Playful literacy: First-graders as meaning-makers in the literacies of play, the creative arts, and the language arts

Judith Macdonald Fueyo

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Abstract
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Fundamentally, this study asks language arts curriculums to honor a range of meaning making gestures or literacies including play and the creative arts. Consequently, it challenges the time-honored "basics" and asks educators to rethink "literacies."

Keywords
Education, Early Childhood, Education, Elementary, Education, Language and Literature, Education, Sociology of
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Fueyo, Judith Macdonald, Ph.D.
University of New Hampshire, 1990

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PLAYFUL LITERACY: FIRST GRADERS AS MEANING MAKERS IN THE LITERACIES OF PLAY, THE CREATIVE ARTS, AND THE LANGUAGE ARTS

BY

JUDITH MACDONALD FUEYO

B.A., English Education, Merrimack College, 1965

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Reading and Writing Instruction

May, 1990
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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3/12/90
For my daughters,
Anne Lara
Joanna Lynn
and
Jane Kay

Due to your strength of character,
I was able to concentrate on this work.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people skip this section. But for writers and those they acknowledge, this section matters. No hierarchy is implied.

Chris Gaudet played colleague, co-conspirator, soul-mate.

Don Graves suggested frequent times to meet and talk, yet stepped back far enough to allow me to find my own way.

Jane Hansen fed my soul (and suggested carrot cake just often enough), during our weekly lunches at the Bagelry.

Susan Franzosa walked with me many summer and fall evenings when I ran off at the mouth.

Tom Newkirk let me "circle, circle, circle," long enough for me to get it. Beth Newkirk nursed my children when I was among the missing.

Denny Taylor spent her energies and monies on long distance conference calls that helped me to focus my work.

Nancy Ellis mentored my videotaping techniques so that I minimized my intrusion on children's processes.

Don and Minnie Mae Murray invited me to dinner, for wine, for home videos, for summer talks under Minnie Mae's sunflowers.

Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater reminded me that even a single mother of three teenage women could manage "the loneliness and solidarity of the long distance writer."

Ann Vibert and Mary Comstock frequently greeted me with, "Well, if it isn't Dr. Fueyo!" long before it was for real.

Toby Gordon and Lad Tobin fed my spirit by acting as if my work could change the world.

Katy Kramer, the school principal, left me alone because, "I guess I have to trust you, Judy. What are friends for?"

My sister, Jane Caruso, and her husband, Rick, loved me.

Lynn and Roger Ritvo served as strategic planners and great part-givers.
Ruth Eurenius invoked the muses regularly during my writing.

My mother and stepfather, Kay and George Walker, acted as if it were natural that I should be doing "this thing."

Bless them all.
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ABSTRACT

PLAYFUL LITERACY: FIRST GRADERS AS MEANING MAKERS
IN THE LITERACIES OF PLAY, THE CREATIVE ARTS,
AND THE LANGUAGE ARTS

by
Judith Macdonald Fueyo
University of New Hampshire, May 1990

This ethnographic study of a first grade classroom examines the interdependence and synergism of multiple symbol systems. Children's oral language, their idiosyncratic use of time and space in the classroom, as well as their play and artmaking all suggest dynamic interrelationships with their writing. Simply put, the study asks, How do play, work in the creative arts, and the language arts influence each other?

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grade thinkers as they compose with blocks, with clay, with shadow puppets, with tissue paper collage, and with dress-up clothes, as well as with written and spoken words.

Fundamentally, this study asks language arts curriculums to honor a range of meaning making gestures or literacies including play and the creative arts. Consequently, it challenges the time-honored "basics" and asks educators to rethink "literacies."
CHAPTER I

SHIFTING LANDSCAPES OF LITERACY

Two whole days a week from September, 1987, through April, 1988, I maneuvered alternately as participant-observer and non-participant observer in 1G, a first grade classroom in a small, newly-upscale New Hampshire commute-community one hour north of Boston. I was looking for connections and disjunctures between meaning making during play and the creative arts, and meaning making within the language arts, especially writing. Toward this purpose, I fashioned the research question, How can the various expressions that first graders use be described?

Inside the classroom I gathered fieldnotes, videotaped hours of play, creative arts and language arts episodes, took hundreds of photographs of children and things they made, collected samples from their writing folders, and audiotaped hours of interviews with their teacher, Chris Gaudet.

Outside the classroom, I visited case study children's homes to interview parents concerning their children's
habits of play, reading and writing. These interviews prompted follow-up calls, and became extended conversations throughout the study. I haunted Kay-Bee Toys to learn more about Nintendo games, since these were foreign cultures for me, yet cultural collateral for the boys' stories, block structures, and recess games.

In a physical sense then, I positioned myself with videocamera to look across meaning-making overtures, verbal and non-verbal, to see what I could see about first graders as meaning makers. Here, meaning making means observable acts, including those children may not yet articulate in words, that case study children engage in as they play, talk, write, read, or work in media like clay, collage, creative movement, drawing, shadow plays, and the like. In a conceptual sense, the need for a mental position, the urge for a metaphor to describe my growing sense of this first grade experience consumed me.

Old-think in studies of literacy and learning meant what might be analogous to particle physics: bits and ever-diminishing bits of matter—fundamentals or "the basics"—were explored. These fundamentals revered words, their divisions into letters, sounds, and their potential to equal the sum of their parts. The idea that words might indeed have the synergistic potential to become more than the sum of their parts was as yet minimized in much literacy research. These "basics" functioned either as top-down,
bottom-up, interactive, or transactive principles, depending on the epistemological and pedagogical orientations of teachers and researchers. Regardless, a verbocentric symbol system mesmerized literacy research. (A notable exception is Ruth Hubbard's 1989 examination of visual literacy and writing.)

My experiences urged a notion of "fundamental" that included varied symbolic experiences, which to me appeared more basic than words—even for verbal literacy. Linguist James Gee (1988) illustrates what is paradoxical in conventional concepts of literacy:

It is this: One has either to define literacy quite narrowly as 'the ability to decode (and encode) writing or one has to define it in such a way that reading and writing do not play a privileged role in the definition. If we demand in our view of literacy that people understand what they read, then we perforce include in our view of literacy the interpretation people give to the text. But this interpretation is always done in terms of some discourse system. And this discourse system will hardly ever be one that is restricted to use with written language. Rather it will be used to encode and decode oral language and events in the real world as well. ...The job of a literacy teacher involves not print per se, but discourse systems. And that is a messy business indeed, involving as it does the world of facts, the world of social interaction and social relations, and the world of ideology (values, norms, beliefs). (37-38.)

"Events in the real world" suggests that "discourse systems" are never exclusively verbal, especially where young children are concerned. Hence, the need for an expanded notion of literacy—or literacies—that values the range of expressive repertoires, in multiple symbol systems, that
children show. Serendipitously, an idea in my personal reading offered a way to articulate shifting notions of space and time, unconventional landscapes of literacy.

**Borrowing a Concept from the New Physics**

In *Chaos*, a layman's explanation of the ongoing revolution in physics, James Gleick (1987) argues for a holistic conception of physics, for less minute accounting of phenomena into ever-decreasing particles. Instead, he urges more inquiry across phenomena to seek patterns where only chaos was expected. In a similar spirit, in my search across meaning making overtures, verbal and nonverbal, during free play, the creative arts, and the language arts, I was looking for patterns, perhaps fundamental patterns, where few had been detected, or perhaps even suspected. And I knew that fundamental need not mean most obvious. To use Susanne Langer's (1942) succinct words:

> A philosophy is characterized more by the formulation of its problems than by its solution of them. Its answers establish an edifice of facts; but its questions make the frame in which its picture of facts is plotted. They make more than the frame; they give the angle of perspective.... In our questions lie our principles of analysis, and our answers may express whatever those principles are able to yield (4).

I questioned: What is fundamental when conceiving of meaning making, verbal and non-verbal, within a first grade classroom and how could this be described?

The episodes and interpretations in this study circle rather than zero in on the traditional literacy topics of
writing, reading, listening, and talking. In the spirit of the young physicists for whom the science was mired in minutiae, the naming of particles futile, and the body of theory cluttered, this inquiry seeks a notion of meaning making or literacies that includes and respects shifting, simultaneous, multidimensional influences.

**Enlarging the Angle of Vision**

Two of the four case study children, Mick and Ed, as well as Randy, Mick's tablemate, are featured in the following examples. I want to suggest ways of seeing connections to literacy within classroom events, including conventional literate occasions such as writing, as well as unconventional occasions such as making collages and building blocks. In each situation, consider what the child appears to be trying to do, ask if is it worth naming with the child, and what, if anything, might it mean to language growth.

Early in December during writing, Mick asked, "Judy, should I tape my watch to my story? I don't know if I should put my watch here." He then positioned the watch onto his story's cover, and began to read. "**Stratham Park Story.** I can't read this first page. Can you?"

I couldn't either so he went on to the next page. At the end, again he asked if he should tape his watch to the cover. I asked if the watch had anything to do with the story. He said, "It's to tell what time I went. They need
to know." I asked him how other authors might show time in a story.

"I've got it," he said, then he drew his watch on the cover and printed a four on its face. I said, "Good solution. You figured out a way to show your readers the time in your story."

Mick had yet to master the power of the word as symbol, admittedly a "basic" to writing growth. However, simultaneously, he was juggling audience needs—traditionally considered an abstract principle for beginning writers—alongside the relationships between ideas and words—generally considered a more concrete principle.

Weeks before this, in late September, I overheard Randy reading his book-in-progress, My Trip to Pennsylvania, to Mick. Of the thirteen pages completed to that time, all began with "We are...." Mick's persistent sensitivity to audience is evident in the following conversation.

Mick: How come you always say 'We are'?
Randy: 'Cause I like it.
Mick: Not a very good reason. All the way back here (Mick turns the pages for Randy and points to 'we are, we are, we are' on each page). How about...
Randy: I have to.
Mick: How about 'I am'?

Ironically, the first book that Mick wrote and read to the class was similar to Randy's in format: most pages began with "This is..." Mick was not critical of repetition in
his own story!

However, this study asks: Is it more important to focus on the problems Mick is posing than on his solutions at this time? He is sensitive to monotony, to audience—even though he is not yet acting on these concerns. Randy, on the other hand, appears to understand better the power of words. He has more control of letter-sound conventions than Mick, yet he does not appear to be concerned with audience. As his story developed, twenty-three of his thirty-five pages began with "We are."

At issue in both these examples is to wonder What is the child trying to do?—as much if not more than—What is the child doing? What appears basic for one is hardly an issue for another!

Another episode, involving talk, not writing, shows Mick's continuing keen, if tenuous, concern with audience. As he works on a turkey collage with his tablemates, he appears to test the boundaries of plausibility.

Mick: Once I killed a turkey for Thanksgiving.
Stacy: You know what? I, my mom's...
Mick: Only I lost my gun. I...
Stacy: My mom doesn't like shooting with the guns so she buys ours at the supermarket.
Mick: I kill ours.
Marissa: Yeah, right.
Mick: I used to, but I don't any more.
Randy: If it's not this year...I don't...then it's
illegal.

Mick: It's illegal. Yeah, but if it's other years it's illegal. Only on Thanksgiving you can deer hunt. But only on the regular days, but if you're poor you can shoot...if you have enough money to buy guns or make weapons.

Mick makes fantastic claims, retreats, and regroups. He appears to be asking, "How can I mean in this situation? What can I claim? How much will they believe and still be friends? What does 'story' mean in a creative arts' context? Can I make oral fiction as freely as the written form?" Mick was posing harder problems than how to make a turkey collage that day, and I wondered how fundamental these issues were to his literacy growth. Not surprisingly, the theme of audience/friends dominated Mick's attention—in reading, writing, and play—throughout the study.

Another incident, collapsed for brevity here, illustrates how block play suggested insights into Ed's writing processes.

Late in October I asked him, "What gave you the idea to make these (bristle) blocks into transformers?"

Ed replied, "I had it last year. I made the idea last year."

About this same time, Chris and I were concerned because Ed had written only two "books" since school began. One had only three pages, the other four. During writing one morning, I asked Ed, "What are you writing these days?"

He said, "I'm working on two books at the same time, so
it's hard. Want me to read you this book? Color Racers."

Both the term "color racers" and his plans for the book were news to me, so I asked (insightfully!), "What?"

"Cars you put in the water and they change colors. I'm gonna do some funny things in this book."

"What do you mean?" I probed.

Ed explained, "Like they go inside the biggest shark...I can show you a picture of it. (He headed for the bookshelves and returned with a book about sharks.)

I asked, "How does this fit into your story?"

"I'm gonna put all my cars...a big shark...I'll..."

In short, Ed began planning a book that became his writing project for most of the year.

One day about this same time, as he was finishing an elaborate block structure during free play, I asked, "Is it good?" Ed replied, "It's my best base ever." I was struck by his consistent pursuit of "the best base ever." For as long as I'd been watching him, approaching two years now because he was repeating first grade and was part of my pilot study, he had worked on building block bases—military structures to house planes, bombs, and so forth. What, if anything, might this mean for Ed as a meaning maker in general, and for his literacy development in particular?

Simply put, Chris and I wanted to see children as meaning makers. Once we shifted our thinking, the traditional literacy frames of reading, writing, speaking,
and listening receded for us and the children. (Though for the latter, of course, the traditions had yet to dominate. If that were not the case, this study would not exist!) Rather, children selected to include the traditional literacies alongside whatever various playful, personal symbol systems they were working with. We were struck more by children's passionate pursuit of meaning than their pursuit of verbal language.

**Learning How to Mean in School**

Indeed, Chris and I were witnessing children learning how to mean in school. Admittedly traditional frames of "reading, writing, listening, speaking" are essential, but they are epiphemonema, the tips of the iceberg when inquiring into early literacy. By the study's end, Chris and I appreciated more subtle signs as literate gestures.

In the chapters to come, you will see how children like Ed and Mick appeared to set more complex communicative goals than any the curriculum or the teacher set. Many times during this study, I've felt like a member of a circus audience, mistakenly watching the center ring as the more significant acts occur off to a side ring. Of Jackson Pollack's work, his biographer Clarkson Potter (1989) said, "His figures were ephemeral creations, 'airy nothings' that existed only momentarily in midair loops of paint, then disappeared, leaving behind their vacated 'skins' on the
canvas" (189).

What if significant literacy gestures are as ephemeral as Pollack's "airy nothings"? What if we miss them, and focus instead on their "vacated 'skins' on the canvas"—only on what we see children decode and encode?

This study questions "the basics," and explores what is fundamental to the literacies of the young child. Elements that may previously have been overlooked as "noise," "frills," or "time off task" within the flow of classroom life become instead the stuff under consideration. Like Michael Halliday (1975), I think that to make sense of language, we "must seek something 'outside language' parallel to, and in close interaction with it." He suggests we use "the social system," and consider it a social semiotic. For Halliday, "...each man's relationship to his human environment is not empty, but full of meaning for him and that this meaning has been learnt through his interaction with others..." (x).

From the outset, Chris and I intended to invent a "space where anything can happen," (physical and metaphorical space), as Maxine Greene (1988) calls a classroom filled with possibility. Like Halliday (1979), we disagreed with an "intra-organism approach," which suggests meaning lies in "what the member knows," and we opted instead for "an...inter-organism approach," one that places the burden of meaning potential in the culture, rather than
in the individual (9). Like Halliday, we were suspect of questions like, What does the child know? Instead, we asked, How can the child mean here? What is the meaning-potential in this context?

Toward these purposes, Chris revamped ideas of how to use time and materials within her language arts curriculum. She was determined to offer multiple meaning-making experiences as literacies. I, in turn, planted the question, How can the child mean in 1G?—and watched.

We saw children struggle as much with reading the communities as with specific encoding and decoding strategies.

We saw that the work/play of the first grader was less specifically the learning how to read and write, and more generally the learning how to mean in school.

We would give them many ways to do just that.

The Selves behind the Work

In all creative works, the creators breathe themselves into every part. Lester Fisher, professor of literature at the University of New Hampshire, endeared himself to me by claiming that he doesn't believe in the concept of 'the self;' instead, he says we all have many "selves." I (we!) agree and find it only ethical to share my selves. Hence, this chapter stands not to deny, but to admit my ubiquitous presences—physical, spiritual, philosophical, social, political, gender-based/biased, educational, personal, and
other--on every page. This chapter stands as reminder that the choices--of ethnographic research methodologies, of Chris's classroom, of case study children, of specific chunks of classroom action and talk, of what to read along the way, and of interpretations--remain just that: choices made by the me's of this study as I try to stay close to children's lived experiences.

The "realities" to follow are descriptions steeped in my selves. To assume another person will see what I see poses potential problems in a study like mine. Jane Wagner's (1986) statement of the nature of reality, magnificently delivered by Lily Tomlin in her one woman show, "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe," captures the maddening dilemma for this qualitative researcher: What counts as real?

After all, what is reality anyway? Nothin' but a collective hunch. My space chums think reality was once a primitive method of crowd control that got out of hand. In my view, it's absurdity dressed up in a three-piece business suit (18).

Frequently, the realities I see are aesthetic, ways of seeing that are alternative, not askew. Aesthetic vision interprets processes and actions that they may take shape as new meanings, new forms, new ways of naming and of being in the world. Aesthetic vision, or "virtual seeing," creates a reality, a thing, out of--for example--behaviors surrounding block play or peripheral talk during creative arts episodes.
Minus such "seeing," these things could easily be missed, or even worse, dismissed, discounted as nothing -- no "thing."

From Kids' Eyes: Who is this Researcher?

Throughout my eight months' presence in the classroom, I moved unpredictably among the roles of intruder, catalyst, collaborator, fashion consultant, fly-on-the-wall, pain-in-the-neck, variously klutz or ballerina with the videocamera, soul-mate, casual friend, quasi-adult-child. The children's words below show best the many-selves I was for them.

Mick and Randy rush to the block corner and begin playing together. I positioned myself as discretely as possible with the videocamera to tape them. Mick enters two minutes later and attempts to join the pair. Mick says, "Get away, Mick. Don't come back. I wish no one would come here. I don't mind Judy. She has to be here."

Mick told me to skip the cafeteria desserts, "because of high blood pressure...because...if your old enough to be older than Ms. Gaudet, you're old enough to die."

Ashley noticed my name on the birthday calendar and asked, "What are you doin' for your party? I'm having a sleepover for the class, just the girls. Are you?"

Crystal and Eliza snuggle next to me and write hearts and love notes in my research journal and Abbie slips me this (see Figure 1). If size is significant, Abbie and I are of similar stature in 1G!
FIGURE 1
"To Judy from Abbie"

To Judy
From Abbie

This is Abbie
This is Judy
Elaine compliments me on the perfume I received for my birthday and tells me about hers, "It has a roll-on part. I love it!"

Crystal critiques my new hair cut, "I liked it long better."

Nicholas explained me to the new student, Tracee: "She helps out. She reads with us. She listens to us a lot."

Katy asked me to help repair the hole in the girls' lav. When I started out the classroom door to check on it, Katy shouted to me: "Wait, you gotta' put your clothespin on the hook else Ms. G. won't know where you are."

Nicholas said to a visitor when explaining my presence, "Oh, she's just Judy. She's crazy sometimes."

Early one morning Elaine announced: "Don't talk to me this morning, Judy. I'm very busy with my fisher story and I don't have time for any questions."

In December, Mick loaned me his baseball card collection. In January, he offered me his new stopwatch for "a few weeks." In February, he edged up to me and whispered, "I had a little trouble on the playground, Judy. Don't tell Ms. Gaudet. It's no big deal." Within moments, the assistant principal called him into the hallway for "a little talk."
Choosing the Informants: Rather...
Case Study Children Choose Me

Informants is a clinical term for a human relationship. And if first impressions count, as they must in selecting "informants," the selection process is highly intuitive, idiosyncratic, and practical. In light of the research question, I wanted to concentrate on specific children who appeared strikingly different from each other. By late October, I zeroed in on four children who were among my gut choices from the first week of the study.

Dawn hid behind long bangs, behind a whisper of a voice, behind a curtain of uncertainty when asked how she knew something or when asked what she wanted to do. Yet, I suspected that she did know. She talked mainly with one friend, Katy, and barely moved from her desk. She wrote long, developed stories, and was beginning to read "chapter books."

Mick was Dawn's opposite in many ways. He was noticeably strong-minded, verbally articulate, physically active: a decided presence. On the first day of school he told Chris how she could make the lunch box storage system "work better." His writing, reading, and listening processes featured sound effects, movements, minimal attention to print, and lots of attention to other children.

The third case study child fit somewhere between the others. Brian caught my eye by leaping over, rather than
walking around, the coffee table near the couch in the reading corner. He would sidle up to his best friend and whisper what seemed an inside joke, then glance around, eyes full of play. I recall wondering if concentration on anything serious was in his plans for first grade.

I added Ed several weeks into study because of his striking differences from the others. He commanded letter-sound conventions, understood "story," and was a first grade repeater, a pro. Yet, he was an enigma to both Chris and me even into November because he was not producing much writing.

These children and others move in and out of focus throughout the chapters to follow, and gradually they reveal their symbolic signatures.

Choosing a Research Methodology: Rather...

Research Methodologies Choose Me

"It's a hybrid. A study to fit you. But you don't make friends with a hybrid," Don Graves, my dissertation chair, charged playfully as he considered my research style. In hindsight, I wish I'd replied, "Don, I need to make waves, not friends!"

A research frame, paradigm, stance, design, methodology, whatever one calls the tools of integrity whereby we fashion our truths, needs to be responsive to the nature of the beast under consideration. My research question, "How can the various expressions first graders use
be described?" thrust me simultaneously into several disciplines and research paradigms because the children's expressions invited, no—demanded them.

Ways to talk about their talk led me into sociolinguistics; ways to think about their artmaking drew me into aesthetics. Ways to talk about movement tugged me into cognition. And ways to enter their stories beckoned me toward myth.

I didn't know what I was looking for; yet, I knew a paradigmatic fit when I found one. For example, certain families of thought—Halliday's sociolinguistics or Langer's aesthetic discriminations—"fit" my experience of the children's experience. Simply put, some scholarship resonated with me. Yet some caused such dissonance and frustration that frequently, I avoided reading altogether when I was wrestling with analysis.

So, the research paradigm is a hybrid. It ranges across disciplines including linguistics, aesthetics, composition theory, cognitive psychology, social constructivism, early childhood education, even the "new physics." Methodologically, it straddles case study, ethnography, and sometimes even tempts the boundaries of experimental studies.

I gambled on this hybrid because I found no more congruent alternative.

I needed to enter the culture of 1G and knew that
culture was changing rapidly and would vanish within months. So I collapsed time, in a sense, by pushing certain questions, "Tell me about this.... Do you think it's good? ...Would you change anything if you did it again?...What are you trying to do?," and the like. No doubt I disturbed the status quo on occasion. No doubt Chris and I structured situations at times—not to proscribe events, but to initiate them.

In retrospect, I needed to elicit less than I anticipated. For one, my questions to the children rarely worked. Instead, close watching, listening, constantly interrelating the fieldnotes, transcribing and replaying the videotapes over and over, sketching children's positions and postures—indeed, taking time to think and synthesize experience—produced more information and consequent insights than any verbal probes.

In sum, Playful Literacy considers the ways specific first grade children make meaning within a variety of first grade communities such as free play, dramatic improvisation, mural-making, shadow play, plastic sculpture, collage, and the language arts, especially writing. Chris opened up the language arts block to invite meaning making in diverse forms, verbal and non-verbal, and both of us wondered what this might mean for literacy.
MAKING SENSE(S) OF WRITING: CHILDREN SENSE WAYS TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN THEIR IMAGINED VS. THEIR PRINTED STORIES

The problems of semantics and logic seem to fit into one frame, those of feeling into another. But somewhere, of course, mentality has arisen from more primitive vital processes. Somehow they belong into one and the same scientific frame. I am scouting the possibility that rationality arises as an elaboration of feelings (Langer 1957, 124).

Most of the children in Chris Gaudet's first grade are read to at home. All listen to Chris read stories aloud in class. All have their own books at home. All watch stories on television. In sum, "story" is not new to them. What, then, do particular first grade children think "write a story" means early in first grade? This chapter explores the distances between the case study boys' apparent understanding of "story" and their experiences writing a story. The journey is a sensitive one.

The story form of meaning-making looms over all others for several reasons as I study the children's symbolic acts in Chris's first grade classroom. For one, the classroom ethos assumes that, while not all incoming first graders can read, all of them can write. Five mornings a week, over an
hour is scheduled to support this assumption. In this atmosphere, the idea of "story" and "book" merge for some children as they manipulate the physical trappings of varied paper shapes, colors, textures, various writing tools, glue, staples, and on occasion even digital watches! to help form their amorphous ideas—or concepts in-formation (Gerhardt 1973)—of what a written story and a book can be.

