7 Conclusion

The COI project furthered our thinking about the affordances of diverse literacy modes, how literacy modes interact and develop, and characteristics of environments that may support and promote multimodal literacy learning and development. In this conclusion, we discuss some implications of our study and areas where further investigation is warranted.

Notions of literacy

The very different understandings and use of the term *literacy* are summarised in Lankshear and Knobel’s continua (2003, p. 73): one continuum identifies the range of modes literacy is considered to encompass, from print-based and monomodal to multimodal; the second continuum identifies a range of ideas about what literacy practices are and how they are seen to function. Here the range is from the idea of literacy being limited to the encoding (writing) and decoding (reading) of alphabetic print, to seeing literacies as the social and cultural practices and systems people use for communication and meaning making.

We continue to deliberate over the usefulness of the term *literacy* in describing the modes through and in which children make meaning and communicate. We believe it important that those of us with responsibility for early years education (i.e., in both early childhood and primary sectors) become conversant with these different conceptions of literacy, because of the implications these different views of literacy have for children’s learning. We find it concerning, for example, that the recently developed draft *Literacy Learning Progressions* (Ministry of Education, 2007) takes a very narrow view of literacy in the early years, looking at reading and writing in isolation and putting too much emphasis on a narrow range of skills.

A sociocultural view, which recognises social, cultural, and literacy practices as interconnected, helps to highlight the variability in what is seen to count as literacy. Consequently such a view opens the way for considering “other possibilities”, for teachers, for example, to consider the different possible modal pathways and modal combinations children can use for communication and meaning making. Likewise having a broader conception of text allows for a greater range of possibilities for children to engage with and design texts that involve a variety of modal combinations; e.g. graphics, animation, and music. The notion of affordance is useful in considering the capacities of particular modes and modal combinations.

On the other hand, we are also aware that using the term *literacy* can sometimes get in the road of peoples’ understandings at the expense of the bigger picture ideas. When literacy is more narrowly conceived, the challenge can become how not to get caught up in circuitous or fruitless debate over terminology. The point we want to make is that understanding how children use and combine different modalities of communication and meaning making is not a sufficiently prominent part of the way teachers are encouraged to look at young children.
Our findings concerning children being given space, support, and opportunities by families to use and participate in particular literacy modes leave us with some unanswered questions about how important it is for children having opportunities to immerse themselves in particular modes in order to consolidate or extend their expertise in the use of that mode. Miro’s parents suggested, for example, that in the school setting Miro may have set drawing aside in order to concentrate on reading and writing. At the same time we have continually observed instances of modal combinations supporting learning opportunities for both. We suggest this would be a particularly fruitful area for further research.

**Literacies within family contexts**

Our investigation of family literacies and family contexts opened our minds to significant new learning. In particular, we have identified the value of being open-minded about family and community contributions to the life of the early childhood setting, of building a culture where contributions are welcomed not simply by invitation or solely on the teachers’ terms, and of undertaking pedagogical discussions with parents aimed at finding out about parent views of their child and other children, family experiences, and parents’ interpretations of pedagogical documentation.

Within focus group meetings, parents discussed documentation of literacy events and explored notions of what constitutes a literacy. These parents were highly interested in the discussions and contributed their views of the learning and development that was taking place. Significantly, the documentation was not about their own child. This is an illustration of the breadth of parents’ interests and that parents can be willing to engage with documentation about children other than their own.

The parent interviews were a particularly powerful means to investigate literacies within a family context and comprised a departure from fairly common “top down” ways of working with parents, where teachers predominantly share their pedagogical knowledge with parents. This type of pedagogical discussion required teachers to be open to learning from parents. The gains from the approach included greater insights into family contexts and how children’s literacy strengths have developed and are supported at home, a “bigger picture” understanding of children’s learning and development, and closer connections with families. These gains potentially flow through into teachers and parents being more ready to share experiences and discuss educational aims, and families being more willing to volunteer their expertise within the education programme. They also seem to enable teachers and parents to be more aware of multimodal literacy resources and opportunities within the early childhood setting, home, and community. We also view interviews as a potentially useful means of contact and communication for parents/whānau who do not regularly bring their child to the early childhood setting.

The interviews were focused on interpreting pedagogical documentation about the parents’ child, documentation that was easily accessible and appealing, i.e. a videotape of the child at kindergarten, and a portfolio book that included narrative stories, photographs, samples of work, and interpretation of learning and development. The portfolios and videos also showed children and whānau as participating members of the kindergarten community. There were no time constraints, and the interview conversations were intensive. The interviews were undertaken in
home settings, where we also met with older and younger siblings, and where the child was
usually proud and delighted to see their teachers. The teachers already knew the child well. This
framing is different from the “home visiting” that used to be done some years ago before children
started kindergarten, where the teachers’ aim was for them to find out about the home and family
and tell parents about the kindergarten and what to expect. Perhaps the title “home visiting”
evokes a somewhat deficit connotation of teachers “inspecting the home”. We wonder whether the
term family visits might help to avoid this.

Our experience of the value of pedagogically framed “interviews” raises a question about how
such interviews might be held with all families. We acknowledge the pressures of holding
interviews and visiting families at home when there are many children and poor staff:child ratios
in an early childhood setting. Nevertheless we suggest that “family visits”, set up and framed for
pedagogical discussion after teachers have got to know the child well, may serve as a core
pedagogical tool. In this event, the value and time that is necessary for holding interviews could be
weighed up in relation to other practices occurring within the early childhood setting, and given
priority.

Cultural literacy

We did not investigate literacy practices and traditions within diverse ethnic communities, how to
access and learn from diverse ethnic communities, or how to integrate diverse cultural
understandings, and artefacts within the early childhood curriculum.

