. Michael recounted that early after starting school, Jonathan had said to him on the way into school “You can leave me at the gate.”

**Environments that afford**

The emphasis in our discussions so far has been on ways in which the relationships and practices of participants involved in the kindergarten context have mediated children’s use of multimodal literacies. These relationships and practices take place within an environment that is well resourced to support learning and development. The environment includes interpersonal resources: an environment that is welcoming of contribution and participation by all comers, where a culture of enquiry and engagement has developed over time; where a culture of pedagogical discussion has become established; where children are collaboratively involved in pursuing their own interests and supported to do this; and where there is time and space for children and adults to work together or individually.

The kindergarten environment also has very extensive material resources to support differing literacy modes and support children to develop their ideas. *Te Whāriki* Ministry of Education, states that the learning environment “should offer a wide variety of possibilities for exploring, planning, reasoning and learning, with space arranged to encourage active exploration, providing both new challenges and familiar settings so that children develop confidence” (p. 83). Resources and equipment that support multimodal expression in a variety of ways, for example, musical instruments, props, books, art, ICT, costume, constructive materials, physical equipment are readily available throughout the kindergarten. This is illustrated, for example, in the large number of resources available to Jack to encourage him in his clown investigations: ICT (computers, Google™ access, email, camera, printer), paint, collage materials, costume, face paint, paper, pens, props, and books. It is interesting to also note the role of the teacher within this, and how
teachers can encourage children to notice the resource options that are before them, such as when considering the prices of clown shoes online, Jack discovers they are quite expensive. Yvette suggests that he could perhaps make himself a pair of shoes. Jack acts on this idea and chooses to make his shoes out of a pair of tissue boxes at the collage table.

There seems to be value in having the range of resources readily accessible at all times. Heather’s mother, in her interview, recalled that when some of the dress ups were temporarily removed and put in storage Heather had really missed them: “I remembered how the first thing she did…she wore that [space suit] for about three days and I wondered…actually having that hood on and being covered in something actually made her feel secure…’cause she wore that non stop, and then the dress ups went away because…there was another project in that space…and so the dress ups were not there for quite some time…and I guess I would say in a way that it’s a pity for children who do want to express themselves that way, that they couldn’t do that.” This comment caused the teachers to consider the impact that such decisions could have on children’s preferred modes of expression.

**Conclusion**

Our investigations of the roles of people, places, and practices in mediating children’s use of multimodal literacies illustrated that the notions of “affording teachers” and “affording environments” are useful concepts. In essence, affording teachers at Wadestown Kindergarten held and conveyed an openness to children, parents, whānau, and communities, and to their contributions and potential contributions. Affording teachers were sensitive to children’s preferred modalities and had an awareness, augmented by the COI research, of the capacities of different modalities to facilitate communication and conceptualisation in different ways. They also conveyed a genuine interest in children’s enquiries and endeavours, and acted to reinforce these. In combination, these characteristics seem to have helped teachers to establish a culture of contribution and enquiry that flowed through the curriculum. Children conveyed a deep sense of satisfaction in being able to work on projects of interest to them, and extend their work across time and space.

A dominant commitment to a pedagogy built on relationships underpinned the curriculum. Teachers listened “with all their senses”, and supported and encouraged children to be listeners too. Carr et al. (2001) have used the expression “a permeable curriculum” to describe a curriculum that is “porous, open to contribution from all comers” (p. 31). Perhaps the greatest transformation at Wadestown Kindergarten was in making it more possible for parents to contribute to interpreting children’s learning and development, where the “traditional” teacher as “expert” in this field was replaced by a teacher who was open to learning from the insights and experiences of parents and whānau. Listening to the input from parents and whānau acted to tangibly change teachers’ expectations of children and their views of the role of home experiences. In particular, teachers were made aware that sometimes children had deeper and different skills and interests than showed at kindergarten.

Making time for parents, whānau, and teachers to talk together in a parent focus group meeting and a semistructured interview situation were useful forums for enabling a depth of contribution
from parents and whānau. These discussions were focused on pedagogical documentation, in which there was keen interest.

One challenge is for teachers to take time to have these deeper discussions with all families, alongside the informal conversations that occur on a daily basis. We suggest that, in recognition of their value, such deeper discussions could be given priority within early childhood settings. In this event, other work might need to be reduced so that the workload is manageable.