In the following exploration of "story" as viewed by several first grade children—with particular attention to two case study boys, Mick and Brian—I ask What is "story" for them early in the year? What about characterization? Who is their audience? How do they decide to end a story? How can I respond to their processes and products? In the course of this exploration, I venture interpretations that go beyond the children's texts, into the culture of the classroom, the community, and the popular culture of television and toys, and aesthetics.

**Actions Speak More Naturally than Written Words**

**Mick**

By the end of the fall, the written pieces in Mick's writing folder include a drawing of his house labeled *My House*, several drawings of rockets and tanks (airplanes); six G.I. Joe pictures with no print; *Tanks*, the first work that includes several pages mostly on one topic and displays some print; *My Trip to Stratham Hill Park*, which in the first draft came complete with his watch taped alongside the
cover so "everybody will know what time it was when I went;" and About Army Things, his first published book. (I have used conventional spellings.) Below, are reduced photocopies of Tanks (Figures 1 - 8).
Figure 1: 1 G TANKS MICK (Cover composed of multi-colored, multi-layered construction paper parts, metallic stars, a cut-out bandit-like mask glued to the right side.)

Figure 2: We are (?) (Neither Mick nor I could tell what he meant here.)

Figure 3: Flat tire

Figure 4: Space Tank

Figure 5: (No print.)

Figure 6: Tank

Figure 7: (No print.)

Figure 8: (No print, but Mick explained to the class that "this really doesn't go here. It's a gumball machine.")

By following Mick's comments to Chris as he works on this piece, I begin to consider "story" from one little boy's viewpoint.

Chris: What do you call this book?

Mick: "Tanks."

Chris: Are you going to add words to this...is it a missile or a tanker?

Mick: A tanker. Cannon balls coming out. (See Figure 1.)

Chris: Are you going to add words here? You have space.

Mick: Like they have walkie talkies inside.

Mick ignores Chris's request for print. Instead, he points to the walkie talkies, gets up, asks where the scrap paper is, and goes off to find some. Within minutes, he's cutting out paper shapes from construction paper and says to
me, "This is a boat with machine guns." He shows me how the
guns move:
Judy: Where's it going?
Mick: On the cover.

As he draws some blue water then glues the boat on it,
I notice that most of Mick's behaviors and comments circle
around two principles: making moveable things that do
something in his evolving story, and that this story emerges
as he works with paper, scissors, glue. It appears that the
"story" for him is action, or depicting things that move—we
might call this the scene of action—and that the physical
manipulation of things/art work, more than verbal plans,
stimulate his storying. Noticeably absent from my adult
stance are story beginnings and ends—either in writing or
art work. What counts for Mick is the action-packed scene.

Most of Chris's comments focus on his verbal plans for
what's next, and whether he'll add words. Clearly, all of
us are conceiving of this story-writing business
differently.

Brian

Early in November, Brian, who sat at a table cluster
across the room from Mick, was beginning a new "story/book"
as Marcia, a university intern, watched. On his cover so
far, he had drawn a rocket, a bicycle, and had printed
"POR". Then he asked, "How do you spell 'part'?" A friend
helped him. Next he caught sight of his friend Eric at the
supply table. Brian grabbed his cover, marched over to Eric and watched him ink the wheels of a toy car and "drive" it over his writing. Brian did the same across his cover. Marcia moved toward him and asked him to tell her about this cover design:

Brian: The bike is trying to go up into the rocket. Someone is trying to ride it.

Marcia: Any words?

Brian: Not yet. I don't know what it's gonna be about.

Marcia: Does this picture have words (she points to the tire tracks he's just made)?

Brian: Yeah. When I'm done. (He explains the cover in such great detail that I am unable to keep up with handwritten notes.)

Marcia: Did this happen first (pointing to the rocket blasting off)?

Brian: Yes. That's the first thing I put on the page. (Notice that story sequence appears determined by pictures.)

Marcia: What's this?

Brian: Two pumpkins.

Then he explains the large hole he made when he was coloring the blast off, but that the rocket didn't blow up because, he adds with a grin, "it's anything-proof!" He throws in several sound effects here.

Marcia: What's gonna happen?

Brian: I don't know yet. I'm trying to think while I'm doing the first page (he refers to the cover). Sometimes I draw the pictures first...sometimes the pictures are in my mind. (Pause.)

Marcia: OK. What's next, words?

Brian: Not now. When I'm done the pictures.
Marcia: Is this done (pointing to the cover)?

Brian: No, need to put in more spaceships. Then I'll put the words.

**Transmediating: Moving Fearlessly Among Multiple Representational Forms**

Like Mick, Brian focuses on things that communicate action, and his composing process, too, appears driven by physical manipulations of things: drawings, inked tire tracks, explosive sounds, and holes in his paper that he playfully explained in a writing share later that morning as "the page blew up!"

He's engaging in a kind of composing that I call transmediational and supra-logical. It is transmediational because no single form (printed words, for example) dictates representational choices. i.e., the work is not "uniform" but is multiform! It is supralogical because the order of presentation is not critical, one thing does not necessitate another. Like a musician, Brian adds sound effects as needed. Like a painter, he is independent of linear composing, free to add a pumpkin here, an explosion there, and see what the effect might suggest next.

This interpretation sits particularly well with Brian for whom writing is still primarily drawing. When I asked him at the end of the first grading period, "What can you do now in writing that you couldn't do before?" he said, "Draw lobsters." Clearly, Brian is not as mesmerized by print as the adults around him!
It appears that he is applying visual art techniques to a verbal medium, much like the neophyte at clay frequently rolls out clay strips and outlines "a man," rather than exploits the plastic medium for its inherent three-dimensional potential. I won't fret over Brian's tenuous grip on printed text. Instead I'll validate his sensible strategies to temporarily bridge the gap between his printed and pictorial repertoires.

Marcia's approach to Brian's work is similar to Chris's: she probes for verbal plans, and indicates that she would like to see these end up in writing. Though Brian does not seem opposed to her goals, they are not his goals at this time. Paying attention to how he detours Marcia's focus on words is comically telling: "Not yet," "When I'm done," "I don't know yet," "I draw the pictures first," "Not now," "No." Instead of a focus on words, Brian wants his page to explode with action and he is invested in making it more of what it is— an action-packed scene.

What is "Story"?

As differences between child and adult goals became clearer to me, I pursued more questions with any children who looked interruptable. I was concerned about the term "story" as it was routinely used by Chris to invite the children to write. I feared that work in this "writing process" classroom might fall into a narrow range of genres, something for which process writing instruction has been
criticized.

Judy: What does Ms. G. mean when she says, "Write a story?"

Kenny: I don't know...it means write something real, or something imagined. Anything.

Mick: Just write.

Abbie: It means getting paper, staples, make pictures on it.

Randy: The new kids might have thought we had to write on lined paper. (Randy is repeating first-grade with Chris this year.)

Ed: A story...means write something with words. (Ed is also a repeater.)

Judy: Does it matter what you write?

Ed: No. I'm working on a chapter book.

Judy: How do you know when a book is done?

Abbie: I always put in two or three pages. I staple them before I start. But today I had to add a page.

Judy: Why?

Abbie: I wasn't done.

From conversations like these I learned that the borders between personal experience, exposition, and fiction are haphazardly patrolled in the children's minds. One can slip among the modes with near-impunity as most children share a reverence for the reality of make believe. If a story one child writes and shares in the spirit of a "true story," tempts plausibility, to be sure someone will call the writer on it, like Mick did the first week of school.

Katy had just shared her story Trolls, about a camping trip where she met up with, but of course, trolls! On the
very next beat Mick challenged her, "Is that a made up story or true?" "Story," then, can be either, but "don't try to fool us" appears to be the children's tacit rule. I am assured that generally these children can appreciate the differences between true story and make believe, but I am equally assured that make believe snuggles close to "true" as they are writing about it. The experience of pretending is decidedly true-to-life. This situation does influence how children handle characterization and their understandings of when is a story done. However, my concerns over the phrase "write a story" appeared unfounded.

I return now to Mick as he works on Tanks. He has cut out a paper mask and is playing with it, putting it over his head bandit-style. I ask if that's part of the story. He says, "No." Mick tapes this mask to his cover and I ask what it is. He replies, "It's a trap. These boats are going through the waterfall and crash into the rocks." He glues his boat more securely.

Judy: Why are they fighting?
Mick: They're brothers, like Rambo, but on opposite teams.
Judy: How sad.
Chris: Time is almost up.
Mick: Can I have more time?

As the writing time ends, Mick is busily gluing stars onto his cover. Notice the constancy of Mick's behavior and apparent purposes here. He says that the bandit mask is not
part of his story, yet when he glues it to the cover, it prompts an idea and he includes it. Again, art work continues to drive his composing here. And his purpose is to communicate action. Interestingly, he can tell me reasons for the action—the brothers are fighting on opposite teams—what we might call story beginnings, but has not included these in writing.

Some would say that Mick displays egocentrism, assuming others "know" his story as well as he does. This may be so, but I would argue strongly that Mick is being pragmatic: he's purposely cutting his work down to size. Claire Golomb's (1974) study of children working with clay also found this economizing principle at work: "Early productions reflect a child's...emphasis on action, and quick satisfaction with crude form-symbols as well as the youngster's playfulness and willingness to simplify and economize" (187).

What's in a Word?: Figuring Out How to Mean in the Writing Community.

Rather than dote on what one might perceive as the absence of narrative form, it is worthwhile to examine the glut of forms that make story-making complex for Mick. Imagine that, like Mick, we share only rudimentary sensibilities of written language, i.e., that we understand there are things called "letters," that we learn to write so we can "draw letters better," and that "they go together to
tell about stuff." What might this specific form of symbol-making be like from this perspective?

We can only speculate, of course, but we can begin by describing the various elements involved in writing a word. First, there is the concept of "written word," that a thing in this world like a rocket, or even happiness, can be represented by squiggles on paper. Indeed, these squiggles or letters are not arbitrary, but shapes that others recognize only if we draw them right. But before we begin to draw them one-by-one, we have to pick from the universe of ideas not only the idea that we want to represent, but how we want to say it!

One day after Mick shared his writing with the class, Ashley asked him what was easy and what was hard about it. Mick admitted, "I know what I was gonna do. I had to make up my mind first. And the hard part...I didn't know what to write in it." For Mick, the ideas are there, but they are not necessarily, maybe not even primarily, verbal. It's the words that are hard.

Brian, in contrast, seems daunted by a universe of possible story ideas. As he began Rockets Part 5, I asked him why he wrote about rockets so much. "I know how to draw them." So understanding how to make a story is largely dependent upon what he can draw. He knows he needs to control many new variables, so judiciously selects ideas he can represent two dimensionally at least! I couldn't help
but ask him, "What do you do if you want to write about something you can't draw?" He said simply, "I don't know."

Another day, Chris sat and talked with Mick about using his turkey mural as background scenery for a story, like the other children were doing. I videotaped the conversation.

Chris: Do you have an idea about a story with it yet?

Mick: (Shaking his head and frowning) I don't really want to do story. I just don't want to do one.

Chris: Why don't you want to do one?

Mick: I just don't. I don't like doing stories that much.

Chris: You're a good storyteller.

Mick: I just think I'm not.

Chris: I do. Why do you think you'd rather not do a story?

Mick: I don't know.

Chris: Are you good at doing stories?

Mick: No.

Chris: Oh, so do you think maybe you don't want to do it because you don't think you're good at it?

Mick: Yeah.

Chris: Ahhh. See, that would make sense to me. There's only one big problem. I think you're very good at telling stories. (All the while, Mick is cutting more things for his mural.) You know why? 'Cause you usually have very different and interesting details that other people don't think of. What do you think of that?

Mick: Well, I don't know...it's just that I never like...I don't like my stories that much. It's OK in writing process, but with other things, I don't want to write.

Chris: What do you like about writing stories in writing process?

Mick: Well, it gives you more of a chance (he makes eye contact with Chris for the first time, as if to punctuate that remark).
Chris: Chance to what?

Mick: Well, like it gives you more of a chance (he looks at her again) to get ready to do like real stories in your life. (Pause.)

Chris: What do you think stories have to be about?

Mick: ...Well...well, whatever people want 'em to be. But I like to do things like, I do one story and I stay on a story. I don't like really doing that.

Chris: Like doing what?

Mick: Like doing different stories at once. (Mick began to walk off to get more paper for his mural, then turned toward Chris.) I know...what I can do for a story. I'll write about Thanksgiving day!

Chris: (Pointing to the turkey on his mural) Is that the turkey that they're gonna go (she motions as if to cut off her head) to? (Mick smiles.) Oh, I think that's a great idea.

Mick: And you know what the turkey did?

Hearing Mick helps me to appreciate the complexity of storying. Nothing is a given if I am a beginner. Once an idea comes, next follows the process of figuring out which words I want, which letters will match the sounds for these words, and deciding where to begin making my mark so that my shapes will turn out like the shapes on the alphabet strip taped to the edge of my desk. Of course, I need to put my shapes in a special order, and my words, too. Unlike making a picture, it matters where I begin and end. Is it any wonder Mick frequently asked, "How many hours 'till recess?" and "Can I get a drink?" early in the fall? So, nothing is preformed, not even ideas. The wonder is that Mick learns as quickly as he does.
Knowing that for Mick, vowels are "letters that go at end of words that you can't hear. The only one I know is 'e'," helps me appreciate what he is doing. Knowing that Mick carried his mother's expired license to prefirst grade screening—to help him write the alphabet—helps too. Knowing that he "wished I had a dog tag like, you know, *Top Gun*, for good luck when I write," and that "everybody else in here can write," helps once again.

There is something mystical about this symbol-making with letters for Mick. He is aware that he cannot yet encode in even bare-bones' fashion without extraordinary effort, so he concentrates his energies on communicating what interests him in stories, ideas that emerge most naturally from manipulating the materials he does know how to manage reasonably well. *Tanks* looks much like the preschool art characterized by movable paste-on parts that his mother saved and loaned to me—with the significant addition of consonants as words. Even when, early in December, he begins to appreciate his audience's need to know "when I went to the park," in *My Trip to Stratham Hill Park*, it is his dawning grasp of the unique power of words, rather than their encoding or decoding, that is the more fundamental issue.

Mick: Should I tape my watch to my story? I don't know if I should put my watch here. (He positions his watch onto the story's cover and begins to read to me.) *Stratham Park Story...*I can't read this first page, can you?

I discover that I can't read it either so we go on to the
next page. At the end of it, he again asked me if he should tape his watch to the cover. I ask if the watch has something to do with the story. He says it's to tell the time he went. I ask how other authors might show time in a story.

Mick: I've got it!

Then he draws a watch with a four on it on the cover where he had previously placed his own watch.

Judy: Good solution. You figured out a way to show your readers the time in your story.

He appeared pleased with his idea and asked me to stay "to help him with the next part."

Judy: Do you know what you plan to write?

Mick: No.

Judy: Do you think you need more [information]?

Mick: Yes.

Judy: How do you know you need more?

Mick: I just have a feeling, you know?

Judy: Yes. (I then told him I'd leave him to work on that while I visited Dawn and Katy.)

Mick: Will you be back?

Judy: Yes, to see what you decided to add.

Mick is drawing on the communicative resources he has under his control to tell the story that counts for him. He's making use of his senses to make sense!

Stories: Where the Action Is. A focus on action surfaces frequently in early concepts of written story among the case study boys. Again, looking through Mick's eyes helps me
appreciate his purposes.

Late in September, Mick describes a story/book-in-progress to me:

Mick: Here's my space ship. Somebody's shooting the bad guys in another space ship. Here's the smoke, fire from the blast-off. They're passing the planet Uranus, and stars. Here's another space shuttle. Here's another. You know those double shuttles? They have an extra piece, you know the three when [they] blast off? I pasted this piece because it goes off...spew (see arrow Figure 10)!

His hands swoosh through the air.

Early October, he begins another story/book and Chris asks him about it:

Chris: Is this your plane story? Old or new?
Mick: New.

Chris: Why different?

Mick: New models.

Chris: Do you know the names of the tanks?

Mick: No names. You (the reader) have to make up the names.

He continues drawing a tanker, making huge gestures and sound effects, and stopping frequently to chat with his table mates, Matt and Randy. More exhuberant sound effects....

Mick: Look'it. My tanker's bloody on the wheel! (Figure 11.)

Figure 11

I asked him if he could tell me more about his work.

Mick: I added the guns...doesn't really have these. I need to add this piece you know, so it doesn't tip. He draws an arm-like appendage onto the tanker (see arrow Figure 11).
Judy: Where did you learn about these?

Mick: I got it at KP Toys (Kay-Bee Toys).

Judy: How does it (the tanker) fit into the story?

Mick: It is a different kind of tank. GI Swamp Master, Cobra....

Judy: These are not planes?

Mick: These are ground vehicles...this is a rebouncer, doesn't smash when it flips, it doesn't break. It has bombs.

My questions assume that Mick's intentions include a plot with a beginning, middle, and an end—even if he is not yet able to carry off these things in practice. I am now less convinced of these intentions. I suspect, instead, that his intentions are to communicate the action-sequences, or at least, show the vehicles capable of the actions that so fascinate him.

Late in October, Mick and Eric are sprawled on the floor working together on a huge mural. They make sound effects, and even taste their markers!

Judy: What's that?

Eric: Haunted house.

Judy: Is it a play, a story, whatever?

Eric: Play.

Mick: No. Story.


Mick: We get a bunch more papers. We count the...if it's that big...and we draw. And we color it, and we staple it.

Judy: Oh, it's gonna be a huge book?
Mick: Yup.

Judy: Interesting idea.

So, the idea of "story/book" gradually takes shape as these children physically manipulate colors, textures, sizes of paper, different writing tools, glue, tape, staples, stickers, ink pads, toys, their voices—in an environment that allows lots of talk through which the trappings of the children's culture enter the picture.

Playful writers invent an idioscript/idiostory along the way toward conventional script/conventional story. Ideally, the mature writer recaptures a spirit of playful invention, but of course, uses it by choice, not default. Mick's "story" is not my "story," and if I expect it to conform to my notions I will characterize it with labels of the sort I've mistakenly used for lack of better terms by comparing it to "a middle," "an episode," or those used by Applebee (1978): "unfocused chains," "sequences," "primative narratives."

Applebee's categories doomed him to deficit labels because he was looking at child storying through the conventional lense of narrative form. My categories will be doomed as well if I bring adult conventions to these questions. My argument, then, is not with either of our findings, but with expectations, and the consequent terminologies. I prefer to view this form of child
"story/book" for the unique thing it is for the child, a thing complete in and of itself, and call it "story."

Anne Haas Dyson (1988) best expresses what I find true of the case study boys' stories: "Narrative and non-narrative may not be the most meaningful higher level categories for investigating children's writing growth.... Rather than categories related to form, those related to children's purposes and to their stances may provide more insight" (385).

**Play Fights and Tadpole Stories.** One day as Chris and I savored chewy apple pan dowdy in a hole-in-the-wall lunch cranny in Portsmouth, she relived a recent interview about "story" that she'd had with Kenny, Brian's best friend and frequent writing partner, as Brian listened in.

Chris: I've always had trouble with boys' writing that misses reasons for good, bad guys...reasons for the battles, the explosions, the wars. When I ask why? Why blow things up?, I usually don't get reasons. How come?

Kenny: I don't know.

Chris admitted to me that she "definitely pushed Kenny for reasons for the fighting." Finally, she asked him about the fighting at recess. She said that it looks like many boys run in groups and have battles. She asked him if this was true.

Kenny: Yup. I do it. Lots of us do.

Chris: That's what I thought. And that's OK. But I want to know, do you get angry in the fights at recess?

Kenny: No.
Chris: I'm confused. So you fight?
Kenny: We play fight.
Chris: So it's not about anything?
Kenny: No. Just fight.

Chris: So, your stories are like this? Play fights?

She said to me, "Kenny looked at me like I had two heads! as if to say, 'Of course we play fight!" Then Chris and I talked of how Catherine Garvey (1977) discovered that preschool children playing mailman, or mommy and daddy, for example, don't have plots, or conventional stories as they play. Instead, they participate as stock characters, they role play bits of scenes. The boys' storying is similar to role playing, in that it assumes certain shared topics and focuses imaginative attention and energies on actions. Such storying shares critical features of play in general, as defined by Garvey, Vygotsky, and Piaget: it is rule-bound and imaginary. Admittedly, children's rules for writing are skittish—at times approaching convention, and at times highly idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, in this classroom, both types of rules count. And even if the topic is minimally imaginative and more imitative of video and television fare, I sense that for Mick and Brian, communicating what they know about anything—in alphabetic script—requires a giant leap of the imagination during the early months of first grade.

So, a more useful and truer-to-the-nature-of-the-thing
vantage point on this variety of first grade story would be
to compare it to a child's early drawing of "man"—typically
referred to as "the tadpole man" (Gardner 1980, Golomb
1973). Nothing is missing in the child's viewpoint, but is
included tacitly. Whether Mick can explain his reasons for
the action-story, or Brian can not explain his reasons yet,
reasons are not their points. Egocentrism is not as much an
issue in this context as the notion of a shared culture and
different purposes for story. There appears to exist an
unspoken, on-going "good-guys versus bad-guys" story
template among these boys that I consider later.

For now, it seems safe to say that the child's purposes
in both tadpole drawings and early stories are to execute
the rather sophisticated notion of representation—or
suggestive, selective symbolizing. Instead of intending
articulate, imitative, one-to-one correspondences between
the symbolic and the actual, the child implies
correspondences. Like the tadpole man implicitly contains
facial features and perhaps limbs, the story for Mick and
Brian contains beginnings and ends, but these are not part
of their communicative purposes yet.

I think that story topics are eclipsed for convenience,
to take control of what the child thinks s/he can control,
and that some boys, in particular, assume that war themes are
shared cultural collateral. Or as Levi-Strauss might say,
children are handymen/women, or bricoleurs, who, instead of
beginning with a theory, work inventively with what is at hand, as scientists of the concrete (Gardner 1982, 33). They invest, instead, in their piece of the action in this enigmatic, continuous ethos of war story. I picture it as an energy field hovering over the first grade classroom—available to anyone who wants to exploit its potential for storying.

**Characterizing "Character"**

Mick and Brian invest physical and mental energy into their stories and clearly we can appreciate these once we sense their purposes. But, what about characters? Can I assume that they are missing? Or omitted for economy? Or that these boys sometimes include them tacitly, much like Mick "knows" but doesn't write about the reasons for the actions? Or should I assume that they never intended to include characters? To inquire into these questions, I'll look at Mick's first published book, *About Army Things* (Figures 12 - 19).
This plane is blown up by this tank.
This is an armored army tank.

Figure 14

This plane has rear missiles.

Figure 15

This plane is wounded.

Figure 16
This tank is wounded.

Figure 17

My Grandpa is ending the war. It is tough. My Grandpa shot thirty-seven men in the service who were not in his team.

Figure 18

Figure 19

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mick

I am six years old. My favorite colors are blue, orange, green, black and gray. My friends are mostly in this school.

Initially, I thought characterization was probably irrelevant given this topic. Perhaps this is an information
book and will not have the trappings of narrative. Am I doomed to deficit labeling if I even pose the question of characters? I think not because of that tenuous boundary between fact and fiction, real and make believe suggested earlier. In so open-ended a situation, then, I need to remain open to what I might recognize and accept as "character." (Mick did not use any glued construction paper parts in this story. He's building fewer sense-saturated bridges into his text. By November, printed text and drawings carry the weight of his ideas.)

I suspect that I'm ambivalent about characterization in a piece like this because I expect things to look different from what I find in Mick's story. I wonder why so few boys put characters in their early stories? Frequently the girls' focus is character. By watching Mick's composing process, I gain insights into his product and these questions. Mick draws with vigorous gestures and still makes noises—noises so powerful that Marissa, one of his tablemates, requested that he write "somewhere else...some people don't like noises when they write." Could these planes and tanks be characters for Mick? Typically, neither Brian nor Mick have people in their stories, or if they do, people are not the focus. For example, Mick does introduce his Grandpa on the final page, but the machines dominate his story from page one. Even more suggestive is repetition of the verb "wounded" to account for the damage to the war
vehicles.

This particular characterization does not resemble the intentional anthropomorphism of, for example, Watty Piper's (1961) The Little Engine that Could, or Ed's The Color Racers Come to Life and the Boglins Come to Life. Instead I call it a sign of deep symbolic involvement.

A Far Cry from Goldilocks. If the proposition that in some boys' stories the machines function as characters even more than human agents do sounds off-beat, consider the following example of "story" and "characterization." This excerpt from Nancy Krulik's 1984 book, The Transformers: The Autobots' Secret Weapon, is typical of what many first grade children are familiar with—from books, toys, video games, and Saturday morning cartoons. Chris's instincts were to hide it when one child gave it to the class during the Christmas gift exchange, but I asked to borrow it over the vacation on the chance that it had something connected to what we were seeing in the case study boys' stories. Not surprisingly, I found that the story follows a generic good-guys-versus-bad-guys formula. It is not until page fifteen that a germ of plot is disclosed when one of the transformer "bad guys" hurls this challenge at one of the "good guys": "In just a few hours, the Autobots will surrender! We will rule the earth!"

