Executive summary

Wadestown Kindergarten’s Centre of Innovation (COI) action research project was undertaken from 2005 to 2008. The aim of the project was to explore the nature and roles of different literacy modes in communicative competence and in shaping the ways in which children view and operate in the world. We also examined how literacy modes are mediated by the people, places and practices in the kindergarten, home and wider community.

The three research questions were:

• What does multimodal communicative competence mean in an early childhood setting?
• How do multimodal literacies interact and support each other at individual, interpersonal and community levels?
• What is the role of people, places and practices in mediating children’s use of multimodal literacies?

The action research approach involved the teachers, research associates, and the senior teacher in gathering data about multimodal literacies at Wadestown Kindergarten, and discussing and analysing the data within the research team and with parents. The approach had elements in common with “participatory action research” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). It helped strengthen the Wadestown Kindergarten community of practice and engaged people in examining their knowledge and understandings; it was practical and collaborative; it involved collaborative critique; and it aimed “to help people investigate reality in order to change it” (p. 567).

Data included:

• case studies of six children, drawing on pedagogical documentation used in each child’s assessment portfolio, video recordings of each child’s literacies over 18 months, and baseline and final interviews with parents;
• a parent focus group meeting to discuss ideas about multimodal literacies;
• video recordings and analysis of curriculum events where multimodal literacies were evident;
• interviews with parents, teachers, research associates and the senior teacher, and discussions with children.

This data was discussed by the research team and analysed thematically in relation to the research questions. The analysis was framed within key theoretical ideas from social semiotics, a field concerned with the study of sign and symbol systems and how these operate in society. In particular, we drew on the notion of Kress (2000) and others that the properties of different literacies offer differing capacities or affordances that facilitate different kinds of communication and learning. These affordances are not only linked to the material properties of a literacy mode, but also to contextual dimensions, including how literacies are valued in a context, and the way affordances may be specific to a child or group of children or a particular situation.

**What does multimodal communicative competence mean in an early childhood setting?**

We drew predominantly on the parent focus group discussion and a particular example of a child’s (Joe) spatial motoric competence (as manifested in his bike riding interests and activities) to
explore the permeability of boundaries between what constitutes traditional print-based and verbal literacies, non traditional literacies (such as creative arts, and new literacies such as ICT) and what some would regard as “non” literacies (such as spatial motoric competence). We argue that spatial motoric competence represented significant features of Joe’s ways of knowing and communicating, in particular a practical “know how” in relation to dynamics of motion and space. We drew on other studies to suggest that there may be linkages between spatial motoric competence, cognitive functioning and specific abilities such as the ability to make sense of text. We showed how Joe’s bike riding interests and activities acted as a key strand of support which the mode of communication was able to be mapped onto. The example also illustrated the immense value of drawing on parents’ “funds of knowledge”, in particular in interpreting and analysing the research data, and discussing family experiences and values.

We used this example and our readings to put forward our main argument that we need to take a broad view of literacies as modes of communication, conceptualisation and meaning making. We argued the importance of becoming aware that we in early childhood education may favour certain semiotic modes at the expense of others. In order to support all children to become multiliterate communicators, we need to notice and understand children’s favoured semiotic modes so that we can support and expand them. We argued that understanding will be enhanced through pedagogical discussion with parents.

How do multimodal literacies interact and support each other at individual, interpersonal and community levels?

Our investigation of the interactions amongst literacies explored the affordances that different modes and modal combinations offered individual children, and the broader roles different modes may play in helping shape learning and learners in the kindergarten context. In particular, we examined:

- the affordances offered by drawing for three children, its combination with other modes, and the role of drawing as a channel for learning and communication. For these three children, drawing was used to portray states of being and complex conceptual ideas. It was through discussion with the child and/or parents that we learned of its complexity, and how children’s competence related to home values. Drawing seemed to have particular properties that enabled exploration of emotional states of being and conceptual ideas to be portrayed “at a glance”. Drawing was interwoven with other modes: for example, with gesture and explanation by one child, with writing and graphic conventions by another.

