

**Reading the Pictorial World of the Child: Emerging Literacies  
in Child Art**

**By**

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Part of the beauty of working with children is that we, the adults, are allowed to explore our imaginative processes too. Isn't that what education should be about?

Marni Binder

Through their artwork, I see the imagination at work. They draw upon their experiences and inner stories. Through often- fantastic renderings, they create worlds that allow them to make sense of what is real in their own. Though there are gender specific depictions, the children need to "go out" and "bring in" what is important. Through poetry, they are amused and touched. Through story, they relate and recall. Visualization enables them to see, share, and feel safe. Imaginary and real worlds are created in their drawings. Their paintings explode with the delight of colour.

Marni Binder

Children see the unusualness of things. They venture out of the real and rational to make sense of their world, defining their personal cosmologies. This manifests in different ways. Granted, the imagination is not the sole property of the arts, but it does provide a way to disclose the mind's eye. I believe that through the visual arts, the transformative qualities of the imagination cross into other realms of thinking. Using the visual arts appeals naturally to their way of looking at things, or should I say, "seeing"- they speak it, they draw it, they paint it, and they feel it.

Marni Binder

## Introduction

First, and foremost I am a teacher. A teacher in the inner city who has had the privilege to embark on a course of study that has taken me into the theoretical world of the arts, art education, literacy, and multiple literacies. Emerging out of this theoretical world, a unique perspective has developed that provides new dimensions in understanding the significance of child art and moves this knowledge into the realm of classroom practice.

My interpretations unfolded from reading the pictorial representations the children in my classroom created. Child art reveals a depth of expression that reflects contextual worlds, the significance of communication and meaning-making, and sociocultural contexts through everyday lived experiences. When translated into classroom practice, these lived experiences become the foundation for authentic learning, not just for inner city children, but for all children.

Reading the pictorial world of the child breaks the rigidity of current literacy practices through the experiential dimension of a holistic, arts-based philosophy. This research has empowered the reframing of my pedagogic landscape and repertoire, expanding the potentialities for children to learn in alternative ways.

My thesis has brought the past and present together through personal and professional growth. It has enhanced my own emergent literacy understanding and has honed my ability to "see". The educational possibilities of seeing the world through the eyes of the child has tremendous transformative power in reframing and reshaping teacher practice and curriculum development.

This distinct perspective provides practitioners a way to expand their

understanding of the multiple ways children experience literacy through their art, and how creative and imaginative endeavours transform learning into acts of meaning-making. Consequently, the possibilities of rethinking educational experiences extend beyond the boundaries of standardized curriculum practices, where teachers can discover that literacy is more than just words for children.

### **The Thesis: An Overview**

That is why I have to keep summoning up the experiences that gave me moments of being and ones that buried me in cotton wool, in the hope that I arouse others to couch some of their stories in similar ways.

(Greene, 1995, p.115)

My thesis examined emerging literacies in children's art through a hermeneutic phenomenological study conducted in my Grade 1/2 inner city classroom. Seven literacy themes evolved from experiencing the phenomenon of children's pictorial representations: spiritual, visual, poetic, aesthetic, gender, print, and story. The potential of reshaping current educational usages and practices of literacy through reading the pictorial representations of children was supported by the literature on literacy, multiple literacies, the arts, and art education.

Exploring the drawings and paintings of children provided the basis for developing a different approach to the concept of literacy and multiple literacies. My research revealed another dimension for how children make meaning. The opportunity for inner city children to express their inner landscapes through alternative and artistic language forms enabled and empowered them to transfer this acquired ability to conventional print literacy.

The significance of the teacher and learner is discussed within the realms of Max van Manen's (2001) four existentials: lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived

relation. The stage was set for experiencing the contextual universes of the images created and deepened the interpretative potentials this research process discovered. The interpretation and interconnection of the experiences laid the foundation for applicable implications for educational practice and future explorations.