For those experiencing this book for the first time, it's useful to walk through the opening scenes. The
transformers are popular block-like toys made by Hasbro. I've seen boys snatch the chance to make and remake structures like robots, cars, tankers, missile bases, and bomb shelters during free time in the classroom, while waiting in line, on the playground and the bus. Television cartoons feature these "characters" and now, as far as Chris is concerned, they threaten to invade the school day in book form.

Sunstreaker, the "vainest of all the Autobots," enters on page one (Figure 20).

Figure 20
And so the story begins with this character who is a modern take-off on the mythical Narcissus. As he shines his chrome, Sunstreaker preens before his reflection in the water, admiring his ability to change from robot to car and back again. He says to himself, "I am the best looking Autobot around...especially when my metal is freshly shined." Suddenly, on the next two pages, Sunstreaker is attacked by "the biggest Decepticon he had ever seen" and he declares, "Mess up my chrome and it's war!" (9)

The next two pages explode into a battle featuring lazer guns that hurl missiles powerful enough to blast boulders to bits. It is not until page fifteen, as mentioned above, that a more plot is offered...the struggle "to rule the earth."

With the exception of Sunstreaker, whose resemblance to Narcissus is a mental hook for me, the characters appear interchangeable but for identifying insignia. Indeed, frequently I had to refer back to the title page insignias to figure out who/what were the good guys (Figure 21).
In a characteristically adult way, perhaps, I wondered why the war? I knew the Decepticons wanted to control the Earth, but why? And I figured out by studying the frontispiece that Earth was probably only one of many planets up for grabs by this warmongering transformer tribe.

I guessed that the reason for the war was a desire to control for the sake of control, the sheer exercise of power for its own sake. Two visual forces dominate the story: high-tech battles and transformation of these transformer-machine-men into other forms. For example, Sunstreaker is robot and sports car interchangeably. The enemy giant Decepticon breaks apart into six separate Decepticons and these are known as the Constructions. "Separately (as Decepticons), we have the same amount of power as any of our
fellow Decepticons. But when we join forces, we become the Devastator, one of the most powerful robots of all! The Autobots are helpless against the Devastator!" (14) Some of the transformers are known as Dinobots, part dinosaur, part robot.

In the end, recourse to Greek myth resurfaces as the Autobots build a gigantic statue—think Trojan horse—and wheel it into the enemy territory. Of course, the enemy is duped and out jump Autobots who proceed to devastate the enemy Decepticons on their own turf.

Now, to give the devil his due, there is a plot: the struggle to control the Earth. There are characters who distinguish themselves by changing into other forms. I am struck by the dominant features of this kind of story: The characters are "transformers," not humans, but they share human attributes like desire for power, vanity, loyalty. Recall that in About Army Things, Mick's war machines got "wounded." The point of both stories is action that pays minimal attention to cause and effect, to the past, or the future. The reader is plunged "in media res" and is expected to be satisfied by the sheer volume of action scenes expressing conflict.

I am struck too, by the correspondence between this and the case study boys' storying in various media like blocks, free play at recess, the dress-up drawer, as well as print, and I will explore these themes within these media later.
Myths, not Mistakes

For now, looking at the case study boys' writing, it is tempting to wonder if they are inventing modern versions of what anthropologists Catherine and Ronald Berndt (1971) call secondary myths. The Berndts find that primitive peoples of New Guinea, for example, create stories that deal with relations between living and non-living people in order to explore man's place in the cosmic scheme of things, the big picture. Through these secondary myths, these people believe they wield power over their world.

Is it far-fetched to consider this mythmaking interpretation for children who live in the shadow of a nuclear missile base, who stop on the playground to stare up at military tankers on alert, and who frequently discuss these concerns as they play with blocks and math tiles? Is it far-fetched for these children to revel in the present, "in media res," when past and future time is often incomprehensible for them. One day while writing a story about her first week of school, Ashley scrunched her brow and asked me, "What means 'before' what means 'after'?" During the fall, a child asks Chris at about 8:50 a.m., "Is it time to go home yet?", another asks, "How many hours 'till lunch?", and another asks her about a bumper sticker, "What's NO NUKES! mean? Does that mean we're gonna' die if Seabrook has an accident?" Time for these children is infinitely complicated. And frequently seems out of their
control. In contrast, control of time in their stories--how they manage their work time and how they represent time in their texts--is theirs. And their experience of time appears different from mine (and admittedly I, too, experience time differently, at times!). What appears disjointed to me may be due to my distance from the supra-logic of childhood.

Myths are not logical--nor are some of these boys' stories--but belong to supra-logical cognition, according to Albert Cook (1980). Not unintellectual, just different. Roman mythmaker Ovid admitted a story to the Metamorphosis only if it involved a transformation of its central character, or could be construed as involving a transformation. Thus, transformation serves as a profound principle. Also, in the Metamorphosis, stories have arbitrary rhetorical presentations, in other words, they are presented in arbitrary order on the belief that "cuncta fluunt, omnisque vagans formatur imago": "All things flow, and every image is formed while in transit" (Cook 1980, 195).

Recall how Brian's storying is driven by mental images as he conjures them up and nails them to paper. He admits often that he doesn't know what will happen next, nevertheless, is intensely invested in translating his visions as they occur. It appears that he trusts that his visions will become the kind of story he and others like him
tacitly understand. In describing mythmaking, Levi-Strauss compares this variety of composing to the way a musician manipulates themes of a fugue so that they are all variations of the same underlying subject. I suspect this principle of tinkering with a communal theme is functioning within the boys' storying, as well.

On less speculative terms, control issues play into the case study boys' themes in pragmatic ways. For four months of first grade, Ed insisted on writing with a blue pencil that functioned like a totem for him. Recall that Mick carried his mom's license and wished he had a "dog tag like, you know, Top Gun" for good luck when writing. Brian writes Rockets Part 1 through Rockets Part 6 because he "know(s) how to draw rockets." Mick writes about tankers because "Judy, I'm the expert, oh, yeah, Matt too."

Between us, Chris and I bemoan that little storying for these boys looks like personal experience, the darling among topics in writing process classrooms. Now, however, I'm inclined to argue that for these children, these topics are personal experience. The level of symbolic involvement as they write indicates deep experiencing. It appears that an inner life of feeling guides their expression -- expression for which they have too few words. Frequently, instead of words, they bubble over in sound effects, gestures, powerful drawings that make holes in their papers. Nonetheless, their experience of story is real: different from mine, but
Any visitor to this first grade needs to appreciate that several children believe that E.T. is real and living somewhere in the cosmos, that heated debates on the existence of the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy rage, and that no one, but no one questions the reality of Santa Claus. Winning at math games is mysterious good luck to each child I interviewed in spite of repeated explanations by Chris that it's nothing more than playfully disguised turn-taking. The first day the dress-up drawer was introduced, we played cops- 'n-robbers and I "took a hit in the shoulder" and staggered to the floor. Brian crept up to me and whispered, "Are you really hurt, Judy?" And he sometimes whispered softly, privately to Rotten Jack, the Halloween pumpkin, as he caved in day after smelly day. When I asked him if Rotten Jack was real, he said, "He was. Now he's dead." Could it be that in trying to understand the storying of children who teeter-totter so precariously on a precipice between fantasy and fact that we have underestimated what are their attempts to control unknowns real and imagined?

**Video Cultures.** Whatever conclusions one might draw from these speculations, the traditional fairy tale with its conventional plot and character types is a less potent and nearly invisible force on the case study boys' concept of story than are the Nintendo-type story forms. In interviews
with the boys’ parents, they confided that in spite of their efforts, their children would not sit for storybook reading at home either as toddlers or now. None of the idyllic cuddly routines of literacy lore worked for their kids. How come? they seemed to ask me. They took pains to explain that they limit their children’s television viewing privileges.

So what's going on here? I asked about favorite toys, favorite things to do at home. Mick’s mother said, "Video games and art work. He never even talked about stories as he built an airplane out of cardboard boxes all last summer. All he made was loud noises. His brother’s the complete opposite. Everything's a story." I agreed that no two children are alike, thank goodness! Brian's dad said, "We don't have the videos, but he plays with kids who do. And we've been to Cape Canaveral. He fell in love with the rockets." During stolen moments in the classroom, both boys chatter about NINTENDO games Mario and Super Mario, about bombers, rockets, and tankers like we might kibbitz about a good book over beers.

So, the week before Christmas, I elbowed my way into a mesmerized heap of boys ages six through ten or so who were eyeing the Hasbro collection at Kaybee Toys. Items were variously and prominently displayed at the entrance to the store.
G.I. JOE: A REAL AMERICAN HERO—LAZER BATTLE GAME KIT
$39.99

Congratulations. You are now a member of the G.I. Joe mobile strike team. Use your Lazer Battle Field Unit and Target to defend democracy and battle the enemy: COBRA.

LAZER TAG STAR VEST: $19.99

Gear up for action—gear up for fun

LAZER TAG STAR BASE: $49.99

Can fire back! Can shield itself! Use Star Base as a goal to defend or attack! You program which game to play. For players over 8. Worlds of Wonder....

Welcome to the future. Star Base is a sophisticated, challenging part of Lazer Tag, the ultimate sport of the year 3010. Star Base adds new dimensions of excitement to the action-packed game Lazer Tag. Best of all, Star Base has a mind of its own and can be set to fire energized light beams at you!

...futuristic sound effects and a digital light display
STAR HELMUT: $39.95
STAR CAP: $29.99
STAR LYTE PRO LAZER GUN—HIGH POWERED AND HOT....

I was struck that "Star Base has a mind of its own," but was not surprised to find that NINTENDO was out of stock. This is "America's best-selling toy," amassing "in excess of a billion dollars this year--double of biggest year of Cabbage Patch" for its makers Nintendo of America, in Redmond, Washington, a division of Nintendo of Japan (Mullen 1988, 16-17). This entertainment system sells for $99.99 and with any of over a hundred game cartridges available for around $50.00 each, the player can be "Mario, a mustached little guy in overalls who must fight his way through eight perilous worlds...or can simply shoot quacking video ducks with a zapper gun."

Transformers, like Autobot Six Changer, Powermaster Optimus Prime, Powermaster Decepticons, and Pretender Beasts, characters mentioned earlier, are futuristic plastic machine-styled pieces that a child can snap and unsnap to transform at will.

I've gone on at some length here partly because I--a forty-plus teacher-type, mother of three young women--find myself in a toy culture as foreign as any place I've been before. I felt indebted to explore these worlds on the same principle that in my classroom, I expect to share, hopefully
to infect! children with my experienced literary worlds.

I do not like these toys, but this is not the point here. I like less price tags on any toys that eclipse even dreams of ownership for most children in this country. And I worry about imitation at the expense of invention. But, it's one thing for an ethnographer to enter this culture, and another to legitimate this culture in the writing classroom.

My position in the wake of this sweeping phenomena is to catch the tail of popular culture's antics and hang on for dear life, on the conviction that they will sustain the child's interests until additional, more so-called "cannonical" literary forms and themes take root as the child reads books that the classroom culture "advertises."

Just as I believe there is no stopping language change, I believe there need be no exclusive reverence for the symbolic forms of yesterday. "My mom thinks I don't learn anything in NINTENDO, but I do. I learn strategy!" Mick whispers this to me as we walk out to recess one morning. Indeed, the times they are changin' and new forms arise from what some might consider fetid ashes.

Who Is the Audience?

Once again, economics figures into this question, more than egocentrism, I think. Typically, the struggle for the teacher is how much to nudge to "get" the child to add information to what is an enigmatic story. When the well-
intentioned teacher asks, "Do you think you want to add something else here?" the first grader will enjoin any number of rituals. My favorite example of one of these happened with Stephen, one of last year's case study children (Fueyo 1989). When I was frustrated at the minimal print on an elaborately illustrated page, I asked Stephen how I could possibly remember everything that was going on in the story. I cried, "What if you're absent?" He turned from me, wrote something on a tiny scrap of paper, then handed it to me. It said, "CLL ME," and included his phone number. It appears that audience was real to him, but that to print all that he knew was impossible given his skill level and patience at the time, yet to print only what he could reasonably manage made a "stupid story." Similarly, this year when I asked Mick about adding print, he said, "But I only read it to my mom and I'll know what's going on."

Frequently during whole group share, children will request more information from the peer author. Infrequently, children like Mick and Brian revise and add it. So, am I to conclude that they are oblivious or insensitive to audience? I doubt it. For one thing, some children write for a specific audience of peers, not the class at large. One day Marissa complained to Mick that "Some girls don't like that war stuff and maybe we won't listen" (to his story). Mick replied, "So...It's not for
you. Is it Matt?" Matt agreed and added that "Some boys
don't like hearts and rainbows, you know."

Because I have only one case study girl and she does
not write about "hearts and rainbows," I will only speculate
on this topic that is stereotypic among first grade girls as
I've watched them during my two years in this classroom.
This speculation surrounds questions like What about the
functions of language in these stereotypic topics? Is there
more than meets the eye and ear?

I plan to study language functions in another chapter,
so will simply note here that stories filled with war images
or hearts, rainbows, flowers, and stars are cannonical
themes in disguise. Bricoleurs, these first grade
craftspersons, don't know about "symbolism," "imagery," or
"themes" for conflict, friendship, and identity, for
example. But they do experience these things. So, they
tell the story in concrete images, images at arm's length in
their culture. A burst of rainbow, according to Elaine,
"tells about my mommy and me." A smiley face inside a heart
is "my friend, Ashley. She said I could put her in my
story. But Cassie said, 'No!' She doesn't want to be my
friend today. Do you think that's nice?"

In our rush to "get" children to understand and use the
representational functions of language--the "This is how it
is" function--we can undervalue other functions (Halliday
1973; Holdaway 1979). Hearts, flowers, and rainbows serve
the important interactional or "I love you" function. And as proposed previously in connection with mythic elements in the case study boys' stories, language functions as power both instrumentally—"I want"—and to regulate—"Don't do that" function. These boys exercise degrees of control at least within the boundaries of their stories, though, admittedly, these meanings are not surface features either to us or the children.

All the while, Chris and I have been looking for the representational function, in other words, we've been asking the boys to tell us more about what their jets, tanks, rockets, and explosions are doing and why they are doing these things—explicitly in written text. Now I think the boys' intentions are, implicitly, to control both the linguistic demands upon them—we write words in first grade—and the cultural demands upon them—be brave young man, and protect your image of self in this classroom, the schoolyard, on the bus, and in the world at large. So they imagine power and it holds the unknown at bay for the while.

And finally, we make a mistake in assuming that the child usually writes for an audience bigger than him or herself. Halliday cautions us to honor the expressive function of language as well as the communicative one (Halliday 1973). In other words, not all language exists to be shared with others. Some of it is downright self-serving and we delight in playing with it. Period. I think that
much early storying is written by the child for the child. On purpose. S/he knows that even s/he cannot read it at times! But the delight in making the story is palpable: noises, laughter, tongue extended in concentration, sweeping pencil strokes are there for the watching. It is largely our adult assumptions, I'd argue, that place a public nature on most classroom writing. I recall Ed saying that he didn't need to read Color Racers... to the kids, even though he'd worked on precious little else in writing for four months! Children appear enthralled in the doing of the thing, making it move, rather than the done, the static. It is no small coincidence that Hasbro-Bradley is cashing in on transformer toys.

When Is a Story Done?

A continuum of rituals surround this question for all the case study children as well as others. I see it—moving from simple criteria to more complex ones—in statements like this from the children:

1. Writing time's up! (Mick the first day of school.)

2. All the pages I've stapled are full. (Abbie, Mick up to late October)

3. When we got into our driveway and the vacation was over. That's when my vacation story's gonna be done. (Randy in November)

4. I just have a feeling, you know? I need to take out some of these dumb pages I put in. I got too much. (Mick in November and December)

5. When I'm done thinking. (Ashley in December)
I decide there's enough truth in it. (Dawn during October)
The children's viewpoints speak for themselves and so I've decided "there's enough truth" in them.

**What Can I Say Besides "Hmmm..."?**

I've taken a wide-angled look at the case study boys' characterization and find that it is embedded in cinematic storying: action-filled scenes "peopled" by machines, with more and more print peppering the text as snow begins to blanket the playground. Now, what can we say to Mick who asks, "How do you like my story, Judy?"

Newly sensitized to Mick's purposes—to express action ("cuncta fluunt, omnisque vagans formatur imago"), that plot is secondary in that formulaic story appears to be cultural collateral shared wordlessly among peers—Chris and I considered our response options:

Judy: I'm reminded of the story as told by Alice B. Toklas (1963) in *What Is Remembered*. On her death bed, Gertrude Stein is known to have asked, 'What is the answer?' An embarrassed silence followed. She persisted, 'In that case, what is the question?' Do you think we've been asking some irrelevant questions of the boys' stories, at least for their purposes at this time?

Chris: Yes.

Judy: I wonder....

**Questions that Matter**

What might I say to Mick about his story? I can respect his eclectic inventiveness, his ability to improvise temporary solutions between his writing and conventional writing. I can count his idioscript as writing.

Instead of asking him for verbal plans, "What's going
to happen next?", I can ask him to "Show me how it moves. Right here, I'll move out of the way!" Instead of asking him for logical plots, "Why did that happen?", I can ask, "Can you tell me more about this (picture or construction paper appendage, for example)?" I can ask him, "What made you think of that?", or "What do you think of that?", or "Do you think you showed how it feels in your story?", or maybe even venture, "What would you do different next time?"

In sum, when I meet with Mick next I'll ask him to reflect on his own felt experience, on what he was trying to do, on his own problem posing/problem solving strategies. I suspect that for him the basics are not so much sound-symbol relationships as existential ones. How can I translate the feelings/ideas in my mind— that mind that includes the feeling, moving, visual imaging, noise-making, touching, tasting(!) me— on paper? What can be captured in print? Indeed, what is worthy of writing? What will my friends want to read? What ideas can I whittle down to manageable form(s)? What can I make that matters to me, and sometimes to others?

Yes, that's the gist of what I'll consider the next time I meet with Mick so that I honor all forms of experience he exhibits along his way to verbal articulation.

For young children, still closer to sense experiencing than to logic, I suspect that Susanne Langer (1957) is a truer guide to early storying than Applebee:
Language is the symbolic form of rational thought. It is more than that, but at least it can be fairly well pared down to abstract the elements of such thought and cognition. The structure of discourse expresses the forms of rational cogitation; that is why we call such thinking "discursive."

But discursive symbols offer no apt model of primitive forms of feeling. There has been a radical change—a special organization—in the making of rationality, perhaps under the influence of very specialized perception, perhaps under some other controlling condition. To express the forms of what might be called 'unlogicized' mental life..., or what is usually called the 'life of feeling,' requires a different symbolic form (124-125).

The symbolic form first graders are expected to embrace in the language arts class is verbal. However, Mick's and Brian's written stories hover somewhere between an "unlogicized...life of feeling," and words. It is only sensible, then, that their stories exhibit varied symbolic forms along the way to discourse.
CHAPTER III

PLAY AS TEXT

There is no reason to suppose that the aesthetics of music is an isolated cultural category. Even in the West, music is inextricably linked to language (in song) and movement (in dance), and it may serve as a frame or background for a variety of aesthetic and non-aesthetic activities. A focus on music alone may miss important associations between aesthetic forms.... Similar problems arise in any single-genre analysis (Forrest 1988, 28).

John Forrest's study of the aesthetic experiences of a North Carolina fishing community purposely makes a broad sweep of the people's daily lives in order to remain sensitive to aesthetic experiences wherever, whenever, and however they might appear. In a similar spirit, this chapter makes a broad sweep of children's play experiences and reads them as "texts" where relationships between idiosyncratic, playful signals and more conventional literate signs, especially as demonstrated in their writing, might matter. In effect, I chose to take play seriously.

I watched kids use their voices, eyes, hands, whole bodies, each other, their free time and toys, in their meaning making ventures--throughout the school day, not just during language arts. Because case study children Mick and Ed were regulars in the block bunch, I frequently videotaped block play. However, visitors to 1G during free choice time
would see many play options. They might notice Kenny and
Brian fiddling with rice in the math area, Dawn and Katy
writing a story together, Mick reading The Very Hungry
Caterpillar (Carle 1970), Kristen listening to a tape of
storyteller Len Cabral, Matt illustrating his book-in-
progress, Marissa and Ashley designing life-sized animals on
the floor from colored beads, and Stacy dressing up in a
ratty fur neckpiece and gaudy scarf!

Whose Meaning Is It Anyway?

"Why can't a woman be more like a man?" agonized Dr.
Doolittle whenever Eliza behaved like a typical woman
(whatever that might mean!). Assumptions like Doolittle's
that imply one person's or group's processes are applicable-
even superior—to any other's are suspect to be sure.
However, like assumptions plague child study whenever
adultcentric views intrude upon child-meanings.

Typically, many adults expect the block corner in a
primary classroom to be a place where children take a play
break, dabble in social matters, and ignore academic
concerns. The day the principal popped into 1G during
language arts and challenged, "Are they just playing?", Chris and I knew we needed to make play serious for the
skeptic. What was happening, for example, in block play
besides developing math concepts, exercising children's
symbolic repertoires, satisfying children's needs for
muscular activity, and balancing curricular demands for
linear thinking? Though I'd argue that these three considerations are reasons enough to support block play, there is more to it.

The block corner is a showcase where significant literacy issues, different per child, are dramatized. Gradually as I watched the case study boys play with blocks, they revealed what they needed to support their literacy learning—a learning that is fundamentally social.

Garroloous Mick, an inventive meaning maker who scavenges the classroom for ways to communicate in writing, reveals his school agenda—what I'd dare to call his personal first grade curriculum. Ed, like a long-distance runner, purposefully and quietly pursues separate, long-term projects whether he makes meaning in block play or writing. And orderly Randy builds block structures that are three dimensional versions of the forms his writing takes. In this chapter then,

play is interpreted as "text," where young children "play out" their learning needs in general, and their language learning needs in particular. And

play is "dynamic text" because, like writing and many symbolic acts, it invites interrelationships along three levels: 1) language meanings both literal and functional; 2) imaginative artifacts, intentionally though not necessarily planfully created by the child; and 3) work patterns/rhythms. And

play is "ecologically-sensitive text" because it offers a natural, minimally intrusive environment for studying child meaning-making. Of all classroom events, play enjoys the least restrictive situation and, like work in the creative arts, its distinctive features include the role of the imagination, and child-designed rules.

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Because this whole chapter is my "reading" of children's block play as "text," I will allow the idea to grow gradually without further explanation here. However, the second two ideas, play as "dynamic text" and play as "ecologically-sensitive text," need more introduction.

Compare the three levels of meaning in play as "dynamic text" to colored filters in a camera lens. Each lens can be lighted individually--I could consider, for example, only the children's words as they play--but in real life, all three levels function simultaneously and meaning potential is multiplied. The three dynamic levels of meaning making--the individual child's language uses, imaginative artifacts, and work/play rhythms--emerge in what might be called the child's symbolic signature.

Simply put, Chris and I thought that once children's individual symbolic signatures became evident in play, that most natural of child meaning making situations, we needed to ask: Are these different symbolic signatures being honored in the literacy curriculum?

Ways with Blocks

The most obvious features of play as "ecologically sensitive text" are that kids choose what to do, they make up the rules and the rituals, and they pace themselves. Given these freedoms, it's safe to assume a "fit" between child and play situation in 1G.

"The block bunch" generally meant three regulars,
including two of the case study boys, Mick and Ed, from whom I learned my way around the block community. Regulars make up the rules, mostly tacit. For example, regulars are territorial: they get to the block corner fast and first, and they stake out their piece of the carpet by piling up their blocks alongside themselves before they begin to build. They verbally negotiate for blocks others have claimed, tread carefully around others’ structures, seek permission to improvise with another’s structure, and talk freely but appear free to ignore one another. Rituals include demolition privileges. The block bunch destroy only what they and/or their partner(s) build; and they preserve structures long enough to "show Ms. Gaudet" and interested others at the end of free play.

Properties inherent in the block medium include pieces whose shapes, sizes, and colors are givens: preexisting materials ready for the child’s immediate use. The child need not alter the separate blocks themselves, unlike the transformations s/he might have to effect on a word -- (for example tinker with spelling and handwriting before it goes public!). Even topics for block compositions are "givens" to a degree, as I observed mainly war themes--block bases, bomb shelters, tankers, transformer jets--even when the occasional girl joins the group.

What hooks kids on block play seems to be its instant gratification and instant transformation properties. For
example, in contrast with writing, children need not labor to "draw the letters," to spell words out, to proceed left to right, to attempt painstaking revision with blocks. They need not concern themselves with linguistic conventions at all, neither story, nor topic, indeed, not even words! They need have nothing in particular "in mind"; instead, they proceed according to what is "in muscle," or what looks good visually, or what makes things move—as they build.