- different usages made of drama, its combination with other modes, and its spread to engaging various members of the kindergarten community. Drama offered children affordances for social learning as children negotiated roles, collaborated and improvised together, and explored what it felt like to be in role; for cognitive learning such as making conceptual shifts in positioning others within role; and for enjoyment and creative imagining. Both fantasy drama and social-realistic drama were used and offered considerable opportunity for children to explore the world. We did not study the use of drama as performance and the associated affordances, although we see such uses as worthy of investigation.
ways in which one child’s interest-driven enquiry drew on a range of modes and modal combinations and involved various members of the kindergarten community. This child’s interest acted as a powerful mechanism for learning and for integrating different modes, including construction and design, and use of digital technology as a tool for communication and enquiry.

In general, these different modes conveyed meaning in different ways, and when used in combination, augmented the ways in which the children communicated, and strengthened children’s thinking.

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

Our third research question took us from investigating the affordances of particular modes and modal combinations to considering the affordances of particular environments and practices. We found some characteristics that seemed to have helped the teachers to establish a culture of contribution and enquiry that flowed through into the curriculum. Affording teachers at Wadestown Kindergarten held and conveyed an openness to the contributions and potential contributions of all participants. They were sensitive to children’s preferred literacies and developed an awareness through the COI research of the capacities of different literacy modes to facilitate communication and conceptualisation in different ways. They also conveyed a genuine interest in and enjoyment of children’s enquiries and endeavours, and acted to reinforce these.

A dominant commitment to a pedagogy built on relationships underpinned the curriculum. Teachers listened “with all their senses” and encouraged children to be listeners too. Through the course of the project, teachers made 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. This occurred through discussion focused on pedagogical documentation both within a parent focus group meeting and a semi-structured interview with parents in their home context.

The kindergarten also had very extensive material resources to support differing literacy modes and support children to develop their ideas.

Implications

Notions of literacy

Our study has highlighted a range of literacy practices and how they function. We believe that it is important for those of us with responsibility for early years education, including primary and early childhood teachers, to become conversant with different conceptions of literacy, because of the implications these different views have for children’s learning. Understanding how children use and combine different literacies needs to be a prominent part of the way teachers are encouraged to look at young children.

Literacies within family contexts

Our investigation of family literacies identified the value for teacher understanding and their support for children’s learning of being open-minded about family and community contributions
to the life of the early childhood setting, and of having pedagogical discussions with parents aimed at finding out about parent views and interpretations of pedagogical documentation. Semi-structured interviews with parents were an especially powerful means to investigate literacies within a family context. These discussions required teachers to be open to learning from parents. We suggest that pedagogically framed “interviews” with parents could be prioritised as a core pedagogical tool, and held with all families after teachers have got to know the child well.

**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 practices within the curriculum. Nor did we examine how the cultural heritages of both partners to Te Tiriti o Waitangi were reflected in the literacy practices of the kindergarten. We suggest it would be worthwhile to investigate notions of cultural literacy, and explore pedagogy and environments that may help diverse cultural literacies to flourish.

**Teachers as enquirers**

Our findings suggest that an enquiring teacher shows an openness, a willingness to examine their own and kindergarten practices in a critical way (alone and with others) and a preparedness to give things a try. Teachers explore ideas of being multi-modal themselves, and become aware of their own preferences.

Central to the research process was the idea of facilitating dialogue between theory and practice so that each served to inform and deepen understanding of the other. Our experience of the COI project also pointed to the value and importance of gathering and analysing documentation and data from the kindergarten and home setting, finding out about divergent views through formal and informal means, using a range of methods, and analysis that was done alone, and within a group, including with parents. The use of video was a particularly powerful medium for analysis, allowing curriculum episodes to be revisited and scrutinised from different angles. We argue that if we are to build a “culture of enquiry” for all teachers, we also need facilitating environments to enable such a culture to flourish, including tools for enquiry and access to professional expertise.