I began my doctoral journey five years ago. A multitude of influences, relations, and events, helped to unfold the focus on the relationship between the visual arts and literacy. During this time, I reflected on these influences and events that led me to undertake such an intense venture. As I stepped back, it became evident that this direction began long ago.

The shape-shifting qualities of my own life, past and present, uncovered significant moments in time, laying the foundation for my teaching experiences. These teaching experiences helped to define this research. Understanding the personal and professional context of my inner and outer landscapes deepened my awareness and moved this research into the public realm of possibilities.

This research took a different form from current multiple literacy research. Teachers are provided the text to read the world of the children through pictorial representations. Multiple ways of knowing and honouring the sociocultural identities of the students shapes the potential to transform learning. The multiple literacies uncovered through experiencing the images children create offer new dimensions in understanding and reshaping literacy development.

This doctoral journey illuminated my understanding of the inner city children I teach. It allowed me to draw on my past knowledge, experience present understandings, and open the door to future possibilities. Crystallizing the significance

of meaning-making, not only in the lives of the children we teach, but in our own inner landscapes, creates the prospect of energizing new beginnings in our quest for knowledge.

## **My Literature Review**

When a practitioner becomes aware of his frames, [s]he also becomes aware of the possibilities of alternative ways of framing the reality of his practice.

(Schon, 1983, p.310)

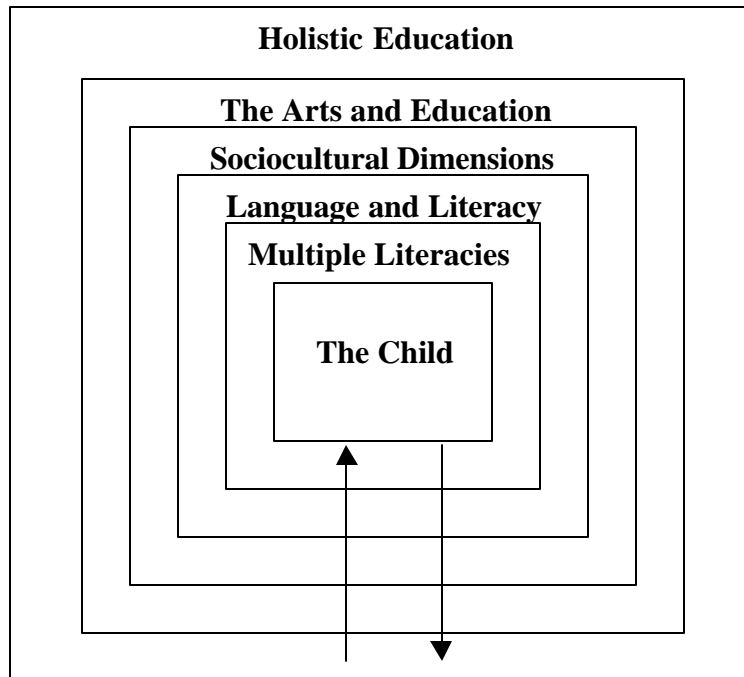
My literature review was very extensive. It represented the influences that have driven my work as a primary educator as well as the significant themes that contributed to the research. The internalization of theory underlies my lived practice. For this reason, I chose to represent the theories as frames. The frames devised, represented the integration of theory with practice that was essential to this research.

The use of frames provided a multi-dimensional perspective that embodies knowledge, allowing for an interconnecting flow that brings together the critical elements that characterizes the “wholeness” involved in the research process. Diagram 1 depicts the frames used in the literature review: holistic education, the arts and education, sociocultural dimensions, language and literacy, multiple literacies, and the child.

The holistic frame represented the overall philosophy, encompassing the pedagogy underlying the arts and education; embracing the sociocultural frame that defines the student, parents, community, teacher, and school; providing the theoretical connections between language and literacy; shaping the vision of multiple literacies, and ultimately illuminating an understanding of the development and lived world of the child. These frames were not static. They were threads that moved in and out, and

through each other, weaving a comprehensive marriage of theory and practice. Multi-dimensional perspectives were supported, strengthened, and shaped by the frames.