The several block incidents or "texts" to follow suggest rather than systematize ways to consider several dynamic, overlapping elements of language growth, particularly writing, speaking, and listening. I omit connections to children's reading growth altogether in order to focus on their writing.

Even then, I do not explore the same questions equally for Mick and Ed and the children who interact with them here or anywhere in this study, because neither I nor any teacher captures identical qualitative information for all children. For example, one play episode may lend itself best to linguistic analysis, another to consideration of the block structures, while another episode cries out for analysis of a child's work rhythms. I catch-as-catch-can and run with it.

The Block Bunch

One afternoon early in October, I videotape Mick, Ed, and Randy, "the block bunch," as they commandeer the block
Quickly, they select the blocks they might need, negotiate for others, pile their choices beside themselves, and begin to work on separate structures. Mick tries to position a cylindrical block on a pointed one and it rolls off. Randy states that he's making a garage.

Mick: I'm making a garage, too. O.K.?

This "O.K." was directed to Ed as Mick places a matchbox car inside his structure.

Judy: What are you making?

Mick: Something for my army...Ed's army cart.

He reaches into his structure, pulls the car out, drives it around himself, all the while making sound effects:

Mick: You guys, can I please use it (a block he needs)? I'll never be your friend. (No response from the others.) I'm not gonna be your friend.

Ed: He is (gesturing to Randy across from him). I already have a good friend (he hugs his toy Boglin monster).

Randy: And me too.

Mick: And me, too, 'cause I'm gonna be your friend even though you don't like me.

Ed: O.K.

It's powerful to consider the three layered dynamics of the above situation: the literal and functional meanings of the children's language, the things they make, and their patterns/rhythms of work.

To begin with language use, an inquiry into the literal and functional aspects of children's words—even a cursory
inquiry made in this spirit—need not complicate something that many might claim is obvious all along. Admittedly, a gut-level reaction to Mick's transactions above might be, "So he's an argumentative kid. Who needs linguistic terminology to make that call? Leave it to academe to make the simple complex!" Instead, linguistic terminology can help demystify language, help us understand how we unintentionally send mixed messages at times ("Nice girls don't talk that way"), and why we might simply say, "Can you think of a better way to say that?" So, rather than complicate things, linguistic explanations, as opposed, for example, to psychological or personal explanations, can defuse confrontational situations and, more importantly, help children consciously experiment with how language works. But before teasing out meanings from the play episode above, several definitions are helpful.

**Coming to Terms**

**Language**

For this chapter, "Language" means the literal meanings—what words stand for in the world, and "functional meanings"—or how language is exploited to make meaning. (Halliday 1975; Bloome 1989). Halliday and Bloome describe functional meanings in similar ways. For example, words act in Instrumental ways to mean: "I want," and they act in Regulatory, Controlling and Disvalidating ways to mean: "Do as I tell you." Words act in Interactional ways: "Me and
Words function as Heuristics or Questions: "Tell me why?" and they act in Informative ways: "I've got something to tell you." To be sure, words allow us to be Imaginative, to whisper: "Let's pretend."

At the literal level, Mick spoke the word "friend" many times above, yet many of his words and actions got him in and out of favor with "the block bunch." What are the relationships between this apparent paradox: literally solicitous words riding on functionally offensive/defensive horses? Mick's language use during block play frequently becomes the text where I explore these relationships by asking:

* What is the child doing/making with the literal and functional levels of language use? Here, it appears that Mick is trying to make friends even more than a block structure.

* What is the child's functional flexibility? or What language options does he use in his efforts to make meanings? It appears that Mick functions mainly on the ends of an "I love you"--"Don't you dare do that" continuum!

How meaningful might a teacher's understanding of these relationships be to Mick's literacy growth in this classroom where meaning is socially constructed? And of course, how meaningful might Mick's understanding of these relationships be?
Imaginative Artifacts

"Imaginative artifacts" includes the non-verbal end products made by the children, like block structures, as well as verbal end products that are imaginative, such as stories about their block structures. Where young children are concerned, I suggest that the imaginative use of language needs to include and validate other forms through which children express themselves as they grow in their use of words.

Admittedly too, I aim to purposely blur the cultural and academic hierarchies between composing in one medium and another. I respect the discrete natures/potentials of different aesthetic forms, say dance versus poetry, yet I respect too the child's transmediational nature. I am decidedly leery of handicapping children early in the literacy game by forcing them to play exclusively by verbal rules. So, where appropriate, I will draw connections among block structures, children's oral stories about them, and written stories by the children. In sum, all these imaginative end products will be considered "artifacts" that matter for language growth.

Patterns/Rhythms of Work

Finally, "Patterns/Rhythms of Work" means the ways children use the context: how they move about, how much they use other people and things, and how they pace themselves. Children like Mick are "sweepers"—covering the classroom
and asking many questions as they scavenge for ways to express themselves. Some like Ed and Randy are "rooted"—minimally mobile perhaps because they focus best by going inward, or because they simply appear more secure with a predictable routine, including where they sit, with whom they talk.

By noticing these three dynamics ongoing while children play, one begins to see individual symbolic signatures come into focus and more importantly, their impact on classroom "work" in literacy arenas becomes clearer. Keeping this in mind, I return to the block bunch and notice Mick driving his car around Randy and shouting, "Space, space, space...AWWWW shoot all mechanical guns. Shoot all mechanical guns."

Meanwhile, Ed continues to work quietly as he straddles his structure, faces it squarely, to see the symmetry, perhaps. As usual, he uses both hands simultaneously. Randy works quietly too. Not Mick. He drives his car up the ramp he has built, shouts "Yahoo!", twists the car in mid-air, makes more explosive noises, tosses the car over his head, and scrambles after it.

Below are my free sketches of the boys' structures drawn from the videotape ten minutes into the free play (Figures 1 - 3). Note, too, how Mick's title, "Something for Ed's Army Cart," has included Ed's ideas with his own.
Figure 1
Randy's Structure October 6 - "A Garage"

Figure 2
Mick's Structure October 6 - "Something for Ed's Army Cart"

Figure 3
Ed's Structure October 6 - "My Best Block Base Ever"
Forty minutes later, and moments before the free choice time is up, I notice that Randy has added some detail, but has made no substantial changes. Mick has made structural changes and additions (in blocks and sound effects), and Ed has quietly made substantial, elaborate additions and changes. Of all three structures, Ed's exploits what art critic Nelson Goodman (Gardner 1980) calls "repleteness" or what I call "the blockness" of blocks. Ed manipulates the potential inherent in the medium to express a symmetrical design of various shapes and colors. There's a solid yet fluid character to his structure. I ask the three boys to tell me about their end products.

Randy: [It's] a garage.

Judy: How does it work?

Randy: Open these right here (he opens doors), and you go in. Or these, I'll show you.

He goes behind the structure and opens more doors. I comment that it's strong enough to stand even when he opens the doors, and ask if he knew it was going to happen like that from the beginning. He nods "yes," but adds, "I don't know how though." If Randy can be taken at his word, I'd call this an example of kinesthetic knowing, something he "knows" in a tactile, non-verbal sense.

Judy: So you have plans when you build blocks?

Randy: Yes.

Judy: How 'bout you, Ed?

Ed: I just...doodle around with the blocks and I...and then
Randy: Then when you're done, you think, you know? Chris announces that it is time to finish up and put play things away, but all three boys are absorbed and continue to build. Mick is making sound effects as he drives his car over a ramp. Next he moves the ramp a bit, and positions the car for a jump. Randy explains his structure to me.

Randy: This is where the smoke comes out. And here's the house in here. And this is the garage where they park.

Briefly, I'll pause here to characterize the global features of the boys' symbolic signatures—so far.

**Mick.** Mick moves a lot and talks constantly to himself or with others as he builds a big, randomly-colored, solid-looking enclosure for his car, with a ramp, and parts that open and close. He borrows a topic from Randy, though he appears more concerned with friends. He reads the social situation—that Ed maintains a tacit position of leadership in the block bunch—because Mick seeks Ed's approval, not Randy's, to make a garage. In sum, Mick demonstrates a preferred style of meaning making: spontaneous, mobile, tactile, verbal, and social. He appears equally fascinated with tangible moving things and with intangible issues of friendship and social hierarchies.

**Ed.** Ed builds what promises to become an elaborate, symmetrically colored and shaped, static structure. He
talks and moves little as he considers adding a block, pauses, adds it, and another. With both hands simultaneously, he positions blocks of the same shape and color on opposite sides of his growing structure. Kinesthetic and visual senses drive his building. He chooses blocks slowly, handles them, visually estimates their positions before he adds them, and makes frequent changes until he appears satisfied. And so, Ed demonstrates a preferred style of meaning making: quiet, elaborately designed both visually and structurally, highly tactile, planful and self-critical (appears to work toward some inner vision). His attentions are focused more on his structure, less on the social situation, perhaps because he is the leader of "the block bunch."

Randy. Randy talks intermittently, yet moves very little, as he builds an all red, square enclosure. He does not estimate visually; instead, his composing process is one of trial and error. Only after repeated attempts to layer blocks in the same futile positions does he make changes. It's safe to say that Randy prefers a degree of predictability as he makes things, though he does not yet anticipate more specific consequences of his overall plans.

Playing with Meanings

The word "play" connotes an irreverence for what looks quite like work to me. Frequently with these children, play and work behave as one thing. As they play, they work at
making meaning in several ways. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the dynamics of the children’s language, artifacts, and rhythms as they play:

Using Words "Good" Takes More than Words

Is it useful/possible to isolate verbal language in the block corner from other actions even in a study of early literacy? Probably not. At least not for long. Ironically, however, until I can imagine non-linear ways of examining non-linear experiences in this study, I’m tied to words and to a discussion of their separate features, even though I know they exist synergistically! This said, I’ll begin with several overarching insights from cognitive psychology that show what child talk at play suggests for thinking. Next, linguistics contributes ways to talk about talk, to consider, for example, its literal and functional features mentioned earlier.

Talk Can "Move" One's Thinking and Moving Can "Talk"!

Mick uses words both for communication and self-expression—words for others, and words for himself—uses evident in his written stories. These two aspects of speech share properties of what Vygotsky called "egocentric speech...[speech] on its way inward...intimately tied up with the ordering of the child's behavior" (Vygotsky, 1986, 86).

At play, and in story writing described in the previous chapter, Mick manipulates things and words as he composes
ideas; the manipulation of words and concrete materials is instrumental in—"intimately tied up with"—his thinking process. For Vygotsky, egocentric speech becomes an instrument of thought in the proper sense: in seeking and planning the solution of a problem. Neither the speech nor the action are independent, but of one "mind," if you will.

"Egocentric speech" then is acutely connected to action on the world, and neither Mick nor Vygotsky lose sight of this dynamic relationship between action and words: speech influences action and action influences speech.

Although Piaget agreed that egocentric speech accompanied child actions, he argued it did so in an incidental, passive fashion. He claimed that egocentric speech was simultaneous with action but not necessarily a function of it. In other words, because he chose to focus on action, Piaget minimized the dynamics between words and action on behavior. (Equally problematic yet misguided, I think, is the practice of inferring in-head operations of a child in general, but particularly from observing mainly linear, logical tasks.) Piaget claimed that egocentric speech died out to become "inner speech" as the school-aged child became better able to plan his actions ahead in-head.

However, because I suspect that egocentric speech and "inner speech" are not entirely verbal—or at least that they respect the dynamics of physical activity—I am situated in a problematic juncture somewhere between Piaget
and Vygotsky and their slightly different interpretations of "thought."

Although I truly doubt Piaget intended it, the temptation to equate speech and thought is too neat in his scenario. However, Vygotsky clearly leaves open critical theoretical space for thought that is non-logical, non-linear, non-linguistic. Thomas Biddell (1986) cites Vygotsky on the dynamics between the inner and outer aspects of speech:

...two planes of speech. Both the inner, meaningful, semantic aspect of speech and the external, phonetic aspect (which) though forming a true unity, have their own laws of movement (14).

Vygotsky argued that egocentric speech is a function of action, and it does not die out, but becomes interiorized as "thought." This thought does not necessarily follow the same "laws of movement" as speech, though like speech, remains an instigator of action. Bidell interprets Vygotsky once again:

As external speech is internalized, it is not simply absorbed by increasingly silent pronunciation but is reconstructed to serve a new purpose. Thus differentiation of a speech function is accompanied by a restructuring as speech is internalized.

It would indeed be surprising if such a basic difference in function did not affect the structure of the two kinds of speech (14-15).

Playfully, I like to envision that our minds take shortcuts across varied "speech structures": that muscle memory plays ball with verb choices; spatial/visual memory
triggers adjectives; emotion fuels syntax; and meaning-
potential resonates in yet-to-be-fathomed ways.

Less speculatively speaking, because Vygotsky leaves
more theoretical space than Piaget for the non-linguistic
aspects of thought, Vygotsky was careful to avoid what I
consider a critical underconceptualization of "thought." By
refusing to exaggerate the similarities between inner speech
and words, he avoided a monistic interpretation of thought:
that it is necessarily one with language, hence linear and
overwhelmingly logical.

Recognizing the danger of a monistic view of thought is
crucial to this study if play and work with artistic
media are to be considered important influences--
however indeterminate--on children's options for
thinking--in words or other forms.

How confining the classroom that values verbal thought
but neglects other forms. As Elliot Eisner cautions, the
nets we know how to weave, and the nets we cast, determine
the kinds of fish we will catch. In the foreboding
conclusion to his essay, "Late Night Thoughts on Listening
rejects any verbal language that permits humanity to
engineer annihilation by nuclear holocaust. Words are not
enough to imagine the best of possible worlds.

It appears, for example, that Ed's composing processes
are fueled by visual and kinesthetic influences, more than
audible talk. Indeed, he is often a loner. In contrast,
the dynamics of talk and action are critical for Mick's
composing process. His stories grow from paste-on moving parts and his block constructions grow as he moves himself, the blocks, his sound effects and words in and around Randy and Ed.

In looking back at Ed's block building and writing habits over two years, the contrast remains: Ed never behaved like Mick—should one counter that Mick is simply on an earlier developmental level than Ed.

This is the case, I'd agree, but for Mick, it is not the significant point. Most likely Mick will "tame down" as his school years progress, and talk will "do" for much of his learning. But I'd argue that such taming-to-listen instead of encouraging-to-talk-and-move is more a function of school culture than his preferred meaning-making patterns.

**Some Historical Precedents for Talk**

Talk, especially teacher talk, has enjoyed a privileged status in education for a long time. Consider the child of Emile's time. Rousseau (1762, 1979) describes how eighteenth century teachers/mothers/caretakers literally swaddled youngsters and hung them on hooks so that they could listen, but not get into trouble!

John Dewey (1900, 1902, 1956) reports his frustration as he scoured the Chicago area for movable desks suitable for his lab school. One exasperated storekeeper exclaimed that the desks he sold were built for children to listen
Stanislavski (see Benedetti 1982), dramatist and acting coach, revealed a fundamental shift in his acting methodologies. Early in his career, when he'd begin to rehearse a scene with actors, he insisted on a verbal understanding of characters' motivations, histories, lives. He'd sit his actors in a circle for read-throughs, stopping to discuss feelings, reasons for doing/saying this or that. Later in his life, he did not permit reading or discussing the scenes. Instead, he'd minimally describe a particular scene, then he'd have the actors move through the action as they felt it should go. Stanislavski and his admirers worldwide claimed that the actors understood their characters more intimately, more naturally, more fully.

How present-day schools reify talk was captured in Paul Willis's (1977) ethnography of poor working class students in England. In Learning to Labor, the term leveled by "the lads," or the noncomformists, on "school conformists," was "ear'oles" or "lobes." The term "ear'ole" itself "connotes the passivity...they are always listening, never doing: never animated in their own internal life.... The ear is one of the least expressive organs of the human body: it responds to the expressivity of others" (14).

Beseiged by a historical legacy for so-called homogeneous, appropriate classroom demeanor, yet suspecting that different practices are needed for Mick and Ed, it
becomes crucial to ask how Mick's and Ed's different meaning-making processes can be honored across language learning contexts in the same classroom.

**Imaginative Artifacts: Exploring Relationships between Block Play and Young Writers**

**Randy.** It is interesting to notice the similarities among Randy's block product, "A Garage" (see Figure 1 page 82), the words he uses to describe the garage and how he plans it, and the story he is writing about this same time.

Randy's block structure features a single repetitive pattern, he talks about it in a repetitive, nearly "slotting" fashion: "This is...here's...this is...," and he claims to plan both his block play and his story writing. How might this block structure compare to his writing at this time?

Randy's single work thus far is titled *My Trip to Pennsylvania*, in which twenty-three of a total thirty-five pages begin with "We are...." Several of these pages are reproduced below (Figures 4-10).
Figure 4

We're on the road

Figure 5

We're getting our key to our room
WE R GOING TO A ROOM

WE R GETTING ON THE ELV

Figure 6

Figure 7
Figure 8

Figure 9

WE'RE GOING TO ROOM

WE R1TR ROOM D9
When he listens to Randy's story, Mick complains about the repetition, even though his own writing shows fewer mechanical conventions. When Chris asks Randy if he knows how to change it and he answers, "No," she confides to me that Randy needs direct instruction in this case. I agree. But I would speculate that in many classrooms, Randy's writing might claim less attention than Mick's and I disagree that this should be the case. Surely Randy might be on a developmental plateau. His block structures support this hunch. And not incidentally, he varied his sentences in his next story, after Chris, Mick, and I gave him
specific suggestions. Revision for first graders like Randy frequently takes the long view of time: it happens later, not on the spot.

Though I am not concerned with Randy's writing, especially now that I watch him work with blocks and know better how I might help him, I would question any who felt that Randy's grasp of what writing can do is more advanced than Mick's, even though Mick's is highly unconventional at this time.

**What Are Good Questions?**

I think we frequently ask the wrong questions of children's early written work. Claire Golomb (1974) argues that to expect imitation in child drawing or sculpting is the wrong tack. Likewise, to fixate on the amount and conventionality of print is the wrong tack: we should look harder for concepts of selection, abstraction, and focus. For example, Randy's work is conventionally readable to an outside visitor to this first grade. Nonetheless, he fails to abstract and create a story line. He writes in a cinematic fashion, documenting the events in meticulous sequence. Consequently, he frustrates a discriminating audience like Mick and Chris.

This makes me wonder: If Randy's purpose was to write an interesting personal narrative, as I believe it was—is writing that fails to honor the principles of abstraction more advanced than writing that lacks mechanical conventions
but is somehow more interesting, more selective, more story-like?

Returning to Randy's comments on his block composition, he suggests that the "they" of his house/garage composition do not concern him. Again, characters are rarely essential to the case study boys' plans in early composing, in words or blocks.

Judy: Who's 'they'?

Randy: I don't know. This opens and closes, so does this back.

Now, I leave Randy momentarily to consider how Ed's block work might inform my understanding of his writing.

Ed begins to critique his own finished work for me (Figure 11):

Figure 11

HAND-SKETCHED RENDITION OF ED'S FINISHED 'BEST BASE EVER'.

But it got too complicated to sketch!
Ed: This is...this is one of the greatest bases I ever did.

Judy: I think it is. Why is it?

Ed: 'Cause. I did hard work on it.

Compare Ed's block composition (Figure 12) to architect Frank Gehry's model for the Walt Disney Philharmonic Concert Hall to be built in Los Angeles over the next three years (Monitor, Dec. 16, 1988, 23).

Figure 12

PROFESSIONAL ARCHITECT'S MODEL.

Block historians and architects alike delight in deciphering the role blocks played in Frank Lloyd Wright's
composing processes. In his autobiography, Wright recalls the gift of blocks given to him as a young child by his mother:

[The] small interior world of color and form now came within grasp of small fingers. Color and pattern, in the flat, in the round. Shapes that lay hidden behind the appearance all about.... Here was something for invention to seize, and use to create.... I soon became susceptible to constructive pattern evolving in everything I saw. I learned to 'see' this way and when I did, I did not care to draw casual incidentals of Nature. I wanted to design (Provenzo and Brett 1983, 3).

Similarly, Albert Einstein was fascinated by blocks as a young child and is said to have credited his Theory of Relativity to his playing with concepts of time and space in visual, child-like ways.

Surely cause-effect claims are fool-hearty, yet the level of concentration visible in the block corner leads me to think that something good—and necessary—is going on with the children. And, such observations are helping me understand them as writers.

Characteristically, Ed pursued one writing project for several months, much like he improvised on the same topic in blocks for more than a year. His principal written work-in-progress became, by late January, that long story titled, The Color Racers and the Boglins Come to Life. Extraordinary illustrations, three-page fold-out drawings of a fierce shark, and a cavernous ribcage where the Boglins tumbled in fear characterize this book (Figures 13 - 15).
ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ED'S COLOR RACERS' STORY

Figure 13
"The Color Racers got swallowed by a giant shark."

Figure 14
"I always carry a extra pair of pepper."
I told Ed that his story reminded me of Pinocchio, and Jonah and the Whale. He looked puzzled and just shrugged. When Chris asked if he wanted to share his finished book with the class, he shrugged again. Knowing that he is not shy, we suspected that in writing, like in block building, Ed is invested in the doing, the intense pursuit of an idea over time, more than the sharing of a product.

**Mick: Relationships between Block Play and Writing.**

Can relationships be found and do they matter? Mick displays the same fascination with moving parts in his block structure and on the cover of his first published book (Figure 16). The latter actually featured moving parts for which he composed oral moment-by-moment action accounts!
Compare this book cover with Mick's description of and actions surrounding his finished block structure, "Now watch this!" He places the car on one of the block runways that he's built. He moves the car toward a triangle block, knocks it down, then the car slides down the triangle, over obstacles, and finally hits a cylindrical block and spins it across the rug, "So it blows up anything it hits!" Like his focus on moving parts in his early writing, his storying with blocks is driven more by the action he's able to create than by a plot.

Forty minutes into play time, it is demolition time,
and each child destroys his own creations without hesitation. The sheer joy of doing drives their play.

What Might Play Patterns/Rhythms Have to do with Writing?

Early in October however, I was concerned about Ed's storywriting. He had completed only three pages in a story titled, My Vacation, and two pages of what was to become The Color Racers.... To make matters more nervewracking, he was writing My Vacation in a fat composition notebook from the drugstore and told me that he planned to fill up the whole notebook with this one story, and that "It might take me all year!" I was tempted to say, "I hope not," but by the grace of goddess of researchers, I managed to keep quiet.

Looking back now as I analyze Ed's composing processes, I recall a discussion with him during another free choice period early in November. The same members of the block bunch were making things with the bristle blocks, though Mick was nearly shut out as he arrived in the block corner about a minute later than Ed and Randy.

Mick: Hey, everybody's using up all the things.
Randy: Uell, you weren't here.
Mick: Nell, maybe I wanna have some. (Pause.) Randy, are you making an airplane?

Neither Randy nor Ed look up from their work, changing parts around, remaking sections. A long pause:

Randy: Huh?
Mick: You don't know what you're making and it turns out to
Ed: Judy, how do you like my transforming jet?

Judy: What is this, Ed?

Ed: It's a jet...and it transforms into ...into a robot. (He does this.)

Judy: Do you have a toy like that?

Ed: Yup...it can turn into a jet. Watch.

He transforms the structure back to a jet.

Judy: What gave you the idea to make these blocks into transformers?

I notice Randy and Mick chatting together like two little old men squatting by the woodstove in a rural New Hampshire general store:

Ed: I had it last year. I made the idea last year.

Mick: You like mine, Judy?

Judy: Tell me about it, Mick.

Mick then describes his plane that is detailed and symmetrical in shape, not color, and he makes sound effects as he speaks.

Mick: It's an airplane and these are the missiles and here's one gun...machine gun...ptchewww, ptchewww...(and he flies it around us). Direct hit, direct hit! It's landing, ptchewww.

Ed: This is what I call a sky spy (referring to his structure). It spies and it can shoot somebody.

Judy: Interesting. Is there a story that goes with it...sort of in your mind when you work with it?

Ed: Not really.

I wince privately as I fight my verbal bias: expecting everything to be a story. By now, I notice that Mick and
Randy are working at ninety-degree angles to each other and Mick appears to be talking at Randy, including him in his storying, "Hey, you guys, Randy blew me up! Randy shot me down out of the sky. I've been hit!"

Meanwhile Ed announces that his jet can become a long-necked jet and he suggests that Mick name his plane "the air-shooter."

Notice the consistency of the boys' work patterns within the building episodes so far. Ed has been reworking a transformer structure since last year, and states that his writing project may take all this year. He joins in conversation rarely, and this conversation seems to influence others' plans more than his own. Mick, by contrast, chats his way into ideas, and moves, makes sounds, all along the way. Note how he includes his playmates in his composing ventures, physically by zooming around them, and verbally, by naming them in his story, much like he does in his writing. Like Ed, Randy is quiet, as he is during writing (he rarely can be seen away from his desk), and appears content to serve as a conversational backdrop for Mick's banter.