Te Whāriki is a bicultural curriculum, and includes a specific statement that:

In early childhood education settings, all children should be given the opportunity to develop
knowledge and an understanding of the cultural heritages of both partners to te Tiriti o
Waitangi. (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9)

The question of how “the cultural heritages of both partners to the treaty” are to be reflected in the
literacy practices of the kindergarten has not received the prominence it warrants. This is
acknowledged as a limitation of our study.

Te Whāriki also emphasises its support for the cultural identity of all children, and the importance
of celebrating cultural differences. In population terms, New Zealand society is becoming more
ethnically and culturally diverse. Māori, Asian, and Pacific populations are increasing as a
percentage of New Zealand’s population, with Asian populations almost doubling from 2001 to
2006 (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). In addition, childhood is becoming more “transnational”
through migration and through “flows of products, information, values and images that most
children routinely engage with” (Prout, 2003, p. 9). It is therefore important that teachers
understand and access knowledge, skills, and understandings that children bring from their
cultural communities, since culture-bound ideas about children’s experiences are inadequate to do
justice to the diverse realities of children’s lives.

Duerie (2001) speaking of a framework for Māori educational advancement, described one of the
goals of education in New Zealand to be about preparing people to actively participate as citizens
of the world:
Quite apart from the increasing urbanisation of New Zealand, the shrinking globe will bring the cultures of other lands and communities to Turangi and Taupo, and in turn these towns will be only a stone’s throw from London and New York. (Durie, 2001, p. 4)

It is reasonable to expect that all children are equipped to participate in New Zealand’s bicultural and multicultural society.

Theoretical conditions for approaching pedagogy through a culturally inclusive lens are offered within *Te Whāriki*. Terreni has pointed out that *Te Whāriki* “not only reconceptualised curriculum in terms of cultural pluralism and inclusion, but also shifted early childhood pedagogy to a more socio-cultural orientation” and that “This theoretical orientation is one which in itself, is more culturally inclusive” (Terreni, 2008, p. 70). Our work on literacies within family contexts, and on the value of reading and pedagogical discussion, suggests some ways in which we might also access “funds of knowledge” from ethnic communities, invite community contribution into the life of the community, and think critically about pedagogy from a cultural lens. We believe it would be worthwhile to further investigate notions of “cultural literacy”, and explore pedagogy and environments that may help diverse cultural literacies to flourish.

**Teachers as enquirers**

As the COI project progressed, teachers found that the role of enquirer became more central to their practice. Our findings suggest that an enquiring teacher shows an openness, a willingness to examine their own and kindergarten practices in a critical way, both alone and in combination with others, and a preparedness to give things a try. Teachers explored ideas of being “multimodal” themselves. They became aware of different modes of expression and encouraged children to access and explore these in learning. They also became aware of the privileging of modes (modes they are comfortable to operate within and/or value), and became more responsive to using resources that would support the exploration of other modes. Teachers developed an understanding that they don’t need to “know it all” and as a result tapped into resources around them that would support the teaching and learning taking place. Within the team setting, different teachers offer and contribute different ideas, ways of doing things, and ways of interacting. One challenge is how to utilise team strengths so that each teacher’s practices can complement and enhance those of the others.

Central to our research process was the idea of facilitating dialogue between theory and practice in such a way that each serves to inform and deepen understanding of the other.

**Figure 48 Theory and practice dialogue**

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Video and other forms of pedagogical documentation were useful tools in this process through the rich texts of practice they were able to provide. The value of research and theoretical literature as a means of informing practice, and in turn documentation, has been highlighted within this project. As teachers have read literature and participated in pedagogical discussions it has brought new ideas and ways of thinking to their attention. This in turn has impacted on the things they notice within learning experiences, the way they respond, and the way they subsequently document these
experiences. The documentation of kindergarten practices and the use of theoretical literature is a valuable tool for enquiry. It allows teachers to think deeply, not only about the learning that is taking place for the child, but also their role in children’s learning and the learning for them as teachers. When thinking about multiple modes of learning it is important to consider how documentation is presented and how we can make visible children’s differing modes of expression. For example, we note that the use of video allows us to capture motion, movement, drama episodes, facial expression, gesture, or sound, which cannot be as easily illustrated or captured through words/photographs.

**Implications for the early childhood sector**

The COI findings have illustrated the value for teachers of engaging in reading and pedagogical discussion focused on their practice, with support from an “outside” researcher. The need to articulate their own everyday practice in written form and in presentations also propelled the teachers to grapple with their ideas in depth, and deliberate and draw out key messages in ways that could be understood. Presenting to other practitioners also opened teachers to external challenges about their views and practices, to other ways of looking at the same data. According to feedback, other practitioners related well to the concrete examples from the Wadestown Kindergarten setting, and learnt from the teachers’ and research associates’ presentations.

These findings have implications for the wider early childhood sector. Conditions are needed to support all practitioners to become enquiring teachers. Our findings support the usefulness of opportunities for practitioners to gather and examine documentation from their own setting, and to present their pedagogical work and thinking to other teachers. This also includes working closely in a pedagogical sense with families and communities. These things are hard to do in isolation from structural support, which includes time, space, and tools to undertake such work, and access to research and professional development advice that is focused on the interactions and environment within teachers’ own early childhood setting.

More broadly, investigation within the field of multimodal literacy may support teachers to become more aware of their own literacy preferences and more knowledgeable about affordances offered by other literacies. A focus on multimodal literacies offers potential to create a more inclusive community where the literacies of all children are valued and supported.