**Diagram 1: Theoretical Frames of Practice**



Van Manen (2001) contends “phenomenological research, unlike any other kind of research, makes a distinction between appearance and essence, between the things of our experience and that which grounds the things of our experience” (p. 32). The theoretical frames of practice did not just define the pedagogical experiences. They grounded the experiences, supported the related literature, and provided a solid framework that expanded the vision of possibilities in my research. “Pedagogy must be found, not in abstract theoretical discourse or analytic systems, but right in the lived world” (Van Manen, 1991, p. 31).

## **Emerging Literacies in Child Art**

The multiple literacies that emerged from reading the artwork of the children were: spiritual, visual, poetic, aesthetic, gender, print, and story. Spiritual and visual literacy had been explored previously in my work with primary children. Out of 250 art pieces collected, 36 were selected for the purpose of my research.

### ***Spiritual Literacy***

I see the universe, I see the world.

Grade 2 Student

Initially, I chose to start with spiritual literacy, as it is rarely discussed in the research. For me, it was the place to begin, as it allowed entry into a realm that is not at all recognized in mainstream education.

My concern for spiritual literacy arose from the desire to deepen my holistic curriculum using the arts. F. Brussat and M. A. Brussat (1996) define spiritual literacy as “the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experiences” (p. 1). In my experience, visualization is one of the most powerful methods in developing spiritual literacy. When I started to use visualization I found a door was opened that allowed children to make meaning in a unique way.

Visualization sessions were a weekly occurrence. Each time more and more children revealed inner stories through the discussions. Oracy skills were enhanced. As an alternative to discussion, the children began to draw and write in journals. I found the magic and meaning that arose orally unfolded in their pictorial representations and writing. Each child had a personal and unique style of depicting images in pictures that explored inner worlds.

The artist Kandinsky (1947) believed that “form is the external expression of inner meaning” (p. 47). Moffett (1988) speaks of the links between what he calls “inner speech” and writing. In the journals, I observed a strong connection between the forms represented, inner speech, and writing. There was an emerging flow from the oral, to the drawings, to the writing and reading.

The visualization sessions were taken from the work of Maureen Garth (1991, 1994). She provides a powerful image of a “worry tree” as a way for children to enter imagining through meditation. The children can put anything that bothers them on this tree. In the journals each child personalized their tree and what it represented to them.

Though the dialogue that followed the sessions was important, not everyone spoke. The journals provided the space and time for everyone to express their voice, privately or publicly. Sanders (1994) states that “stories spring from emotional roots that grow as large underground as the stories we hear above. Every time a child rattles one off, he taps deep into those emotional roots, for the stories get told from the ‘inner senses out’ ”(p. 46).

“The inner lives of children should be nourished and attended to. The only way to achieve this within an educational frame is to allow for the development of spiritual literacy” (Binder, 1998). The visualization journals enhanced the children’s ability to understand the signs written in their own experiences. The journals gave the children the freedom to express and the choice to share, enhancing their ability to read and write.

## ***Visual Literacy***

If someone doesn't know how to write, they can draw and it can mean something to them.

Grade 2 Student

My approach to visual literacy is to view the pictorial representations of the children as forms of graphic thought. The internalization of their construction of knowledge and the manifestation of making their thoughts public has, and continues to, inform my practice. Greene (1995) believes that “the literate mind informed by the arts is not tidy and predictable, cannot be prepped for, cannot be trapped within preordained codes, for the literate mind fuels the sense of knowing, and knowing things” (p. 42).

At a workshop presentation, David Booth stated: “All drawings by children are personal expressions of thought and feeling using visual language.” There is an important correlation between pictorial representation and literacy development. Booth also discussed the importance of community building. When children are part of a community, personal experiences, interpretations, and expressions inform meaning-making in relation to themselves and others.