Come November, I observed Randy, Ed, and Paul, an infrequent member of the block bunch, building with the wooden blocks once again. Ed and Paul are collaborating on one structure. Randy appears to be building a shape similar
to the garage mentioned earlier, and makes more than six identical attempts to place blocks into positions that are not stable. His building collapses. Although he is not visibly frustrated, I am and cannot refrain from intervening, partly because this time I do not have the videocamera, and partly because I'm human.

Judy: Randy, what could you do to make this stronger, so it won't fall?

Randy: No. I did it once. (Like the big bad wolf, Paul blows Randy's structure down!) NO!

Judy: What can you do to change the shape to make it more strong?

Randy does not reply. Recall the stalemate in his "We are" story. In that instance, Chris had asked if he knew how to change the repetitive beginnings and he did not. Mick, sitting across from Randy, ventured several suggestions, but Randy did not act on these until his next story. Here in the block corner, like Mick earlier, I could not resist nudging Randy's thinking so I began building a block structure something like his. Paul noticed mine standing strong and tall, and said, "Awesome, Judy." Randy looked but did not comment, nor did he change his tactics. In both media, then, storying and block building, Randy appears not to anticipate either the effects of identical sentence beginnings, or the consequences of positioning the initial blocks in a structure.
These are instances of "the teachable moment," or of Randy's "proximal zone of development," to use Vygotsky's (1978, 86) terminology. Observing similar behavior in more than one medium gave weight to Chris's instincts with Randy. She now felt comfortable giving explicit suggestions to Randy for his written piece.

Returning to the boys, high emotions became visible when I asked Paul and Ed to tell me about their joint construction.

Paul: [It's] a Disney World ride.
Ed: Not a ride. It's a base.
Paul: I say it's a ride. I was here first. Doesn't look like an arm base.
Ed: Not an arm...an army base.

The play continues until Ed complains that Paul is not serious about their structure:

Ed: Come, on. You're playing. I'm working.
Paul: It's ok. It's play time.
Ed: No. I'm working...so we can finish before the bell rings.
Mick: I have a radical idea!
Ed: No. No. I'm not in the mood.
Mick: Can't you take a suggestion?
Ed: No.
Mick: I don't like you guys.
Ed: Get away.
Paul: Don't come back here, Mick. I wish no one would come over here. I don't mind Judy. She has to be here.
Judy: Why do you hate interruptions?
Paul: 'Cause they'll wreck it.
Ed: Yeah. They keep on wrecking it.
Paul: Where'd I put my car. This could be a car wash.
Ed: No.
Paul: We can each call it what we want to, ok?
Ed: Yeah, sure (spoken in a sarcastic manner).
Judy: What do you want to call it, Ed?
Ed: A base. (Pause.)
Paul: I guess it could be called a base. [Judy] Don't show my mother any of this (the photos I'm taking).
Judy: Why?
Paul: She'll be laughing away.
Ed: The girls are laughing. They don't like it.

The bell rang at this point and Chris invited children to walk around and enjoy what others had made.

Once again, I am struck by Ed's persistence: he's building another base and he sees this as his "work." Block theorist, Elizabeth Hirsch (1974) would agree, "Look at children's faces: happy, busy, block builders belie the stereotyped image of childhood: they don't laugh, they don't even smile--they are serious workers" (100). I am struck by Ed's clear position of leadership in this block community, no matter who else is part of it at any one time. I'm struck as well by Mick's response, "I don't like you guys."

Once again, he uses language that functions at the extreme
ends of the love/control continuum (or to use Halliday's terms, the interactional/regulatory continuum) when it comes to relationships.

To See the World in a Grain of Sand: Final Block Episode Characterizes Symbolic Signatures

By late fall, the boys' symbolic signatures are taking distinctive shapes so that the language, artifactual, and rhythmic features of this final "play text" appeared as no surprise to me as I videotaped it.

Late one afternoon just before Thanksgiving, Chris announces "free choice time" and three pairs of boys--Mick and Paul, Ed and Donny, and Mark and Eric rush to the block corner and begin to select their blocks.

Mick: I don't want the broken one.

Mark: Well, take it, you're not getting any more. (Mad scrambling for blocks ensues.)

Mick: Come on, you guys already have a lot.

Ed: We have enough.

Mick: I'm telling Ms. Gaudet.

Child: Why?

Mick: You've got all of 'em. You're not sharing. (Mick begins to walk away from the group then stops.) All you guys have more than us.

Donny: If you need any, we'll give you 'em.

Mick: At least you're being nicer than those guys (referring to Eric and Mark).

Meanwhile, Mick's partner, Paul, is silently, busily building a structure. Ed and Donny are facing each other
building separate structures, and Eric and Mark work together on one structure between them. Ed places a block in a certain position, then changes it to another position. Then he shows Donny some marbles and laughs.

Eric repositions a block that Mark has placed on their structure. Mark does not object. Eric then asks Ed and Donny for a certain block. Donny says sure. Not Ed, "No. Nobody can have any more. That's it." Ed places a block on Donny's structure. Mick decides to begin, faces Paul, and works on a separate structure and says, "I'm making... bomber. I'm gonna go get some marbles. I'll be right back, Paul." Mick places his hands on his partner's shoulder as he heads off looking for marbles. Paul gingerly places colored blocks on his structure, sometimes using both hands simultaneously to position identical items on each side. Mick is still scavenging marbles from the classroom supplies. Ed is talking softly, "Stick 'em up."

Then, unlike Randy in the earlier episode, Ed holds two blocks up before him and appears to estimate if the triangle will support the rectangle before he sets the two pieces into his structure. He places them momentarily, makes sound effects, then removes them, trying again to fit the triangle into his structure to his satisfaction. Nothing works, and he destroys the top section. Then he adds a block to Donny's structure, and returns his attention to his own.

Mark is trying to convince Eric that a certain block
won't fit into a certain place, but Eric disagrees. Mick, in the meantime directs much conversation towards Paul, who is generally quiet as he builds: "(To Paul) Can we keep our bombs? Where do we keep the bombs?" The talk between Ed and Donny picks up on the topic of "bombs": "(To Donny) Hey, we can steal...bombs and we can put it over here." Donny tests "shooting" his bombs out of his structure, and so does Eric, who manages to send some marble-bombs flying from his structure:

Ed: Holy commolly!

Mick: Come on, Mark, we really need one of those [marbles]. I'll give you two for that.

Ed: No fair.

Note how Ed picks up on the issue of fairness even though Mick is speaking to Mark. Meanwhile, Mick has found a marble and is dropping it into Paul's structure, to which Mick has added a few parts. He drops the marble in, watches it roll out, and accidentally tip over one block. Paul reacts, "Hey!" Paul repositions the block that Mick's "bomb" has upset.

Paul: Mick...don't do it.

Mick: I didn't bomb it. The bad guys bombed it...I'm telling.

Paul: What?

Mick: You said, 'shut up.'

Paul: Did not.

Mark: See, you just said it.
Mick: You stay out if it, knuckle-brain.

I will quickly summarize the remaining talk and action of this episode, on the gamble that the flavor of the play event lingers in this excerpt. Partners Ed and Donny continue to build, talking now and then but seem oblivious to the talk that surrounds them. Partners Mark and Eric tussle with Mick verbally, and Mark and Paul even consider trading Indian sunburns—twisting of arm skin—but decide against that idea at least for the time being. Shortly after this incident, however, Mick negotiates with the Mark and Eric team for marbles as if no disagreement ever existed, and Mick approaches the Donny and Ed team for blocks of certain shapes.

Ed, on the other hand, concentrates on his structure, which, again, he names as "a block base," and he even scolds Donny for changing a block, "Don't... no... leave it to me." Likewise, he warns Eric, "And don't walk over here again," as he peers intently at his work without moving from his squatting position on the rug. He maintains this focus until he overhears Eric saying a "bad word" and it appears that he thinks Mick is being falsely accused. It is at this point that Mick confronts Ed by facing him, placing his hands on Ed's shoulders, and asking, "Ed, did I say a bad word?" Ed says, "He did," referring to Eric. Then Ed stands up, says, "That's it," puts his hands in his pockets and walks away from the group toward Chris.
From across the room, Chris has watched this business brewing, and she follows Ed back to the group.

Mick: I didn't have anything to do with it.

Ed: Well, you joined. You didn't have to join in.

Mick: Well, you didn't have anything to do with it. It was none of your business, Ed. We weren't doing anything to you. It was none of your business.

Ed: Just hearing it bothers me.

Mick: Well, you should of told us.

So ends this portion of the block episode save for the following plaintive cry from Mick:

Mick: Come on you guys. Can we just be friends...forget about the war?...I'm sick and tired of the war. I'm sick and tired of war business...You guys can fight all you want against us, but we're not fighting against you.

Then Mick walks up to each boy in the block bunch and asks him, face to face, if he wants to end the war. Mark admits that he's fighting only because he doesn't want Mick and others to steal their stuff. Mick agrees that nobody will steal things, and he then attempts to join Mark and Eric in their project, moving between his own and theirs, including their topic into his own. Soon, Mark, Eric, and Mick are zooming cars in and around a common structure, as laughter punctuates their machine-like sound effects.

Because the end of play time sneaks up on me, I only have time to ask Ed about his work:

Ed: It's a base...this is where we place the bombs.

Judy: Is it a good one?

Ed: Yup.
Judy: What makes it good?
Ed: Lots of detail.
Judy: Are details in a block base like details in a story?
Ed: No.
Judy: What do you mean?
Ed: Well, this one has detail in the base because we put special things in it.

As he showed me how his bomb-proof structure could hide ships, the bell rang to end free choice, and Donny suggests, "Hey, let's play war, now, Ed." Ed begins to knock down parts of his partner's structure but Donny stops him, "No. I'll take 'em off mine and you take 'em off...off yours."

So as each child demolishes his own structure I overhear Ed saying, "Pow, pow, pow. I blew up all the bad guys," and Eric saying, "If a bad guys comes through here...it shoots arrows...," and Mark saying, "It has all secret passes in it, and...."

Note that even when the boys do name topics in block play, the emphasis is on action, archetypal "bad guys" devoid of apparent motivation, and that details are connected to features of things, structures, movable parts, not plot or story in a conventional sense. This sounds familiar to their composing strategies in writing.

These block play episodes, taken together, help shed light on the case study children's meaning-making patterns across other literacy contexts. Clearly, connections to
literacy are beginning to take shape: Ed needs time and relatively little interaction to pursue long-term projects, Mick needs to move among many resources including people and things, and Randy needs explicit demonstrations to nudge him forward in writing (and blocks).

**Meaning Systems**

At this point in the discussion, I circle back to the linguistic aspects of language functions by interpreting talk in terms of socio-linguistic functions—the "how we mean" as opposed to the referential or literal meanings—the "what we mean." The rationale for looking at language in this way is "not that it enables us to enumerate and classify the functions of speech acts, but that it provides a basis for explaining the nature of the language system, since the system itself reflects the functions that it has evolved to serve" (Halliday 1973, 57-58).

To take play seriously for literacy learning is no joke. Now I am confronted with these issues:

* The ways that child is learning "how to mean" in the different classroom communities.

* That all these ways of meaning-making—linguistic, artifactual, work patterns, and more—are ongoing simultaneously and transactionally.

* That it is transactive systems that need concern any literacy study.

* That the child's work is enormous and vitally dependent on the environment.

Michael Halliday (1975) said it best:

Let me make clear that I am not talking about how
the child learns language, but how he exploits language (in the course of learning it to be sure) in the learning of other things—in the learning of the culture, in fact. We need to start perhaps from the notion of a social semiotic—of the culture as a semiotic system, or system of information—the latter term is perhaps more familiar, but I shall avoid it because it suggests a subjective or 'intra-organism' approach (the culture as 'what the member KNOWS') whereas I want to adopt an objective or 'interorganism' approach, in terms of the meaning-potential carried by the culture (and therefore what the member CAN MEAN, rather than what he knows). Somehow or other, the child learns the meaning systems of the culture, he develops a social semiotic, and in the process becomes a member of the species 'social man' (9).

In this same spirit, I conceive of 'literacy' in expansive ways, because I agree with the paradox James Gee (1988) states so concisely:

One has to either define literacy quite narrowly as the ability to decode (and encode) writing or one has to define it in such a way that reading and writing do not play a privileged role in the definition. If we demand in our view of literacy that people understand what they read, then we perforce include in our view of literacy the interpretation people give to the text. But this interpretation is always done in terms of some discourse system. And this discourse system will hardly ever be one that is restricted to use with written language. Rather, it will be used to encode and decode oral language and events in the real world as well (37).

Because this particular classroom offers free play time and many creative arts media as "texts", in Halliday's terms, it extends various "meaning potentials" for children (and literacy researchers!). Simply put, a child's meaning potential is highly dependent upon the potential s/he derives from the social system. If one accepts this,
attention necessarily belongs less on so-called "native wit" or even "intelligence" and more on the social structure. It is not enough to ask "What can this child do here?" The better questions become, "How many ways does this environment invite the child to express meaning?", "How many entry points into verbal literacy are validated here?"

A Closer Look at Linguistic Levels of Meaning

The episode above where Mick pleads for an end to the war provides particularly fertile data for a combined analysis of the more obvious literal use of words and their more subtle functional uses—to see if and/or how they reflect one another and what this might mean.

In the full transcript of this play episode, nearly one-third of Mick's statements function as questions. His second most frequent language function is of the "controlling/disvalidating" kind where Mick disagreed with others while at the same time tried to gain their support. The frequency of these functions might suggest that Mick does not enjoy a high status in this community in that he needs to ask lots of questions, still he confronts people a lot. What, then, might be satisfying to him? Recall that he is a "block bunch regular."

One needs to ask the question, "What is Mick making here?" It's reasonably safe to pay little attention to his block structures in this episode because he himself appears minimally invested in them. Instead, I will turn to the
talk, paying close attention to Mick's questions, asking what they suggest about his purposes, what meaning potential he "reads" in the context. In other words, what can we say he is trying to do/make? How is he using language to do it? and How can/do others help him here?

Ethnographic antennae are not prerequisites for examining the literal level of meaning making going on with Mick in the episode where he is accused of calling someone a bad name! In answer to What is Mick making here? I'd say, friends. At least, he's trying to.

**Learning How to Make a Friend**

Initially, Mick appears to alienate every member of the bunch, even his own partner. Paradoxically, however, Mick also manages to align himself in some fashion—either verbally or physically—with every member of the group! For example, he says to his partner, "I'll be right back," and he places his hand on the partner's back as he heads off to get more marbles for bombs. A second time, Mick uses physical touch when he places his hands on Ed's shoulders and explains the allegedly false accusation. Later, Mick announces to the group, "We're not going to fight on you," and attempts to rebuild a tower that he knocked over that belonged to Eric and Mark. Finally, he pleads, "Come on, you guys, can we just be friends? Forget about the war?...I'm sick and tired of the war."

Interestingly, at this point, he is separated
physically from the block bunch, and is outside the circle of play. In a real sense, his physical position suggests his social one. So three indicators point to his situation as "outsider" in a sense: the functional analysis of his talk, the literal meanings, and his actual physical position in the block community.

Soon, however, he charges back into action asking Eric and Mark, "Do you want to end the war?" Then he returns to building with his partner, and announces to the group, "You guys can fight all you want against us, but we're not fighting against you." By the end of the episode, Mick and Chris agree that he owes his partner apologies, and soon after these are paid, Mick cavorts successfully with his partner, and with Eric, Mark, and Ed. Thus, he has temporarily managed to work out, with a little help from his friends short and tall, how far he can go in words and deeds, what will pass muster within this community. A beginning. (I might add that by early January Mick was handling conflict in the block corner with even less teacher intervention.)

Mick is like a little bee, scavenging for honey, only to find himself in sticky situations often. That friendship was heavy on Mick's mind grew clearer once I examined the three indicators mentioned above: the literal references to friends, the paradoxical love/control/dislike functions that dominated his talk, and his physical activity during block
The most tangible clue lay in his About the Author page at the end of his All About Army book (Figure 17).

Figure 17

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Nick
I am six years old.
My favorite colors are blue,
orange, green, black and gray.
My friends are mostly in this school.

Add to this the two pages from his science journal written during this same time (Figures 18-19). The first page reads, "I especially like Rotten Jack, my friend. No kidding. He smells."

Figure 18

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S
As Rotten Jack deteriorated, Mick wrote the next page, "I hate Rotten Jack. He's peeing. He is puking. He smells."

Add too Mick's responses to the questions asked in individual self-evaluation reading and writing interviews of every first grader at the end of each grading period. Though many children had similar responses, the friend theme appears more frequently and seems to mean more to Mick. I did the writing interview, and Chris did the one for reading this particular November.

WRITING

Judy: What can you do now as a writer that you couldn't do in the beginning of the year?
Mick: I can learn how to draw things better, like my tankers. I can share with a friend. I can collaborate. I can get published books.

Judy: What's something you do well?

Mick: I learned how to draw better pictures. My friends teach me, Paul. I learned how to write words.

Judy: What do you plan to learn next?

Mick: Beats the heck... (then he told me to scratch that out!) I want to learn how to draw planes better, the ones with wings going back.

Judy: How do you plan to do it? Who can help you?

Mick: Paul could teach me.

READING

Chris: What can you do now as a reader that you couldn't do in the beginning of the year?

Mick: I can... I learned to help friends, sharing with them, conferences. I never used to go to the listening center but I learned that it helps you out. I couldn't read at all and now I can.

Chris: What's something you do well?

Mick: I read a lot!

Chris: What do you want to learn next?

Mick: Learn how to make crafts. To share with more kids than just one or two.

Chris: How do you plan to do it? Who can help you?

Mick: I'll get a bunch of kids who are not reading. I'll tell them to get their books and come over and share.

In January, Mick included his friend Mark in a two page story titled, Soccer. The text is reproduced below (Figures 20-21). The first page reads, "Soccer. It was fun. Mark
and I was tripped from our," and the second page reads, "shoelaces 'cause they always got tangled.

Figure 20

Figure 21
When he shared his book *Football*, some children challenged the outrageous winning score. He then agreed that "that part was fiction." He is experimenting with the boundaries of plausibility and appropriateness in this literate community.

**The Whole Child, the Whole Day**

Interwoven between the above episodes, the assistant principal denies Mick recess twice early in October because he fights on the bus and in the schoolyard. His mother tells me that he is having trouble with friends in his neighborhood and at his bus stop. And though earthy language about Rotten Jack is tolerated in the classroom, language appropriateness on the playground becomes a problem for Mick. Finally, in March, the principal notices him lingering outside the school psychologist's office and this principal kindly shared this conversation with me.

She asked if she could help him. Mick wanted her to write a note to the psychologist, "because I don't write so fast. Tell her Tuesdays are good for me." So, true to his eclectic style, he sought out the resources he needed. Indeed, this situation was a first for the psychologist, because later she came to Chris and asked, "Who shall I say made the referral?" Chris called it like it was, as usual, and replied, "Self." And I recall more than one time when Mick sided next to me to admit that "I had a little trouble today, Judy. No big deal."
To add to the picture, his mother was concerned with the violence in his writing, and requested that Chris forbid it. Just as his mother believed that appropriate school clothes, not sweatsuits, "are a message...if his behavior disintegrates, he'll be going to school in a necktie," she wanted Mick to concentrate on writing neatly, about non-violent topics. Because she believed that Mick could do much more, much neater work in writing, she asked Chris to "come down hard on him."

When Chris asked about Mick's at-home play habits, his mom mentioned that he had watched Top Gun since he was eighteen months old, though he did not own Nintendo games. She mentioned to me that his father frequently challenged Mick to figure out the truth or falsity of things his dad said. "It's just his way."

So, I began to consider the connection between Mick's functional uses of language—the high incidence of disvalidating remarks said by or to him—and his position in the block bunch. It appeared that he was simply acting out "ways with words" learned at home.

Clearly it is not a teacher's place to judge family discourse styles. But if these patterns become problematic for the child in and around the classroom, the teacher and the child need appropriate ways to respond. In a nutshell, at the literal level Mick was testing the limits of appropriateness and plausibility, while at the functional
level, he frequently sent mixed messages and sabotaged his best intentions. Mick was genuinely confused about "how to mean"—especially how to make friends—in these new social settings.

Like the minority student whose primary discourse is different, not deficient, from mainstream discourse, Mick deserves to be taught that discourse conventions are like costumes that one dons according to the occasion. (See Gee, 1987.) Mick and children like him need to be specifically taught that language comes in many styles, that these effect people differently, and that styles are not necessarily interchangeable among contexts.

In deference to Mick's mother, Chris instituted the "new regime," and came down harder on Mick for three weeks in the middle of April. The initial results of this regime included neater work and—a book printed in mirror image—the first of its kind for Mick but an embarrassing "accident" for him. Parts of this book are photocopied below (Figures 22 - 24):

Figure 22

"I like space mountain. You go fast."
Figure 23

"They have space rides and they go fast."

Figure 24

"People want to puke I think. I get pulled down."

I am not alarmed by this book. But it does illustrate how much work writing is for him and how inappropriate "coming down harder" is. More specifically, this book shows the dynamic nature of Mick's meaning-making systems, and how separating them artificially can wreck havoc.
I have to ask, too, what is literacy for—to be neat and technically correct, or to be free to explore meanings in a community of fellow meaning makers?

I would agree that the inseparable issue of friends/appropriate language is an emergency theme for Mick, particularly in this classroom that rests on the social negotiation of meaning. I'd go one more step and claim that they constitute his first grade curriculum. They are his "basics."

As Chris so wisely admits, "All first graders come to school to make friends. They learn to read and write on the side!" But, for Mick, the friends' issue is overwhelmingly first. Raphaela Best (1983) found disturbing connections between peer group and academic performance:

Among the first- and second-graders it seemed that reading ability has been a factor in determining a boy's popularity with his peer group. In the third grade, high reading ability seemed to be not so much a prerequisite for peer group acceptance as a consequence (48).

[and that peer influence on boys' academic achievement] reads like a public health warning: the macho role that the male world imposes on small boys by way of their peers is dangerous to their--emotional--health. It imposes stresses on them that six-to-eight-year-old boys are not ready for (vii).

Though I would be naive to hope that all children fit into "the" popular group, I think it is imperative for the classroom to provide various communities so that all children can find some legitimate groups to be popular in. I would also hope that communication skills flowering in a
block corner would count towards that child's official literate progress.

So, I would argue that for Mick, time at blocks is free of certain school demands yet still safely structured so he can work on meaning making, take risks, fail, without too much freedom, visibility, or vulnerability.

**Distinct Symbolic Signatures**

In considering the cumulative play texts, the case study children's symbolic signatures can be briefly described by now. In block play and writing, Mick needs lots of social interaction and physical mobility, frequent and safe times and places to experiment with language and receive helpful feedback, and opportunities to improvise with inventive resources.

Ed appears less complex. He has established his leadership in the block bunch, so need not concentrate his energies on making friends. Instead, he can focus on his composing in writing or blocks. Interestingly, a tally of the language functions he uses most reflects a high percentage of regulatory/controlling functions, but they come across as definitive, not confrontational. In the block bunch at least, he is the leader. His symbolic signature at play and in writing suggests that he is highly visual as he composes and needs relative quiet and long-term projects to function best.

Knowing these things is not without its pitfalls,
however. Chris needed to tape a time schedule on Ed's desk mid-way into the Boglins' story because Ed became minimally productive for days at a time. With the schedule, he proudly produced between one to two pages a day, a milestone for a child who clung to a favorite blue pencil for the first few months of first grade, because, "It writes fast. I need to write fast." Fast is a mixed blessing, I'd say, when applied to a child like Ed.

And Randy? His behavior in block play is what I imagined block play would be when I decided to look at it: it is "time out for play!" Randy appears content to dabble, to chat, to listen; he appears to enjoy freedom from academic expectations, to enjoy the predictability of block play. Still, because I've tuned in, I know better how to nudge him.

**Block Play as Miniature Worlds: Worries and Wonderings**

I am struck by features of block play in 1G that suggest how vast and sometimes ominous the terrain of literacy studies can become. Specifically, war topics dominate the block structures and their stories. Even when the rare girl ventured into this all-male block community as of early January, she contributed to the war topics. What I had expected to be a neutral toy, one that would prompt endless topics and designs, frequently assumed the topics and shapes of mainstream commercial battle toys mentioned in the previous chapter on "story."
If, as Roland Barthes contends in *Mythologies*, toys are a microcosm of the adult world and if, as Barth suggests, they impose on the child a structured way of viewing the world and anticipate adult life, I see reason for concern—not with the blocks per se—but with the militaristic culture the children are enacting in them.

