Introduction

The research reported here is of a three-year action research project in Wadestown Kindergarten. We analysed the nature and roles of different modalities in communicative competence and in shaping ways of viewing and operating in the world, and how these are mediated by the people, places, and practices in the kindergarten and wider community.

Aims and rationale

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum framework, Te Whāriki, recognises communicative competence in young children as not only verbal, but as including: “an increasingly elaborate repertoire” of nonverbal forms of communication, e.g., the language of images, art, dance, drama, mathematics, movement, rhythm, and music (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 72).

The title metaphor of Te Whāriki, in which the construction of curriculum is likened to the process of weaving, is a metaphor we first drew on in our original application to illustrate our ideas about how multiple literacies could contribute to the kindergarten curriculum. To illustrate the metaphorical weaving of curriculum, we used the photos below, which show an actual weaving being created at the kindergarten, an enterprise involving children working with and alongside other children, and with and alongside parents to create a mixed-media, woven hanging. We used the photos to represent the way we see Te Whāriki positioning children and families, alongside teachers, as key players in the weaving of the curriculum whāriki.

Figure 1  Weaving a wall hanging at Wadestown Kindergarten
As explained in our application:

The weaving is for us a metaphor of the way we envisage multiple literacies helping facilitate the contributions of our learning community to the curriculum whāriki. The vertical strands of the weaving . . . represent multiple literacies. Through these strands the contributions of children, teachers and families are woven. The more literacies (vertical strands) used, the more extended this enables contributions to be, with each strand serving to support others. (Wadestown Kindergarten, 2005)

The decision to focus on multiple literacies was based on research team members seeing modes such as gesture, drama, music, dance, drawing as playing a key role in the way children experience and make sense of the world and communicate. Alongside this were the common concerns within the research team about the privileging of print-based and verbal literacy, and more recently technological literacy, at the expense of other modes. As Kress (2000) argues, a focus on verbal literacies alone “…has meant a neglect, an overlooking, even a suppression of the potentials of all the representational and communicational modes…and a neglect equally, as a consequence, of the development of theoretical understandings of such modes” (p. 157).

As the project progressed, as we read more extensively, and as we discussed our ideas about multiple literacies amongst ourselves, with other colleagues, and with a focus group of Wadestown parents, we were increasingly drawn to the term multimodal literacy in preference to the term multiple literacies. The term mode can be seen to denote the form in and through which meaning is made and communicated. Incorporating the reference to modality we think gives fuller expression to form as well as function and helps to make the form–function relationship more visible.

Our focus on multimodality draws on the work of Gunther Kress and colleagues, and the notion that different modes offer different capacities or affordances (Kress, 2000) to facilitate different kinds of communication or learning. These different capacities or affordances may make different modes better suited to some tasks than to others (Kress & Jewitt, 2003). Investigating the affordances of a mode involves both how the material properties of a mode link to the capacities they offer as well as how contextual dimensions (“[the] social, cultural and historical side”) help define how affordances are constructed (Kress & Jewitt, 2003, p. 15).

A key interest in our study is the way that different modes children use in communicating and meaning making, interact and support each other. The term multimodal literacy also lends itself to the idea of communication and meaning making involving different combinations of modes and their interrelationship. As Kress and Jewitt (2003) point out, “in communication, modes rarely, if ever, occur alone” (p. 2).

Our interest in the development and use of different modes, or literacies, has not only been to do with their communicative function, but also with how the use of particular modes may impact on the way children make sense of the world. We have become increasingly interested in how learners and learning are changed and shaped by the differences in mode and by the dynamics of different modal combinations.
Wadestown Kindergarten

Wadestown Kindergarten is one of 59 kindergartens within the Wellington Region Kindergarten Association (WRKA). It is nestled in the small community of Wadestown, close to Wellington city. Kindergarten families are predominantly high socioeconomic and New Zealand European/Pākehā, with some children of British, Māori, Niuean, or Indian ethnicity. The kindergarten is a sessional kindergarten with 30 four-year-olds attending in the morning, five sessions a week, and 30 three-year-olds attending in the afternoon, three sessions a week. All teachers are qualified and registered. At the time of application to become a COI (September 2005), we were a two teacher team (Yvette Simonsen and Mandy Blake) who had been together for just over a year. We became a three teacher team when joined by André La Hood a little over a year into our COI project.

The kindergarten programme is regarded as special for its exploration of multiple literacies within the use of a project approach. In the period prior to becoming a COI, concentrated time had been taken to deliberate over values and beliefs about teaching and learning. There was a shared interest in project learning, the place of family and community within teaching and learning, and the use of ICT (information communication technologies) for representing different modes of communication. We were committed to delivering a programme that focused on the coming together of these three strands.

In early 2005, the teachers participated in professional development about *Kei Tua o te Pae: Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2005) with Victoria University of Wellington College of Education (VUWCE). They began to work with Maggie Haggerty from VUWCE who, along with Linda Mitchell, then at NZCER, became research associates for the COI research. Through professional reading and discussion, we were introduced to the term *multiple literacies*, coined by The New London Group (1996). The group provided “a cogent and convincing argument that being literate in a multiliterate world is being able to access and use a range of design elements in making and creating meaning through integrated multimodal texts” (Limbrick & Aikman, 2004, p. 12). The group work led us to query the meaning of being ‘literate’ as print-based and verbal, and challenged more traditional views of ‘literacy’.