I admit my desire for the reverse to happen: that boys will take on different, if you will, "female" repertoires of friendship, or happiness, for example, as they continue to work in various creative arts media. I wonder if media themselves imprint themes...or limit themes, much like the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis contends that language limits/determines thought? (See Farb 1983, 206-213.) Imagine trying to tell a joke with math notation. Whenever I played with blocks in the classroom, I did not envision "story" but "structure" and perhaps "topic." And this topic never included relationship concerns like storying about persons or times in my life. Instead, I considered the beauty, the strength, or the function of the structure I was making. Are there media that might bridge this apparent gender gap? Elliot Eisner (1982) contends that the "selection of a form of representation influences not only the content of representation but the content of perception as well" (49). I do wonder....

But of This I Can Be Sure

Children's social transactions, which in more traditional
instructional contexts might be considered "noise," raise critical curriculum factors wherever literacy teaching and learning depend upon the social construction of meaning, as "process classrooms" must. More simply put, children's social transactions need be considered part of the teacher's "in-head" curriculum.

As I take leave of the block corner, I need to ask, does the literacy curriculum in 1G support these children? Indeed it does, or I would have been unable to trace their unique "symbolic signatures" in writing. Their personal, playful touches might never have been invited to work for them.

There is an affinity between construction toys and the grownup world of architecture. I have often been struck by how much the disorganized and chaotic atmosphere of the design studio resembles that of a children's nursery. For a long time it puzzled my why this should be so. It was not because the students were childish, for they took their work seriously, and not because they lacked discipline. Perhaps it was their little cubicles, which resembled a child's improvised playhouse and make me feel a little like an adult interloper, or the motley drawings pinned up on the walls. Or was it because the basis of their work was 'let's pretend?' What they did was real enough, yet the miniature worlds in whose making they were so totally absorbed were imagined (Rybczynski 1989, 35-36).
CHAPTER IV

THE DANCE OF MEANING

Transmediation—crossing media boundaries—occurs naturally in children's meaning making ventures. In the previous chapters on story and block play, the array of forms that children spontaneously employ—drawing, pasting parts, making sound effects, talking, playing, and gesturing, for instance—suggests compelling influences on language. This chapter explores the influences on language in 1G when Chris purposely invites meaning making in various arts media under the umbrella of language arts. During creative arts ventures, she orchestrates and actively participates herself. Sometimes she offers open-ended topics within assigned forms. Sometimes she assigns class topics and offers open-ended forms for their exploration. Always she extends considerable freedoms. Always she invites talk.

Additional adult voices are present in this chapter. Parents add children's past histories to present classroom experiences. And I am everpresent here because the dialectic between my experience and the children's experiences is often the point.
Philosopher of art Susanne Langer (1953) describes the product of dance—the reality that the art of dance creates—as "virtual power." "Virtual" in philosophical terms is tricky: it refers to experience that is real, though intangible, like the existence of one's reflection in a mirror. My intentions in this chapter are to recreate my own felt experience of "virtual power" that permeates children's actions when they intend to make meaning for themselves and for others—in shadow play, dramatic improvisation, claymaking, and other creative arts. (Although play can result in a feeling of power, it need not. In contrast, to intend to make one's meanings public is powerful!) My felt experience of "virtual power" was a response, I trust, to what the children themselves felt.

What was real though intangible for me as I observed children posing and solving expressive problems in different symbol systems, was that they began to see themselves as caring, powerful meaning makers in general, not just in words. Though my main purpose was to explore connections to language, I experienced children in hot pursuit of meaning. In the scramble, they grasp whatever forms can best represent their meanings. Simply put, I came to see that the pursuit of meaning is more basic to the pursuit of verbal literacy than words.

The "basics" in 1G means that the child is expected to think, to discern and express meaning. In that words do not
represent the totality of thought, even for that fifteen percent of persons who are highly verbal (John-Steiner 1985), children are encouraged to represent thought in any form. Inevitably, in this passionate pursuit of meaning, the child or children nearby engage in words about the chosen form, words that nudge children's linguistic limits. It appears that children experience artmaking in complex ways, and in this classroom, they grope for words to discern their meanings. Small talk about big ideas—ideas that matter for literacy.

Two cautionary admissions are in order. First, to avoid domain distinctions between what is art and what is not, or what is aesthetic and what is simply expressive, I do not suggest that intention to express meaning artistically is synomous with successful execution; however, neither do the children suggest this. It is precisely the awareness of the differences between intention and execution, whenever it does occur, that raises children's intentions—if not their products—to the level of art.

Second, rather than perpetuate that argument for fun and emotion in learning that is frequently tolerated as harmless frill or disparaged as extravagant waste of time, I plead instead for joyful caring. In this way, I intend to slip through the bottleneck of emotion and bridge that intellect-versus-intuition chasm.
"The Dance of Meaning," then, stands as a metaphor of power, suggesting that the processes and products that children demonstrate during creative arts ventures generate "virtual powers" that are real, intangible, and intimately tied to composing thought—in any medium.

**It Was a Dark and Stormy October Afternoon in 1G...**

Chris told the children a Halloween story she made up in which the whole class was trapped in a haunted house. She then invited them to express the separate concepts nonverbally through movement. Children became screeching owls, fierce black cats, shifty ghosts, creaky stairs, wind whipping through the hallways of a haunted house, by moving in ways that were comfortable for them. When they begged, "Can we do it again?" Chris retold the story and suggested that they act it out however they wished.

Like dance theorists (Benedetti 1985; Cunningham 1985; Graham 1973; Laban 1963; and Redfern 1973), Chris respects the primacy of movement for thinking. Indeed, Howard Gardner (1983) cites two eminent twentieth century dancers' opinions on just this idea. Isadora Duncan admitted, "If I could tell you what it is, I would not have danced it" (224). And Martha Graham was bitingly candid: "...the difficulty of having any kind of conversation with most dancers which has any kind of logical cohesiveness—their minds just jump around—the logic—such as it is—occurs at the level of motor activity" (224). Stanislavski's most
mature work reflected his belief that to understand characterization and motivation, actors had to begin with movement, not intellectual analysis, not psychological motivations (see Benedetti 1982).

The next day the children designed murals in groups of four or five. Chris explained how these murals needed to "go with the Halloween story," and that each group needed to cooperate so that their mural made sense as a whole. Each group would make one mural as background for their shadow play. They could tell the whole story their way. Then each child made a shadow puppet in order to "act out their part of the story." Several group members anticipated problems before they began making their puppets:

Ashley: What if you make the same things?
Chris: Good question. What can you do so that you don't?
Marissa: Talk about it.
Mick: Ask 'em what they're gonna be.
Chris: Let's say four people want to be the same thing. What happens?
Crystal: Well, you couldn't argue. Someone needs to pick.
Dawn: Maybe if everybody wants to be it, nobody can be it. (Pause.)
Kristen: Like we talk about it.

The talk/social negotiations, movements, tangible and intangible artifacts connected to creative arts ventures constitute the matter that matters in this chapter. Familiar case study children like Mick, Ed, and Randy
reappear briefly; but the focus is on Brian, whose writing is motivated by "what I can draw," on Dawn, a new case study child and the only girl in the study, as well as on small groups of children.

**Brian.** Brian's writing has been adequate but undistinguished (recall, he's the fellow who drove car tracks across the cover of his book, *Rockets Part 2*), and his reading is equally nondescript: competent enough, but somehow lacking sparkle. Brian is the type child Chris calls "a cracker," one who threatens to slip between the cracks of a classroom, unless such classroom honors many expressive acts as literate behaviors. For example, Brian's level of symbolic involvement in enacting the Halloween themes was so deep that he continued being a "fierce black cat" out on the playground for days.

During a one-and-a-half-hour home interview with Brian's parents, I heard that he's been playing drums since he was "three or four," and joins his folks at band rehearsals weekly. His mother plays piano and organ, his dad bass. Dad explained, "Sometimes the drummer gives Brian some tips. He took six lessons, but...that wasn't the way for Brian. He's like his dad. Gonna pick it up by ear!...We've taped special songs on cassette and he listens to them and plays along. We have every instrument in the house: piano, organ, guitar, drums, trumpet, sax, recorder, harmonica. But we don't force anything."
Mother added, "He's more coordinated than verbal." Dad agreed, "He's more coordinated than most...he's just good like that." I learned that "Brian is on soccer, baseball, and t-ball teams, ...is really outgoing with teammates...he skiis, bowls, rides Lady (one of two horses I could see out back in their pasture), and drives the farm tractor...but [play] blocks? He has 'em but never did."

Mother commented that school and home don't seem to mix for Brian, with two exceptions: he frequently writes in a journal at home and he writes about rockets in school. The family has visited the Kennedy Space Center twice and "this was the beginning of rockets." Yet, both parents lamented that "there's a lot [about his abilities] he doesn't say at school." Soon after this interview, I asked Brian about his music. He said, "Yup. I play drums. And lots of other stuff. I like it." I asked, "Have you thought about writing about that?" He shrugged, "Nope."

With the parents' permission, I shared parts of their interview and Brian's comments with Chris. It appeared that Brian figured what counts for knowledge at home and at school is different, even distinct, that his ways of knowing carry less clout inside school walls than outside them. Chris and I were determined to shake up his interpretation however we could.

Dawn. Dawn stood out as a confident reader early in September when she was asked about The Girl and the Moon Man
by Jeannette Winter (1984), a book she read to the class. She halted in response to one child's question, then said, "I can't tell." Mick jumped in and said sympathetically, "You know and you don't know!" Dawn immediately stated, "I do know," and proceeded to cite an example from the text, and in the bargain secure her audience's admiration.

She was an equally competent writer even in September, as one page from her Martians' story shows. Note the point of view she takes: her eye is drawn peeping in on miniature Martians at work (Figure 1).

Figure 1

DAWN'S MARTIANS--A NOVEL POINT OF VIEW

"Everyone stared at me."
These specific literate competencies threaten to mask her social timidity amidst the hubbub of a busy classroom. During a home interview with her parents, I learned that overcoming social shyness was their primary goal for Dawn this first grade year. When I asked Dawn what her goals for first grade included, she said, "Not to sound out words, just read 'em. And to do more movement stuff." For Chris, who claims "I teach children first, literacy second," these eclectic goals fit the spirit of her literacy curriculum.

**Mural Making before the Shadow Play: A Dance of Negotiation**

Chris distributes huge mural paper to each table cluster and asks the children if they already had "pictures in their minds" from moving through the Halloween story earlier. They agree they do, and small groups spread out on the floor around the room. I move toward Brian's group with the videocamera. Clockwise beginning at twelve, the participants are Kristen, Brian, Eric, Dawn, and Katy. Brian, on all fours, straddles the mural paper, and opens the discussion:

Brian: It's mine. (He refers to the ghost character.) Make the house! Make the house, make the house, make the house! (Spoken to Eric.)

Kristen: No. I'll make the house.

Eric: I'll make the house. I know how to make the house. A dance of negotiation was being performed before my eyes. Studying the videotaped episode on fast-forward, I noticed the group moving from a closed circle to a wider one.
and back again like a sea anemone opening and closing.

Physical alignment and realignment appeared to accompany shifting of ideas, and was not according to sex allegiances, unlike much play described in an earlier chapter. (The more I became aware of this phenomenon throughout the fall, the more I suspected that collaborative artistic creation offers powerful opportunities to shatter sex ghettos.)

Eventually, Kristen wins out and begins to make the house. Katy moves from Kristen's right to Brian's left. All lean into the paper as Brian and Kristen begin to draw. Dawn is silent, hanging back verbally and physically.

Eric: I'll make a bat. I'll make a bat.
Katy: I'll make a ghost.
Brian: I am. I'm making a ghost.
Eric: Then I'll make another ghost.
Brian: No. There's only one ghost.
Eric: I'll make a bat.
Katy: That depends, Kristen?
(Eric moves toward Dawn. Kristen begins the house.)
Brian: That's a house, too big of, too fat.

Kristen: No, it's...(big smile and she continues drawing). It has to be big (and she draws the roof about a foot tall)!

They continue negotiating in this fashion, and eventually Dawn begins to draw a ghostly tree using heavy, dark, rough strokes. Fifteen minutes into the project, Brian fiddles with marker covers for several minutes, then
draws a bat. Dawn moves herself outside the circle completely, and tells the group to "stop fighting." By session's end, all appear deeply involved as they did not stop when the dismissal bell rang.

**The Shadow Play!**

That next afternoon, children sit on the floor as one group secures their mural to the rope draped between two easels. The clothespins cooperate and the collaboratively planned and executed mural stands ready in the spotlight, which is a simple floodlight perched on a stool behind the mural. "Backstage" between the floodlight and the mural the five shadow players fidget. One child, fist raised in a powerful boxer's gesture, gives a silent cheer for the group; some have notes in hand, each one readies the shadow puppet s/he made earlier. These puppets dance impatiently atop rulers used as support. I ready myself to capture the sequence on videotape and Chris announces: "The Halloween Shadow Plays shall begin!" A hush blankets the room....

Below is the story Brian's group told in that darkened room save for the spotlight behind them, their shadow puppets, and their mural:

**Kristen:** One dark night, there was a pumpkin. (She is straining to read her hand-written notes.) His was...of... (now she abandons her notes, and moves her shadow puppet into the action). Once there was a dark night and the ghost came out. There was three ghosts... and there was some kids behind the fence. And the kids were making a trick on 1G who were very mad when they heard about it. BOO! Boo-hoo.

All who followed Kristen ignored their notes and improvised
with their puppets from the beginning of their turn.

Katy: One dark Halloween, there was this ghost flying around. It was so happy it went flying around trick-or-treating with all the boys and girls. But all the people would give 'em candy because he...looked too scared.

Brian: Once upon a time there was a ghost flying around. One day, at the same night, there was a really scarey ghost. And it went (he giggles) walking up the stairs like this...and then it went down (he walks his puppet through this action) and scared all the kids and all the kids went on Eric! And then (unintelligible) went up and up until he got to the tippety of the roof, and then to the attic, and then he jumped off the attic and went on the branch of the tree branch...ok...he went down and the little, little tiny (unintelligible) down there, he ran in the (unintelligible). The end.

Dawn: After the kids ran out of the haunted house, they heard a whisper laugh coming from the other first grade. They had played a Halloween trick on them.

Some especially noteworthy language behavior is happening here. To begin, the ante is upped once the children disregard their prepared scripts: they are taking risks new to them. They are communicating or transmediating in several ways at once: verbally through their ongoing narrative, visually through the use of their mural, physically with their puppets, and personally, by staying receptive to what others have said, what I call "ensemble playing." I doubt that egocentricity is as entrenched as Piaget would suggest (see Margaret Donaldson 1978). Some children even use dialogue, a technique few of them use yet in written story. Perhaps this shadow play format encourages language use on the edge of what some will soon attempt in writing? Regardless, the immediate value of this
work becomes apparent by examining what the children are able to do here and now.

Consider the forms available to the child here. Topic ideas are given by Chris and by the cultural collateral surrounding Halloween. Certain words and their order in the story are given. The form of the story is set: as shadow play where characters and actions are represented visually, and kinesthetically, as well as verbally. Hence, words don't carry too heavy a load.

Thus story prompts are numerous: Chris's story, Halloween know-how in general, physically moving through the story two times before the "performance," making the mural, seeing the mural, the puppets, and one another. Children can spread their concentration over such concerns as "summary," "sequence," "timing," "responsiveness to others/ensemble playing," "main ideas," "details," and characteristics of the environment that help them to function best.

Kristen sets up the story with the formulaic "Once upon a time...," an appropriate response since it's her job to begin the scene. She does not simply begin, however, but gives away the whole story then ends with a ghostly "Boo!" Kristen does show summarizing skills, and she uses syntactically more sophisticated oral language than she has yet to manage in writing ("on 1G who..."). Katy too begins at the beginning, and adds only her piece.
Brian imitates the formulaic opening, "Once upon..." and characteristically, his story appears generated more by the mural than by verbal plans, similar to his storying in print. He is first to include a group member as a character in his story, and he, too, uses dialogue, "Boo, boo, boo, boo."

**Connections to Writing**

If Brian's fluency is surprising, as he is generally a man of few words, consider that movement and topic guidelines are synergetic, maybe even fundamental at this time, for his composing process. Specifically, in writing, Brian's most fluent performance to date occurred late in September after an afternoon of science in the schoolyard. Chris told the children to look for "something white, something round, something brown, and something red." A sense of that rhythmic afternoon was captured when the children danced down the hillside and back to their classroom.

On his return to the classroom, Brian wrote eleven words with drawings in his science journal between 2:38 and 2:57 p.m.—nineteen minutes (Figures 2 - 3). To this point three weeks into September, he'd written a total of only twenty five words during morning writing time where the topic is completely open and the time frequently less defined.
Brian again demonstrated exceptional written fluency the day he wrote a letter to his classmate, Eliza, who had been home sick for over a week. As in science writing, the
topic was suggested, the format was familiar, and a time limit was necessary (for the whole class) to get Eliza's letters ready before the three o'clock bell. I have only a transcript of this letter because the original was whisked into a manilla envelope which Eliza's mother picked up promptly:

DEAR ELIZA,
I want you to come back to school
I like you Eliza
I hope you come back to school
By Brian

Brian's writing folder through mid-November contains Rockets Part 1, Rockets Part 2, Rockets Part 3, Rockets Part 4, Rockets Part 5. Unlike Ed's Boglins-Shark adventure described in the story chapter, Brian's focus could not be characterized as passion. Instead, it smacked of desperation, or at least of boredom. Here are my typed notes of November 3, fleshed out that same day from my handwritten field notes, that led me to question Brian's situation. I want to show the ambiguous nature of certain classroom behavior where children move, talk, make things, and so on, as they write. Inevitably, the teacher's art involves discerning what is generative and what is not per child, per situation. My observations follow:

Writing November 3, 1988

9:22 Brian piles pillows on top of chair next to coffee table, gets his (writing folder).

9:26 Brian gets his crayons, considers adding one more
pillow but chucks it back onto the couch, sits on the pillows, opens his folder. Then he goes to his desk to get a pencil and put a toy car away.

9:28 He opens his folder, erases a line, then gets up, goes off to sign up for writing share saying, "Goody, now I've got one" (a time to share with the whole class).

9:30 He returns to his pillow perch, and says, "This is tiring. I need another pillow." He gets one, then another and piles these on his chair.

Donny asks, "Why are you using pillows?" Brian answers, "I like it. I hope this doesn't flip...OOOHMMM..." Then he tumbles onto the couch, chats with Donny a moment, climbs back onto his pillow pile, opens to his current piece of writing.

9:37 Brian hops off pillows, makes sound effects, places his writing on top of his head and says, "Now, where's my pencil?" He goes for a pencil, and returns to the pillow perch.

9:40 He takes his pencil and for the first time this writing period, 18 minutes since it began, he prints on the cover "ROCKET POR," then he tosses book down, gets another pillow, his whole folder, sits again, opens folder and looks through it.

I risk toying with your patience, inviting you to feel the tension I felt, to allow it to gnaw on your sensibilities as it did mine. If Brian was simply "on hold" until he shared his work with the class that morning, Chris and I would have been less concerned. But perched atop pillows, Brian continued this behavior for several days.

Whenever Chris and I were confused about the value of certain behaviors, we watched closely for connections between the play and the process/product. If we were able to discern none, we discouraged the diversion. Chris read Brian's actions as a signal for help and she "strongly
invited" Brian to write about something different, no pillows allowed. He then began Army Part 1. A small step for humankind...! Our concerns about Brian's writing were only part of the picture. We needed to know what Brian thought.

In November each of the first graders self-evaluated reading and writing progress in separate one-on-one interviews with Chris or me. Brian's writing interview comments follow:

Judy: What can you do now as a writer that you couldn't do in the beginning of the year?

Brian: Write aliens, write rockets, and write people. Write leaves, buildings, and houses. Lobsters. That's all.

Judy: What's something you do well?

Brian: All the things on there (and he pointed to the answer above).

Judy: What do you want to learn next?

Brian: I don't know...how to write turkeys and lobsters. I need to practice the claws. I'm getting to it.

Judy: How do you plan to do it? Who can help you?

Brian: I practice at 'em. I get 'em from friends like Kenny.

Chris and I confirmed our decision that for now, for Brian, frequent topic and time guidelines, plus movement, would support his composing processes more than what too often become the rigid freedoms of time, choice, and chat in many process classrooms.
Returning to the shadow players, notice how Derek shows budding sensitivity to what others said because, in spite of his formulaic opening and closing, he picks up where Brian left off, rather than begin over like Katy did. Derek is also the first to include himself as a character in the story, he picks up on an idea Brian initiated, and he, too, uses dialogue.

Clearly Dawn is the first to continue the story, minus formulaic openings and repetitions and she ends the story because she is last to speak. She has "read the situation." In traditional terms, she understands whole/part, and recognizes what's missing, all on her own. Note, too, her peacemaking initiatives during the making of the mural. She understands that too much conflict interferes with her creative work and she's taking new risks to minimize such conflict. Clearly, language functions are in contexts, and Dawn's discovering certain language functions—as she works in creative media—to temper her social timidity. Share that with any who doubt the connections between "just art" and "language arts instruction"!

Following the shadow play, Brian took the initiative once again by becoming "host," and seeking out classmates who wanted to make comments and ask questions of the players. (Once attuned to this interpersonal savvy, I began to notice it in other situations.) For example, Brian defused arguments among children when they "discussed" how
to improvise the Thanksgiving story a month later. He even assumed leadership that day when the group process threatened to abort. Another time he rescued Derek by insisting, "Leave him alone guys," and he sought out Mick after the latter's detention and whispered, "That's not fair. Whoa! No kidding. Too bad, Mick."

Brian called on one young audience member who asked, "What was the hardest part to do?" A player offered, "The hardest part was when everybody...what to say...when to talk...." Children were becoming aware of "ensemble playing" where one child's contribution influenced what the next child could say and do, though not all managed to act on this awareness yet. Kristen's comments below reflect these dawning insights.

Kristen: ...you gotta be a little quicker. Like you gotta know when it's your turn....In real plays, you gotta be...like quick.

Chris: And what helps you do that?

Kristen: Practice.

Chris: Can you practice this at home?

Kristen: Yes.

Chris: If you want to work with a group, can you practice alone?

Children: No!

Receptivity to their own and others' intentions shows up in different places and times, for example, at play and during arts episodes. In effect, individual histories of
meaning making can gradually be mapped out that help the child and me to enlarge the angle of vision, to reframe what counts, to see growth.

In the situation above, children know and I know that the ability to critique their own work, to separate their intentions from their executions, to see what is and what could be, is growing. When Chris asked, "How many thought that the words were hard to say?" few raised their hands. When she asked, "How many thought acting out with your puppet was hard?" none raised their hands!

These comments echoed those following the Thanksgiving improvisation a month later:

Crystal: When we act things out in here I feel like I'm really there.

Elaine: It felt real.

Ed: It's kinda harder...and we were ready for something harder.

Abbie: I liked it because you could say what you wanted to. We didn't have lines that you had to say (unlike a fire prevention play we'd done earlier).

Ed: You could feel you did a good job. (Big smile.)

Chris continued her questions. "How is this like writing process?" Marissa answered, "Having a lot of work, and coloring, and words." Still Chris probed. "How is this different?," and Elaine smiled and replied, "You don't have to write!" I asked, "Do words come quicker when you don't have to write them or when you write them?" Most children agreed that words come quicker when you don't have to write.
A barrage of requests to do more shadow plays followed and children decided things would be much easier with only one partner. So within the week, four pairs began working on them: Kristen and Abbie; Ed and Mick; Derek and Mick; and Dawn and Katy.

One morning a few days later I asked Dawn and Katy about the huge five-page project they were making while sprawled on the floor.

Judy: What are you doing?
Katy: We don't wanna color the whole house, so we made a guy painting!

Judy: Good idea, maybe he'll color it for you! Who thought of that? That's funny!

Katy: Dawn.

Judy: Oh, Dawn, you're funny!

Katy: She just said, "I have a great idea...."

Higher-level thinking processes come in many guises (Daiute 1989). I need to continually remind myself, as well, of Howard Gardner's caution: look in specific contexts for different kinds of intelligences as there's precious little transfer across content areas. I am not sure I agree with this. But I do know there is transfer from one meaning making situation to another of what Vera John-Steiner calls "motivational ambiance" (John-Steiner 1985, 34). Like the physicist examining a fractal, I need to see minute and huge chunks of behavior in many meaning making contexts—contexts where the demands are different: verbal/non-verbal;
visual/kinesthetic, and so on—before I infer any child's abilities.

It appears that Dawn's skills with words and art materials, skills that school legitimates, seed social confidence. Recall how she initiated peace-making overtures toward the mural group while she was drawing. If Brian's sensitivity to others and his deep symbolic involvement, for example, were legitimated, might it influence his writing? All these abilities—initiative, risk taking, deep symbolic involvement, expressive skills verbal and non, as well as interpersonal sensitivities, matter for literacy growth wherever and whenever they occur.

**Talkin' Turkey**

One afternoon before Thanksgiving, George Winston's "Thanksgiving" plays on the tape recorder and I videotape Mick and his tablemates Randy, Mark, Marissa, and Mandy, making tissue paper turkeys from dittos. It appears that, on occasion, being assigned a topic and being free of written words leaves children more energy to spend on supposedly periferal talk, what Dyson, tongue-in-cheek, calls time-off-task.

Questions here are similar to the ones posed in block play. For example, what, besides an art project, is Mick making here that connects to language growth? Below I include a transcript of the group's conversation concerning how a turkey feels on Thanksgiving:
Randy: The turkey's scared.
Mark: I think they feel a little bit nervous.
Judy: What do you mean "scared"? (Mick is smiling.)
Randy: I think they feel nervous 'cause they're gonna be cooked.
Mark: I think they feel yukky 'cause I'm gonna eat 'em.
Mick: Once I killed a turkey for Thanksgiving.
Mandy: You know what, I...my mom's
Mick: (He interrupts.) Only I lost my gun I (unintelligible)
Mandy: My mom doesn't like shooting with the guns so she buys ours at the supermarket.
Mick: I kill ours.
Marissa: Yeah, right (spoken sarcastically).
Mick: Well, I used to. But I don't any more.
Randy: If it's not this year...I don't...then it's illegal.
Mick: It's illegal. Yeah. But if it's other years, it's illegal. Only on Thanksgiving you can deer hunt. But only on the regular days...but if you're poor you can shoot...if you have enough money to buy guns or make weapons.
Marissa: Girls doesn't shoot turkeys.
Mick: I know they don't.
Marissa: Great. (She's referring to Mandy's tissue work and the whole conversation shifts).

Once again, Mick is testing the limits of plausibility much like he did in the block bunch. To his credit though, he is not tempting the boundaries of appropriateness.

Just as free play time is legitimate in the language arts classroom, so-called art "busy work" is legitimate—
it includes the three freedoms: to talk, to imagine, and to add kid-rules.

Consider the tissue collage incident; it is no less than a microcosm of our society viewed through the children's minds. They tackle the legalities of guns, shooting game, the implications of poverty and exemptions to law, women's versus men's views of shooting, women's roles in meal preparations, money supply and demand, to mention only the more tangible issues. Then there are the intangible ones like "virtual power," and even...joy.

"Virtual power" here is a spinoff from the creative arts arena into the verbal arena. These children know they are allowed to talk during artmaking. They know they are expected to make their art product public—meaning for self and others. (Though "public" does not mean "explain or describe in words." Chris never insists on verbal comment/critique of art work; she always invites it.) There appears to be a transfer of "power," a spinoff, from the presentational forms of meaning making (where words are not necessary) to the linguistic/discursive forms (where words participate in the meanings).

What resonates for me is children's seemingly incidental immersion in verbal meaning making. Certainly the children in 1G have many opportunities to practice talk within arts (and play) ventures. Possibly, then, they become increasingly response-able for their verbal meanings.
as their artistic ones?

**Joy beyond Measure...**

How do I describe the intangible joy, perhaps aesthetic experience, that permeated the room and avoid sentimentality? Dare I admit my sensation of fullness, of children bathed in sunlight, whispering to one another, as if sensing a reverence for each other's concentration?

Yet I will admit seeing children approach what looks like a mechanical task in different and thoughtful ways. Kristen selects a colored tissue square, scrunches it, dips it into glue, places it on her turkey ditto, then runs her palm over it as if to register the effect "in body." Dawn tells me she's making repeating patterns of the colors, like she did earlier in math. Katy, too. I overhear Mick comment that his turkey tail "has more life to it" once he fluffs up the tissue. I watch Randy touch his work tenderly, as he adds each tissue square. I overhear two boys speaking through the open window to friends at recess, "We're not coming out now. We're working on our collage. It's awesome!"

And so on across the room, children create and evaluate in various ways that I'll never have sufficient time or insight to appreciate. I have to question any theory that claims children's aesthetic understandings are invariantly sequential (Parsons 1987). I respect the developmental skeleton of such theories, but distrust their tendency to
overgeneralize. Children sense more than they have words to express, in every respect, but surely in relation to aesthetic experience, whether ditto-driven or open-ended. Dawn and Ashley helped me see examples of the latter.

One morning Dawn was working on her Martians' story. She jumped up, stood beside her desk, hands on her hips, testing various statements. When I asked her what she was doing. She explained, "I see the mom. I kind of see it...I kind of hear it too. Yeah. But I'm not sure my mom would say that (what she'd written so far), but I would say that. I know what she kinda says...when I go, 'Hurry up!' she goes, 'OK! OK! OK!" With this, she plunked herself down and continued writing.

One afternoon Ashley tearfully asked Chris to play the "storm music" over because, "My painting's bad, I didn't let the music in." Her tablemates' pastel crayon work was fluid, full of heavy lines for the eye of the storm and then lighter strokes for the calm. It appeared that Ashley felt that her controlled, uniform lines were less expressive and she wanted to try again. Of course, she could.

What classroom ethos supports whatever aesthetic joy and/or art processes are alive here? Such ethos is less a "what" than a "when": less a "thing" than the sensation of time and space put on-hold. Art philosopher Nelson Goodman suggests that we avoid the question, "What is art?" and ask instead, "When is art?" In IG, "when" means that a
qualitatively different spirit envelops the place, when children can, in Paulo Freire's terms, "name their worlds" in ways more natural perhaps than writing, when lights soften, music plays, voices temper, product expectations relax, when "there's a kind of hush—all over" the scene.

**Time-Out for Art**

Then, too, there's the sheer joy of "time out" for art. Amazingly, children are able to tailor these times to their needs, and, perhaps because, the coherent classroom structure and philosophy are secure enough to withstand moderate deviations from "the way we do things in here."

This classroom is atypical in its open-endedness but this freedom has its price. Few dittos are used, few skills' sheets pile high, frequently children head home empty-handed because most of their work is "in progress." In sum, closure is a rare commodity here, much like in real life. Hence play and what looks like "busy work" become refuges where it's legitimate to take time out and just "be."

In fact, I think it was just this time-out that encouraged Mick and Chris to relax and chat. In the story chapter, Chris had planned that the children would glue their turkey dittos onto murals and "make a story to go with them." Mick let down his guard and talked when Chris sat next to him. Excerpted portions of this chat reappear here to illustrate what a receptive mood can do for both child and teacher.
Mick: I don't really want to do a story...because I don't like doing stories that much. (Pause.)

Chris: Are you good at doing stories?

Mick: No.

Chris: Ahhh.... There's only one big problem. I think you're very good at telling stories.... 'Cause you usually have very different and interesting details that other people don't think of. What do you think of that?

Mick: Well, I don't know...it's just that I don't like my stories that much. It's ok in writing process, but with other things, I don't want to write.

Chris: What do you like writing stories about in writing process?

Mick: Well, it gives you more of a chance (he looks at Chris long and hard here).

Chris: Chance to what?

Mick: More of a chance...a chance to get ready to do like real stories in your life...I like to do one story and I stay on a story.... I don't like doing different stories at once.

Next Mick announced that he did have a story idea and marched toward the mural table murmuring something about "stoled gold...you know, about how the Pilgrims stole the gold!" Perhaps he was impressed by the gold metallic buckle he made for his Pilgrim hat earlier? Perhaps the legal ideas during the "I kill our turkey" discussion triggered these? Who knows? Whatever, it appears that Mick is frequently overwhelmed by the call for writer story, and that his expectations for himself exceed his performance at this time.
In effect, he is pleading for the non-linguistic joy he needs to balance his school experience. To use Nel Noddings' (1984) terms:

For students to engage a subject matter directly, they must be free of the mediation supplied by the precise objectives. Subject matter should not always be a thing to be analyzed and mastered. It may be possible for almost all students to have at least an occasional I-Thou relation with subject matter—occasions in which student and subject meet without pre-stated objectives and in which the subject speaks to the student (146).

Writing can appear overwhelmingly convention-bound, prescriptive to some children, dictating the do's and don't's from the print culture that surrounds them. Though Chris and I sing the glories of environmental print, of invented spelling and so on, for some children, this is an adult sing-along. To these children struggling to enter the print game, it appears frustratingly complex. It is no accident that Donald Graves (1983) titled a book, Writing: Teachers & Children at Work. Certain children can make only brief commitments to playing by the rules before they need to opt out for their own games which may not be in sync with classroom goals.

Work in the creative arts provides a legitimate, thoughtful, joyful, and generative balance...along the continuum of cognitive acts, not as opposed to them. I doubt I'll forget how Mick pranced towards that story mural, or how Brian whistled his way across the room to his writing folder immediately following a space-walk moving experience,
or how the class begged Chris to invite parents to see their Thanksgiving improvisation "'cause it'll be gone forever when we're done."

**Cognitive Joy**

That aspect of "joy" considered next is the one Noddings terms as "affect," not emotion. For Noddings, "affect" is "the conscious subjective aspect of experience" (1984, 132). Such a distinction between "affect" and "emotion" emphasizes the cognitive reflectivity involved in the joyful experience. Reflectivity implies a going-between; hence, the joyful experiencing I intend to show involves children's doing the thing and reflecting on their doing. The relationship between the doing and the reflecting—and the children's growing ability to think and talk about this relationship, seems to be what is joyful. Or at least this is the aspect of joy that demands consideration in any discussion of language learning.

David Elkind (1981) contends that the central task of education is to facilitate the acquisition of three things for the child: of knowledge (a system of constructing concepts about the world), of representation (a system of constructing imitations and associations), and of meanings (a system of relationships between knowledge and representations). Like Elkind, I argue that it is the second two arenas that are frequently neglected in schooling. Happily, 1G, is an exception. Here explicit
attention is given to relationships between the representations and the meanings—as these connect to the world and to the maker. Such attention fuels a cognitive joy—if such an idea can be held gingerly in mind.

If, in creative work with shadow puppets for example, learners experience joy, then they stand a chance of seeking this relationship within other learning experiences—in particular, with ideas. Above all, I intend to avoid any split-brained, left versus right-brained arguments for or against learning anything. How then can I make peace with this age-old duality of intellect "versus" intuition?

By refusing to take sides, in this stance, I am not alone. Thinkers as far back as Plato (1987) suggest there is overlap between the two phenomena of intellect and intuition. (See Dewey 1934; Eisner 1979, 1985; Gilligan 1982; Noddings and Shore (1984); Perkins 1981; and Steiner 1985). But for the latter to function, a "time-out" for receptivity must exist. In this receptive state, the learner makes time for a relationship between self and subject, no matter what the nature of the subject. Hopefully, in any learning situation, just as in creative work, the learner expects to ask, what can I make of this? Within such an experience, then, the learner invests self, and begins to "care." This "care" appears to induce that quality of "joy" that follows creative art work, even though this new "joy" may be related to conventionally cognitive
subject matter.

Once hooked on joy in the creative arts' classroom, learners may demand it of learning in general. They who know the power of making meaning in caring ways become the best detectors of alienating learning situations. Even Chris confessed, "Sometimes I feel myself faking it in a writing conference with a child. I can't believe I said that. But when we work in movement--never. You can't fake that. It reminds me how learning's supposed to feel."

John Dewey (1934) describes "an (educative) experience" in ways similar to Noddings' concept of joyful, caring learning.

An experience has a unity...that is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can make within it.... In final import they (experiences) are all intellectual. But in their actual occurrence they were emotional as well.... No thinker can ply his occupation save as he is lured and rewarded by total integral experiences that are intrinsically worth while.... Thinking goes on in trains of ideas, but the ideas form a train only because they are much more than what an analytic psychology calls ideas. They are phases, emotionally and practically distinguished, of a developing underlying quality (37).

Cognitive connections to language growth could be made for much of what's to follow, but I'll not pause to make many because it would break the mood I'm interesting in sharing: that dance of meaning children so eagerly embrace if given the chance.

More importantly, I want to present the classroom as a space where anything can happen, where words and numbers
dare not claim an exclusive hold on meaning, where presentational forms as well as discursive forms "count" for literacy. In her passionate book, The Dialectic of Freedom, Maxine Greene (1988), like Noddings, warns of an overly cognitive thrust to education.

The implications for education have had to do with cognition— with logical thinking, the resolution of moral dilemmas, the mastery of interpersonal rules.... The problem with this highly cognitive focus in the classroom has in part to do with what it excludes. Also, it has to do with whether or not reasoning is enough when it comes to acting in a resistant world, or opening fields of possibilities among which people may choose to choose....It seems clear...that young people need the opportunity to project themselves in rich hypothetical worlds created by their own imagination or those of dramatic artists (119).

In a sympathetic vein, Dewey believed that "mind" should be conceived of as a verb: "It denotes all the ways in which we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves" (1934, 263).

So the dance of meaning includes dress-up play which happens at odd moments when kids and teacher need a break. Dress-up play is frequently starred as one of the choices for free play time during the week and children improvise costumes and persona, singly, and together. During these episodes, neither Chris nor I filmed or took notes because we always played!

Collage-making, bead work, knot-tying, creative movement, improvisation on themes, and painting occurred frequently, but the medium I chose to explore most closely
was clay.

**Clay.** The first morning the children explored clay in the classroom, I witnessed the distinctions between imitation and representation. These distinctions then allowed me to appreciate what many boys were doing in their written stories. They never intended to imitate/copy story form as I know it. Instead, they represented/suggested the parts that were important to them, the parts they knew in their own ways.

The value attached to imitation is an adult one and a fairly recent one historically. With clay, some children set out to make what they know kinesthetically, or through direct physical experience, not necessarily what they see. In drawing children represent what they "know" however they know it, rather than what they see. (I saw Elaine draw x-ray versions of her house, with see-through walls showing bedrooms and the Thanksgiving turkey on the dining room table! For a study of children's visual thinking, see Hubbard 1989). Similarly, children's multiple ways of knowing shape their clay products.

Whether the media be two-dimensional, like writing and drawing, or three-dimensional, like clay, product intentions appear fueled by cooperative influences. The sculptors in 1G shared a kinship with sculptor Carley Craig (see illustration Figure 4 below): "My sculpture seeks to abstract the action, or energy, of a body. No effort is
made to record the physical bone structure" (Loovos 1988, 26).

Figure 4
"One Step at a Time"

In the spirit of professional sculptor Craig, the children's sculptures invited us to read them as shadows on children's cave walls, as the important parts, to them--of what they know, however they know it--about how their bodies move.

Not all the children were satisfied with their clay representations, but many were. They asked, "Do we have to wreck it?" "Can I take it home?" "Can I let it harden?" "What are you going to do with them?" "Where will you put
them?" Chris had to negotiate with them to leave their work on display in the classroom "just until Parents' Night."

**Concepts In-Formation.**

Minutes before one sculpting experience, Chris invited the children to move in many ways so that what might have been simply information became concepts in-formation (Gerhardt 1973). Children volunteered and demonstrated their moves for each other: walk, kick, run, skip, gallop, jump, punch, walk on two knees, do a bridge, do a pencil into a swimming pool, do a butterfly into a pool, twist, handstand, roll, wiggle ears, hop on one leg, stretch, swim, wiggle nose, toes, do a cannonball, dance, sit, summersault, jumping jack, move wrists, crawl, backwards bridge, stand!

Then Chris said "make any one movement and when you hear the cymbal, freeze, and look at your body position carefully." When the children did this, Chris hit the cymbal again and said, "Get a lump of clay and make you body shape just as you remember it!" Children scampered and sculpted. Below are my hastily sketched impressions of the children's clay work that morning (Figure 5):
Figure 5

Solid, stands upright

Brian

Popsicle stick →

Mick
Solid, stands upright with support

Nicholas

Abbie
Raised features lays flat

Marissa
Supported by clay base

Eliza
Sitting

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In sum, children made meaning in several forms: they participated in a physical experience first, the body movements. Add to that the conceptual, intellectual, abstract symbolizing in a different medium, the clay work. Lastly, they self-evaluated their process and products, the verbal work.

The question remains: How might work with clay or other creative arts media connect to literacy?

**Small Talk, Big Ideas:**
**Literacies in the Creative Arts Classroom**

In the opening passages of this chapter, I mentioned that artmaking in 1G was characterized by children's talk, talk of a different sort than I was used to. The section to follow invites you to eavesdrop, and consider this: artmaking nudges children toward complicated ideas, ideas that appear so deeply experienced that they wrestle to articulate them verbally, even though no such demand is made. (Frequently invited, of course. Recall, this is language arts time!)

What levels of awareness, what criteria, do children themselves bring to their creative arts work in 1G? It is appropriate to look for their self-imposed criteria in their work. I make no distinctions between production and perception here. Simply, what follows are descriptions and illustrations of the issues/criteria I saw different children working with at different times. The terms are
mine, art philosopher Nelson Goodman's (1968), or common to creative endeavors in general, but the issues are the children's:

**Problem Posing**—What is the nature of the problems that the child initiates? Here are included qualities of selection, abstraction, focus.

Recall Mick's response to a classmate's question, "What was hard...and what was easy in writing?" He stated that deciding what to write about was easy. Deciding what to say was hard! Recall, too, what Brian wanted to learn to do better in writing: "write turkeys and lobsters." The nature of the problems these two boys posed for themselves in writing suggests different understandings of the medium.

"It took us two days to find it (a good title for the play Dawn and Katy wrote).... Nothing said all the stuff we needed...getting up, the things on the bus,...the tricks on the boys.... Our play's...um...it tells the whole day!" Such was the problem these children posed for themselves: their title needed to include many ideas in few words. Their solution, "Our Best Day"!

**Expressiveness**—(Goodman 1968) Does the work convey emotion, mood? Does the child respond to this?

"My painting's bad, I didn't let the music in." Ashley evaluated the storm drawing she made as music played. She was dissatisfied with her controlled, gentle lines in contrast to her tablemates' freer, darker strokes.
"That book's like the other one." Randy comments about a book by the same illustrator, before the illustrator's name was mentioned. An extraordinarily common observation in this classroom. He "reads" expressive features of another's work.

"This book makes me feel pretty inside." Crystal reacts to other's expressive intentions.

"I finished the smell!" Ed recognized his attempt to capture the elusive quality of smell (Figure 6) as he drew Rotten Jack's noticeable deterioration!

Figure 6

"Rotten Jack is rotten now. Ms. Gaudet threw him out."
Repleteness—(Goodman 1968) Does the work capitalize on the potentials inherent in the medium?

"It has more life to it now." Mick comments on his turkey collage after he fluffed up the tissue squares he'd glued to the tail. Both qualities of expressiveness and repleteness appear involved in this self-critique.

"I just did." Dawn wrote this poem (Figure 7), her first, written at home, the same day Chris had written a similar one (Figure 8), following a whole class move-like-a-leaf experience. This statement was Dawn's answer to my question, "How did you know how a poem looked?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 7</th>
<th>Figure 8</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dawn's Poem</strong></td>
<td><strong>Chris's Poem</strong></td>
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The Falline LEVS
The LEVS Grund Dans In The
Site They looke
Leck Hayre Baulenons.
Dassin Erewart In-
Tell Thay Fab To
The Groe A LIMAL
Boy Pick Them Up And
Boy Pick Them Up And
Brings Them To His Mom
Brings Them To His Mom.
They Are Big Full Now
They Are Wiittle Now
Lick A Old Pole A
Like An Old Retle-
A Bot To Brac
About To Break.
"I liked it...a feeling." Dawn responds to my question, "How did it feel when you finished (your poem)?" She is expressing, in her way, the expressiveness and repleteness of a poetic experience.

"I'm gonna do it over because it's stupid." Crystal critiques her clay figure. She appeared dissatisfied with her two-dimensional techniques in a three-dimensional medium, because she proceeded to work out a three-dimensional shape. Below she begins the work she later found "stupid."

**Level of Symbolic Involvement**—How does the child enter the creation—from the inside or the outside? Either can show growth, for example:

"Everytime the class acts something out, I just dream like it's really true." Crystal reacts to the Thanksgiving drama. Clearly she can concentrate and focus during movement activities.

"I felt like I was pretending." Nick comments on the same Thanksgiving drama. He was not dissatisfied with the experience. Instead, he was even more aware than Crystal of its intentionally symbolic form. Such a reaction shows that creative work is not symptomatic of a person's inner state, but is purposefully symbolic. A mature distinction—for a first grader or any of us—that sets apart "art" from non-art. As Robert De Niro, "a contemporary Brando," admits of characterization, "In everything you do, there's always a part of you. You draw on that. It doesn't mean you become
that person" (Carr 1988, 80).

"I was laughing inside me." Brian responds to moving like an astronaut. He, too, is deeply involved in symbolic representation. And, to defy any who might claim that his work is symptomatic not intentional, I have seen a consciousness about his representations of himself across media, as well. For example, his responses to "Me" in drawing, movement, and in clay exhibited similar body poses and facial expressions.

**Time/Effort**--Does the child appreciate that these qualities are intrinsic to much good work?

"How many days did it take you to do it?" Crystal questions an adult who read to the class a lovely book that she'd written and illustrated about a huge tree in the schoolyard. Crystal appreciates the time and care involved to make something good.

"Skill. Don't rush. Twenty-five days." These are Mick's criteria for what it takes to write a good book. "It might take me all year!" (Ed plans his vacation story...which he abandoned for the shark adventure. But such a pronouncement shows awareness of the time creative work can take.)

"Don't disturb me for two weeks, Judy. I'm writing something important." Elaine warns me, the ubiquitous ethnographer, who inadvertently interrupted many artistic ventures.

**Problem Solving**--Does the child follow through, at
least occasionally?

"I was stuck four days on this page. I had in my mind to make a good idea. That they (Martians in the story she is writing) were blind. But...I was thinking...how could I look another way? Did you ever see The Gnomemobile? They're in a big person's car so everything's big. It's funny. These people know it. It's a movie...."

Recall how Dawn solved her perspective problem (Figure 9).

Figure 9

"Everybody stared at me."

Transmediation--Does the child understand and/or express ideas in different forms?

"One group didn't do words." Such were Brian's comments following the improvised Thanksgiving drama. Chris asked him, "Did they need to? Could you tell they were
having the Thanksgiving feast?" Brian paused a moment then decided: "Yep."

Risk-taking--Does the child try new things beyond his/her conventional repertoire?

"We didn't have...like...um...like props.... It's kinda harder and we were ready for something harder."

Ed's critique of the Thanksgiving improvisation.

"We never had a hard...we never had a hard play before. And this one we had to say our own words...." Kristen agrees with Ed that the Thanksgiving drama was a new challenge.

Collaborative Nature of Invention--Is the child growing aware of the contributions, however tacit, that others have made to his/her work?

"In our group, we tried each other's ideas." Mandy responds to my question, "How did you decide on the design?"

Evaluation--Does the child evaluate own and others' work in light of developing creative criteria?

"I liked your play. You all...you all didn't have the same voices." Kristen critiques the shadow players' portrayal of different characters' conversation.

"I didn't really like it because I couldn't make it like it was." Dawn evaluates the distance between intentions and results in her clay figure.

"I needed more time." Dawn evaluates her work following the astronaut movement activity. Again, she is aware of the difference between her intentions and her actual efforts.
"It's like a lightbulb in your head, click!" Mick explains his understanding of reading a hard word in a professional author's book. His awareness that a media traditionally considered discursive, can be apprehended presentationally, holistically, like a painting, is an evaluative act in itself.

Care-- Is the child growing in sensitivity to other people, things, and ideas? Is the child personally invested somehow? This concept includes responsiveness to others' intentions, like that "ensemble playing" demonstrated in the shadow plays.

As I consider all these criteria, what strikes me is that they are more an evaluation of what's possible in a classroom than they are an evaluation of any child's growth. (Nor would I expect to find many of these qualities developing in any one child at any one time. I'm simply on the lookout.)

No doubt David Elkind (1981) would enjoy this classroom, because it stands in contrast to what he deplores most in current educational practice: "The most neglected task is...providing children with the opportunity to represent their experience in a variety of ways. In the end, the truly educated person is the one who can articulate what it is he knows and has learned" (213). The bonus for verbal literacy comes when children themselves notice the criteria above and begin to talk about them.

Growth in an arts experience is explicitly literate precisely to the extent that the child becomes aware of
these criteria and begins to verbalize them. The ability to separate something from the flow of life, to conceive of it as "a thing I caused to be made," and to make this new thing present to others in words is critical to linguistic growth. Knowing in general involves seeing the self as agent. Creative work fosters this awareness by its very nature; but harnessing language to articulate this awareness links the art work to explicitly literate functions.