**Research questions**

We formed three research questions, which have been refined during the course of the project (see below). At the end of the project, these were:

1. What does multimodal communicative competence mean in an early childhood education setting?
2. How do multimodal literacies interact and support each other at individual, interpersonal, and community levels?
3. What is the role of people, places, and practices in mediating children’s use of multimodal literacies? In particular, what are the roles of family and peers, and the role of significant people and influences in the kindergarten and its wider communities, especially teachers?

We reworked these research questions during the course of the COI project as the research team became more critical and analytic about the meaning of terms being used.
Question 3 originally read, “How does an emphasis on multiple literacies within pedagogy, drawing from the concept of ako and involving project work, build community and children’s communicative competencies?” For a start, this question read like “gobbledygook” to teachers and families who heard it, so we always had to explain it and change how we presented it. Secondly, the concept of “ako”, featured in the original question, is complex and we came to think it needed deeper exploration than we were able to give. Bol Jun Lee (2004) argues that if the term ako is disembedded from the Māori pedagogical context of which it is part, there is a risk it will be used in ways that are superficial or reductionist. She suggests that the term ako has been co-opted by the mainstream education scene in New Zealand “as if it’s the latest fashion”, and adds that fashions are often only “style deep’, they come and go” (p. 563). We became increasingly aware that the concept of “ako” from Māori pedagogy needs in-depth investigation for us to do it justice.

Project work mentioned in the original third research question also did not become a central focus in the research. The benefits teachers saw in the project approach and their interest in it did play a significant role in teachers’ interest in investigating children’s use of multiple literacies. Amongst the connections we discussed between the project approach and multiple literacies was the Reggio Emilia project’s often quoted reference to the one hundred languages of children (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998) and to a pedagogy of listening, requiring teachers to listen with all the senses (Rinaldi, 2005). While neither the discourse of “ako” nor that of “the project approach” became a key focus in the research, we acknowledge both as important and see them as fruitful concepts to investigate and frame further research.

Our choice to frame question 3 around the role of people, places, and practices in mediating children’s literacy learning readily links with the idea in Te Whāriki that curriculum is provided by the people, places, and things in the child’s environment (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 11). We use the term practice to incorporate activities, tools, and resources. We see a focus on practice as particularly appropriate in light of the practice-orientation of action research and the COI programme.

**Outline of the report**

This was an action research project in which the teachers and research associates worked together and with the wider community of children, families, and community from Wadestown Kindergarten to investigate the research focus on multimodal literacies. The report is structured around the three research questions, and also includes discussion of what it means to be a Centre of Innovation from the perspectives of different participants, and some implications for policy and practice.

Chapter 2 discusses the use of action research methodology, the video and narrative documentation that was gathered about learning episodes where multimodal literacies were evident, and data gathered to explore different perspectives on various modes in communicative competence. The research team’s approach to data analysis is discussed.

In Chapter 3 we discuss our theoretical positioning, the thinking of those who have been a key influence, and the concepts that have shaped our understanding and helped us further develop our ideas developed during the COI project. This includes a discussion of the ways in which the work
of Gunther Kress and his colleagues has contributed to our thinking, particularly the idea that
different modes may offer different capacities or affordances to facilitate various kinds of learning
(Kress, 2000). We were also helped by Margaret Carr’s ideas on affordance, especially her focus
on the particularities of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) setting and the New Zealand
context (Carr, 2000). This chapter draws on data to address the first question of the meaning of
multimodal communicative competence in an ECE setting.

Chapter 4 focuses on the second research question. We identify a range of modalities, and analyse
the interplay among different modalities and their roles in helping to shape learning and the
learner. We gathered substantive documentation about modalities of drawing, oral language, play-
drama, and gesture, and somewhat less substantive documentation about modalities of writing,
dance, and movement. (The latter documentation was only less substantive because of time
constraints in gathering and analysing data. There were abundant examples of these modalities and
others within the kindergarten.) This chapter also draws on data to explore Kress’s ideas of
different modalities offering different capacities or affordances (Kress, 2000) to facilitate various
kinds of communication and learning. These different capacities may make different modes better
suited to some tasks than to others, either separately or in combination.

Chapter 5 discusses literacy as a social practice. During the course of the project we came to
recognise more fully how multimodal literacies necessitate an understanding of the sociocultural
networks of which they are part. Our investigation focuses on the role of family and peers,
significant others in the kindergarten and its wider communities, and the role of teachers. We
discuss ways in which these mediating influences came together in the kindergarten context.

In Chapter 6 each member of the team offers some individual commentary on the experiences and
insights they gained from being part of the round three COI programme. The accounts are a mix of
looking back and looking forward, analysis and reflection, practical and theoretical, personal and
professional. They highlight ways in which our involvement in the project helped shape both our
teaching and research practices. The discussion includes a focus on factors and systems which
helped us progress.

The conclusion (Chapter 7) highlights insights from the project and suggests ways in which the
key findings contribute to the growing body of research on multimodal literacies, and to forging
“different possible pathways” to curriculum and documentation. It highlights some policy and
practice implications, and discusses ideas for further research.