I cannot claim that art work generated many ideas for writing in 1G, yet this is a comment by one who is trapped in adult time. Who knows when what goes in as art experience comes out as critique on the world, in print or otherwise? That concept of time that demands an immediate return on investment is what Michael Apple (1986) names financial capital—a view of time that is short-ranged, that privileges quick turn-around of cause and effect, i.e., can be evaluated soon after instruction, deals with minimum risk, and a mass audience. Clearly, these conditions are anathema in 1G. Instead, this classroom requires what Apple calls symbolic capital—that long view of time that honors risk-taking, direct experience, experimental form and content, and is personal. That view of time that defies quick evaluation, and demands qualitatively different evaluative techniques.
I can claim, however, that children dive into different mental tasks with enthusiasm following an art experience. So I can say that the latter is generative indirectly for mental energy, "motivational ambiance," for the sense of power over self-expression, for the change of pace, sense of balance, in the experience. Janet Emig (1984) sides with art philosopher Nelson Goodman when he calls the American educational system "half-brained." She continues with concerns I share:

The situation may be even more serious: What if the schools require students to be split-brained where the learning of writing and complex arts and sciences are concerned? Perhaps the only base for the curriculum should be what research suggests is literally organic. And for the process of writing, what is truly organic. Let's begin to find out.

Work in the creative arts is organic if organic means to engage whole systems cooperatively, whether the system be the human being, one's tablemates, the classroom community, and so on. Within this engagement at various levels, what I do see above all, is the care children invest in their own and others' products and ideas. A culture of caring flows from the children's products, toward each other, to ideas. Consider the art teacher's comments following the class's Thanksgiving drama she attended:

The tenderness of the music and the children...the story through movement...not overprepared so the edge was still there. Selective movements. I could understand it all. I've never seen young children do anything like this. More teachers should do it...seems so natural.
"...seems so natural." Not quite. Rather, so it is that one teacher deftly choreographs that dance of meaning children enter so naturally, to help them move beyond nature.
CHAPTER V

MIND IN SCHOOL

How I saw and was able to describe individual children throughout this study, how I was able to understand story from their visions in chapter two, how I interpreted their play as text in chapter three, and how I discerned their literate/aesthetic sensibilities in chapter four, was largely a consequence of how Chris envisioned time, space, and possibility inside IG.

What remains to be characterized in this last chapter then, is not the individuals Mick, Brian, Ed, and Dawn, though originally I did plan to summarize each of their symbolic signatures here. In addition, I planned to capture each child's meaning-making marks within an "expressive portfolio," a collection of the child's work in writing, play, and artmaking. Photos, written work, videotape, audiotape, anecdotes, even original artifacts could be included.

Regarding the symbolic signatures, I now think them redundant: they've been "signed" in this study already. You are invited to come to your own interpretations per child. I've reflected each child from multiple angles--presentationally, in a sense, bombarding you with
simultaneous visions. Their ordering and ultimate meanings remain between you and the child—as meanings always do in authentic teaching.

Regarding expressive portfolios, Chris and I simply never got that far last year so I'll shift that plan into "directions for future research."

What remains to be explored are certain characteristics of the classroom and their implications. Thus, issues even more fundamental than individual configurations of meaning making—issues that at least need co-exist with questions of how individuals learn to mean in school, issues that enable or inhibit unique meaning making—are considered in this final chapter:

* The Language Arts share characteristics of Art in general.

* The classroom can be compared to an expressive, living organism, just as language can be compared to an expressive, living thing.

* "Child-centered" can be a suspect term, an alias for a multitude of questionable practices.

* Learning how to mean in specific school communities is the "basic curriculum" for first graders.

* Literacy learning is systemic and cooperative: Children coopt eclectic meaning-making systems to reach their expressive goals.

* The "New Basics" for Literacy are more fundamental than sound-symbol correspondence, the word, or any discrete verbal features.

* Questions about literacy ultimately embrace questions of learning and thinking.

* Relations of power are ubiquitous, even overt in a study that admits to being advocacy.
The Language Arts Share Characteristics of Art

Thankfully, philosophical domain distinctions between the Language Arts and Art are not relevant here. These remain as problematic for me as for Lily Tomlin/alias Trudy, the quintessential bag lady in The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe (Wagner 1986). Imagine Trudy trying to show differences between art and junk to alien visitors to our planet: She plucks a sticky soup can from an alley trash bin, and holds it up opposite a replica of Andy Warhol's now-infamous painting of same. Trudy explains to the audience that "they," the aliens, are confused by appearances:

They find it hard to grasp some things that come easy to us, because they simply don't have our frame of reference. I show 'em this can of Campbell's tomato soup. I say, 'This is soup.' Then I show 'em a picture of Andy Warhol's painting of a can of Campbell's tomato soup. I say, 'This is art.' 'This is soup.' 'And this is art.' Then I shuffle the two behind my back. Now what is this? No, this is soup and this is art! (29)

Confusions aside, both domains — Language Arts and Art — exhibit essential qualities: Both the Language Arts and Art intend meaning. Both have emotional resonance. Both invite immersion. Both strain to make personal forms
public. Both take initiative, imagination, passion, and time. Both invite critique of one's work in relation to others'. Both incite wonder.

Thus, it is appropriate, even essential, to approach the Language Arts in aesthetic ways both in our classroom practices and our assessments. Previously, I've spoken of the "ethos" of 1G. At this point, I'll simply plant an idea borrowed from John Dewey (1934), perhaps the single educator most responsible for process education.

He claimed that Americans confuse objective standards and objective judgment. The first conventionally connotes a numerical accounting; the other does not.

The qualities shared by the Language Arts and Art resist traditional measurement, though in a passionate efficiency, we've scurried about measuring what we could: number of correct verb tenses, number of correct capitalizations, and the like. Not coincidentally, of course, we've then doggedly pursued/taught what we could measure frequently at the expense of other, admittedly elusive, "virtual things." As Tamara, my young, wise piano teacher puts it, "Judy, the notes are in black...the music is in the spaces."

And so, historically, we've been seduced by epiphenomena, drugged by surface paraphrenalia where the Language Arts are concerned. It's time we accept that going below the surface, beyond the black spots on the page, out
from behind our desks, though risky, unpredictable, and conventionally unmeasurable, is what we must do in our Language Arts classrooms. (For an indictment of conventionally measurable concepts of time -- the Short View of Time, versus the Long View of Time, see Apple, 1989.) Then, we, like the children, will be language art-ists.

Chris and I were trying develop artistic eyes in ourselves, to see in children's actions those qualities that may be valuable for growing literate capacities. We learned through trial and error that no stock form could serve us well. For example, we frustrated ourselves for weeks trying to capture separate evaluative formats/forms/frames for clay work, for shadow play, for collage making. We then realized that we were trapping ourselves into behaviors that were highly imitative of other evaluative schemes we'd seen. Instead, we decided to learn new ways to describe child actions that we experienced as rich with literate/artistic possibility.

Now, we look for qualities or sensibilities in the children that appear to contribute to meaning making in general, and in the Language Arts and Art in particular. These qualities will be considered shortly as "the new basics."
The Classroom as Expressive Organism

The classroom can be compared to an expressive, living organism just as verbal language can. Like language, 1G exists to give expression to ideas—ideas of the culture at large, of communities within the classroom, and of individuals. (Clearly, 1G exists to express ideas in non-verbal ways, however this discussion focuses on its specifically linguistic aspects.) If one accepts the analogy between the classroom and language, it is appropriate and powerful to describe 1G in linguistic terminology.

For example, recall that linguists have isolated seven functional uses of language: Instrumental, "I want;" Regulatory, "Do as I tell you;" Interactional, "Me and you;" Personal, "Here I come;" Heuristic, "Tell me why?;" Imaginative, "Let's pretend!;" and Informative, "I've got something to tell you" (Halliday 1973, 57-58). Given this range of functions, the question lurks: Does the classroom regularly honor all language functions?

Because Chris systematically schedules time for talk before, after, and during most classroom ventures, every language use is invited throughout the day. (Though I suspect all language functions occur within the unofficial curriculum — say in whispered talk, note passing, and the like in 1G, talk is officially validated most times. To be sure, children still discover unofficial ways to use
Coding the one hundred and thirty-four child statements for one typical forty-minute block play session demonstrates a close correspondence, both in uses and frequencies per use, that Halliday identifies as typical for young children using language to learn language. Specifically, the six boys in one block play event used Regulatory language forty-six percent of the time, they used Interactional/Imaginative language thirty-three percent of the time, and they used Representational language nineteen percent of the time. Instrumental and Heuristic language each represented thirteen percent of the boys' transactions, and Personal language functions served three percent of their exchanges.

This admittedly tedious scheme suggests that the conditions most natural for child language growth are alive and well in this classroom if one accepts this slice of behavior as typical, as Chris and I do. She capitalizes on children's natural ways with language. Talk inside even more "officially academic" events shares characteristics similar to this play event simply because children continue to converse, in their own ways, throughout the school day.

Form follows function. In the case of language, children figure ways to figure out language as the classroom gives them the chance. I question any school day that systemmatically ignores whole ranges of language functions. Literacy curricula need nurture linguistic flexibility,
optional ways to use language to get things done. By freeing up certain times for talk in and around doings during the school day, children flex their different linguistic muscles.

"Child-centered'' Can Be a Suspect Term

"Child-centered'' can be an alias for a multitude of questionable practices and underlying philosophies. The closer I got to what children were trying to do at play, the more I thought about what distinguishes situations that are child-centered from those that profess to be. For example, some classrooms masquerade as child-centered by caricaturing child-like activities. Where whole curriculums are predetermined, in effect, they say, "DO THIS. LEARN THIS--but you can do it your way." Free play, cutsie worksheets, and cut-'n-paste doings lure tiny folk toward adult-centered concerns.

Other child-centered aliases manipulate children from an opposite angle. They formalize play routines to the extent they fizzle as play. They cajole, "Express yourself, learn what you want, but do it according to THE RULES: "Wait just a minute, we don't do that in the kitchen center." "No mixing the bristle blocks with the wooden ones. We are orderly in the block corner." "So you've decided to draw a pumpkin, Willy! ...Willy, stay inside the lines when you color your pumpkin. And remember Willy, we are quiet when we color."
Until we notice and honor what concerns the child, like friendship concerned Mick, cooperative environments were essential to Dawn, and sustained focus on block bases and Boglins concerned Ed, and until we offer the child choice of ways to proceed—playfully disguised activities or play stripped of its essentials: initiative, imagination, and freedom—we are doing little more than sugar-coating adult agenda.

Chemists now make an artificial compound, "left-handed sugar," which is symmetrical to the natural compound, tastes the same, even cooks the same, but is not accepted by the body, not processed for nourishment. Ultimately, it's a fake. My experience suggests that kids know what's truly child-centered and what's fake in classroom practices. I particularly like Dyson's (1990, 197) term "child-created" in contrast to "child-centered" because it better guarantees child purposes.

**Learning How to Mean in School Communities**

When I began this study, I expected to document children's eclectic approaches to literacy, especially writing. Naturally, then, I focused on children struggling to make meaning in print. Meanwhile, however, I was bombarded by visions of children struggling equally to mean in the different communities within the first grade. Though I never sensed I was being sidetracked, or that I was losing sight of literacy, I did sense that first grade children
passionately pursue ways to mean in school, and more or less willingly add print to their repertoires, along with block behavior, table cluster talk, or collaborative art ventures, to mention only the few communities I watched closely. I discovered with the children that no two communities exhibited identical ways to mean.

Though writing topics are usually open-ended in 1G, making meaning in the writing community is tricky. Its rules skirt idiosyncrasy and convention, depending on the individual's purposes, skills-to-date, among countless other things. One day a solution like taping a watch to a page is cheered by some people. Another day, those same people complain there are no spaces between words so "your story's hard to read." In addition, as the child grows more aware of writing conventions, the writing community imposes even more rules. Fortunately, approximations are cheered more loudly than misses are noted, so most children balance the expectations in stride. Nonetheless, making meaning in writing means balancing tensions--even in first grade.

Thankfully, perhaps, distinct though frequently unspoken rules exist in the block corner. Unlike the writing community, in block play, one does not interrupt another with impugnity. One does not always ask for a block as easily as asking how to draw a "k." Unlike reading or writing share time, one joins a block group only at the beginning of play. And in the block corner, a child can
work on other agendas more freely since no product is expected. Remember how Mick frequently used block play to improvise ways with friendship? Recall Ed's subtle exercise of leadership?

The art communities suggested new rules. Often the projects involved group work. Frequently, groups were intact table clusters instead of freely chosen like in block play, so girls were included more than in free play situations. When girls were a part of a group, they critiqued war themes, "Some girls don't like war stories." Boys in turn articulated their positions more fully. Recall Mick's "Once I killed a turkey..." adventure.

The art community stimulated talk of essences more than other communities, I think. (Though I'd never suggest children's thoughts were less constructive, at other times, during art, they were inclined to articulate thoughts verbally.) It's tricky to speculate on essences! However, I suspect that since few rules of any kind surrounded artmaking acts in 1G, and since many projects were collaborative, children took stabs at explaining to each other the many different things they were trying to do. And these different purposes--like Dawn trying to make patterns she learned in math with her tissue turkey tail, like Mick trying to make friends in nearly every art and free play situation I watched--frequently appeared more complex than the ones intended by the curriculum.
I suspect, too, that children's different purposes — especially ones that take shape as fairly consistent patterns of behavior—are prerequisites to their first grade school success and signals to us that need be heeded. Recall Ed's need to work on one topic for four months, Mick's need to sweep the classroom for resources when he writes, Brian's need to arbitrate dissention.

No matter how acute our perceptions of children's purposes might be, children are definitely context-hopping, moving among different, sometimes distinct, generally subtle rule-bound communicative communities in first grade. In so doing, they are becoming context-literate, reading situations, possibilities, and people. That's important life work. (See also Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater's (1990) similar finding for college students as they move among various writing-intensive disciplines in their majors.)

**Literacy Learning Is Systemic and Cooperative**

Children coopt eclectic meaning-making systems to reach their expressive goals. They are natural transmediators. Children have yet to privilege one literacy over another, or to specialize. Everything counts for them.

In turn, new things need to count for us in watching them, appreciating their purposes, their resources, their literate progress. We need guard against artificially separating systems and inhibiting the child, like Chris was temporarily led to do when Mick's parents insisted she "come
down harder." His backwards book suggests a frustration with limited meaning making resources. Instead of his functional repertoire of inquiry, a sedentary one was imposed on him and it backfired.

How does a teacher find a way into even a few of the various meaning systems operating simultaneously for any child? If we are to open the lens wider, what do we look for? Chris and I found two helpful tools: the Parent Questionnaire we developed together, and a conceptual frame I consider when looking at classroom meaning making acts. The questionnaire follows (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Play habits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does child choose to do most often? Describe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does child appear to dislike?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does child prefer to play with others/alone? Describe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading/Writing Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe earliest reading experiences, favorite book(s).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does child like to be read to? How often? For how long?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does child look at books on her/his own?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If so, how does child &quot;look&quot; at books independently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe earliest writing experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your child write yet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If so, what does s/he write (i.e., letters, name, words, sentences, stories, etc.)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any second language experiences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Favorite toys, recordings, TV shows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Artifacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What has the child made at home? Any demonstrations of  &quot;taste&quot; in clothing, room arrangement, color, etc.?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports, music, art, dance, gymnastics, and so on.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. How would you characterize your child as a learner? For example, does s/he prefer to work with others, talk while working, move actively about as s/he works or listens, handle things as s/he investigates them, stick to one project for long periods or change projects frequently? Does the child prefer to practice new things in private or public? And so on.

7. Other. Are there patterns of meaning-making that you recognize in your child that might help us make first grade a more comfortable, joyful, and more natural place for your child to learn?

Parents know so much that can help us help their children in first grade. We found them generous in response, and grateful for the chance to communicate with us in these ways.

The second useful tool was a conceptual one. Below is a sketch of the three-colored lens "camera" that I found generative (Figure 2). For each child, I conceptualized the relationships among the socio-cultural functions of language; the artifacts, i.e., reading, writing, or art products; and the rhythms or idiosyncratic work patterns.

Figure 2

Dynamic Levels of Meaning Making

Language Functions

Artifacts

Patterns/Rhythms
I imagine myself viewing the child through all three lenses at any one time and I ask:

How is s/he using language?
What is s/he trying to make?
How is s/he using time and space to do it?

The linguistic lens helps me notice the child's functional flexibility, how many ways s/he knows how to talk about things. The artifactual lens helps me appreciate the products the child is making, be they stories, clay figures, friendships, dramatic improvisations, peaceful working conditions, and the like. The rhythms/patterns lens tunes me in to the child's ways through time and space in the classroom.

Generally, what I see through one or two lenses strikes me as more significant than another. It is this combination of sights, or insights, that I would name for/with the child, and work with at that time. I remember the look on Brian's face the day he and I named his project: peacemaker. He kept that idea in mind for months apparently because his parents mentioned his commenting on it at home. They, too, agreed that Brian fit that role on his sports teams. At last, I believed home and school were connecting for Brian.

The New Basics: Literate Sensibilities that Cut across Meaning-Making Acts

The new basics suggest we offer children opportunities to be Problem Posers, Initiators, Problem Solvers, to explore levels of symbolic involvement in diverse forms. We
need give them opportunities to respond to others, to ideas, to contexts, chances to "read situations," and of course to self-evaluate.

Then, in turn, we'll begin to describe children in light of these sensibilities across contexts. We'll consider their meaning making gestures, their talk, work patterns and rhythms per community. Instead of a rush to evaluate their power over print, perhaps we'll privilege thinking, meaning making, expression and communication wherever, in whatever form(s) they occur. We'll ask them and ourselves, "What's happening here? What are you trying to do? What's new?"

Even when we are suspicious that a child is simply imitating video game plots, for example, we need to discover the child's purposes. How powerfully I came to respect what I believed were skimpy, formulaic plots once I appreciated the boys were invested in the action, in the middles, not beginnings and ends. I suspected that Brian was trapped into rocket stories largely because he was in the habit of writing about what he could draw well. It seemed that his intentions and ours were out of sync. Once Chris and I saw how prolific his science writing was compared with his rocket stories, we attempted to shift his intentions from drawing what he could draw to describing his recent vivid class experiences. For weeks, Brian abandoned his rocket stories and immersed himself in Rotten Jack journaling. He appeared more confident during this writing than during the
Never did I talk with a child who did not have a purpose for what s/he was trying to do. Sometimes I urged a shift in purpose, more often, I shifted my own. Always, I needed to hang around long enough to eavesdrop and figure things out.

**Questions about Literacy Ultimately Embrace Questions of Learning and Thinking**

Playful Literacy is an attempt to credit children—at the very least—for what is visible about their thinking. As Don Graves suggested to me, this story is an "external Notebooks of the Mind." In *Notebooks of the Mind*, Vera John-Steiner (1985) studied "experienced thinkers" and showed powerfully that while "inner speech—and 'inner speech' writing of the kind recorded in Virginia Woolf's diary—has been studied by others, condensed thought across several modalities had not been noted before" (215).

Playful literacy, I hope, documents "condensed thought across several modalities" by first grade thinkers—who are not inexperienced thinkers, nor "experienced thinkers"—just thinkers.

**Relations of Power Surface in Any Educatice Venture**

Power relations confront any study, but particularly a study that admits to being advocacy. Questions arise: Whose meaning is it anyway? What constitutes curriculum? What is knowledge? Whose knowledge counts? Who is in power?
Surely, knowledge is never neutral, but always connected to relations of power.

A driving question for me has been—Who owns access to what knowledge? Early in my data collection, I sent dear friends a letter describing my concerns. An excerpt follows from that December 1988 letter:

Dear Chips and Harry,

...So, what specifically am I looking for? I am interested in what qualities constitute and contribute to literate behaviors. Most of the research I’ve read focuses on ways of talking, listening, reading, and writing. Surely, these behaviors are the most obvious, and those most directly associated with what we know as literacy. But, I am interested in expanding the notion of literacy so that we can value additional behaviors that I think may be even more fundamental. And surely, by arguing that more kinds of behaviors need be considered part of literacy, we open up more ways into it—we offer a more democratic access to it.

I’ve been disappointed by what I think are limited conceptions of literate behavior—those that place verbocentric acts on pedestals and relegate non-verbal, or incidentally verbal acts to a lower intellectual domain. I’m continually amazed at the faith writing teachers have placed in brainstorming. The teacher invites the students to make lists of ideas, phrases, sentences, whole paragraphs, etc., in order to get writing going. In my experience, those who could use some prompts for writing are precisely those for whom words aren’t forthcoming in any form! So, those that know how continue to succeed, and those who don’t flounder and feel incompetent.

...What I’m struggling to suggest is that schools have limited the access to the literacy game by constructing narrow gates to the playing field. Only those who can fit through playing by verbal rules make it through successfully; others squeeze by or not, but in either case, see themselves as less capable early in the game and frequently lose ground evermore....
If Chips and Harry were agog with my ramblings, they never let on. (Friends of dissertation writers are among the long-suffering. Add to that list family and committee members, to mention only the obvious!) At any rate, research needs to challenge the status quo.

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Chris and I became collaborators in our worldview. It is not another's world view. It is offered as one section of the theoretical map qualitative researchers are piecing together in search for our GUT (grand unification theory, to plagiarize from physics!) for literacy learning. What we hope will be seen by others, however, is that the language arts classroom needs to support and celebrate the child on all levels of meaning making. This means that we must ask, How many ways are available for this child to make meaning? before we ask, What does this child know?

Both Chris and I are sympathetic with anyone who is overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of data, experiences noticed, and the like, per child. Teachers could not possibly keep track of what a researcher may noticed per case study child for whole classrooms of children. Teachers can, however, refine their "seeing" in order to zoom in on fringe children, those who are on either ends of teachers' concerns: the "crackers," like Brian, or the decidedly advanced, like Dawn. And any others who are mysteries, or wonders.
Directions for Future Research

Mysteries and wonders remain for me. I wonder if artmaking has the potential to blur gender ghettos/communities in schools? (See Best 1983 for ominous implications of peer group affiliation and academic standing.) I wonder about the role/connection between children's stories and primitive mythmaking across cultures. I wonder what an expressive portfolio be like if it represented varied literacies within clay, shadow play, writing, reading, talk, and the like?

I want to know how meaning makers in different art forms—dance, sculpture, music, architecture, painting, interior decorating, hair design, landscapers, tai chi experts, and the like—could lend insights into aesthetic knowing? Might reflecting on such knowing in other people, and in ourselves—talking about it, reading and sometimes writing about it—excite certain students in our reading and writing classes who otherwise may turn off? Chris and I admit that this study is a form of resistance to an education that until now systematically excluded these ways of knowing, ways that are real, powerful, even essential for us.

Fundamentally, I wonder about two critical issues: Can teachers find ways to articulate the values, skills, attitudes, understandings, and passions that are developed by a multi-literacies approach to literacy? And if so,
would the public expand its expectations for what is basic for schooling? For the sake of the children in our classrooms, I think we must brave the admittedly uphill battle.

Finally, there was the wonder of Stephen, the child who fueled the early thinking for this work. Stephen was a first grader for whom our version of the writing process was not working. His first day of school, he zoomed into the classroom, arms akimbo, eyes on a distant vision, motors running. He circled the room like a landing strip then glided to a landing on the rug. Chris and I exchanged cautious glances and wondered what was next.

Even into late October, no amount of cajoling could nudge Stephen to print. What we eventually discovered during Stephen's parent interview was that he had been involved in community theater since he was a toddler. For him, story meant acting it out before a live audience. He was eager to participate in storying whenever the conditions allowed him to improvise orally and physically, and make his audience laugh.

One day as he told a story about tankers (war planes) to the class, complete with his handmade construction paper plane and accompanying actions, Chris wrote down his words. She handed them to him when he finished. He appeared to be moved to see his story in print. Whether or not Stephen could imagine story without performing it, we knew that he
would not willingly. And we were determined to honor his preferred ways of thinking and keep his joyful spirit of invention alive and well. So, for months, Stephen was invited to build planes, move around with them, and to share his oral stories about them. His earliest near-voluntary accommodation to print was the day he agreed to "print the destructions" for making the plane so other children could make one too!

Gradually, willingly, Stephen added more print to his stories. Late in the year, I stumbled across this page in one of his books (Figure 3):

Figure 3

"I am flying with my hands."

I AM FLYING
WITH MY hands

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I was stunned that Stephen not only imagined planes, but that Stephen was a plane within his imaginings. I dread thinking what might have become of him had Chris insisted that he remain on his bum and think in words alone.

Now when I look at a literacy classroom, I look for a junk corner with found materials for people to "doodle around" with. I remember asking Ed as he played with blocks during language arts, "Do you know what you're building before you begin?"
He said, "Not really. I just doodle around, you know?"
Now, I do know.

Now I look for found materials such as clay, pastel crayons, material pieces, yarn, cardboard, styrofoam, blocks, a dress-up drawer, and music. The day Ashley asked if she could do her page over, "Because she didn't let the music in," suggested to me the meaning potential of varied experiences within the classroom, whether or not I can connect these directly to writing that ends up in the folder.

Surely we share a vested interest in leading persons to words, but I'm worried about any literacy classroom or curriculum that privileges words at the expense of multiple forms for thinking. I worry: Who are we silencing by a narrow focus on words? How free is choice if choice fails to include different forms for meaning making?
LIST OF REFERENCES


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