Children's storywriting, specifically their drawings, demonstrates a visual order. They make meaning from their conceptions of their immediate world. Steele (1998) believes that “children think words while planning a drawing; they conduct internal monologues or talk out loud to themselves as they draw, and put thoughts, words, and their drawings together in conversation with adults when drawings are finished” (p. 149). Conversation helped me to probe the depth of the children's visual literacy. The richness of their meaning-making and symbols allowed me to see the world through their eyes.

Writing, being linear, cannot express what a child's drawing can. Orwell used the phrase "making thought visible" (Edwards, 1986). Thought is made visible through drawing, painting, and other artistic endeavours. Edwards (1986) considers drawing as a "possible parallel to verbal language" (p. 55). I view it as visual literacy.

### ***Poetic Literacy***

Brown is the colour of my skin  
Red is the colour of tomatoes  
Orange is the colour of carrots  
Green is the colour of trees  
I like the colour of me.

Grade 1 Student

I approached poetic literacy differently than the other literacies, where I use the children's images as the focal point. Here the poems generated the depth of images, allowing me entry into their awareness of poetic meaning. In many cases the meanings were extended. Just as poetry plays with language, children play with images to further their contextual awareness.

Booth and Moore (1988) write: "Poetry uses especially concentrated and connotative language. The words mean more than the words mean, because the meaning and form are wound together" (p. 18). The inventive images the children created to interpret the poems illustrated how meaning and form are entwined. Chukovsky (1971) discusses the importance of poetry as a painting of words, linking this to how children think in images.

Livingston (1984) discusses the qualities the child and the poet have in common. For me the most important is the "ability to think in concrete imagery, to make pictures, and to glory in the use of imagination" (p. 299). Poetic literacy is the ability to transform

one's ability of reading and understanding verse into images that extend, reshape, and recreate the interconnection of form and meaning.

### ***Aesthetic Literacy***

Because you can be creative and use your imagination.

Grade 2 Student

Through the aesthetic educational experiences I provide in the classroom, the children become engaged participants in the arts. For me aesthetic literacy is when they go to the paint centre, create a three-dimensional form, or show an artistic influence from a picture in a book or poster. It is the movement they bring to their everyday experiences and the songs they joyfully sing. Yes, I do provide the catalyst, stimulation, and the language of the arts, but it is their internalization of these experiences that show me their aesthetic literacy.

"The word 'aesthetics' comes from a Greek word, *aisthetikos*, that refers to the ability to perceive through the senses" (Jalongo & Stamp, 1997, p.2). Through artistic encounters, children perceive through their senses and internalize their awareness into something that is tangible. This is aesthetic literacy for young children.

### ***Gender Literacy***

One day 7 Pokemon were fighting 4 Pokemon and bet 3 Pokeman and they could not bet the fire. So the 7 Pokeman became 1 and the Pokeman were fighting for a long time. Then they were friends. The end.

Grade 1 Student

Derman-Sparks (1989) maintains that "gender identity consists of two components: a person's sexual identity, which is biological, and a person's role identity, which is cultural" (p. 49). In my classroom, I am challenged with the cultural aspect.

There are a myriad of cultures that define my classroom community. When the children enter the room, they bring with them their cultural histories that define how they perceive the world. Within the cultural and historical construct is gender identification. Children do have a strong sense of gender identity at this age and the roles that characterize them. There are cultures that portray very distinct pictures of what mommies and daddies do. In many cases mommies stay at home to look after the kids and daddies work. Children from single parent families often see the mom (I use mom here as the single parents in my classroom are moms.) going to work or not working. Images from the media reinforce these gender stereotypes.

The research literature provides a comprehensive view of gender differentiation in children's drawings, for the five to seven age ranges. Girls generally draw subjects of an interpersonal nature such as friends and family, focusing on the real world. Boys tend to draw vehicles, sports activities, and monsters, and focus on fantasy depictions that are often aggressive. These I have observed quite clearly in the work of my students. These universalities seem to occur in Grade1 and into Grade 2.

### ***Print Literacy***

You draw first so you can think what to write

Grade 1 Student

From making marks on paper, to letters, to words, and to whole sentences, children learn quickly that print carries meaning. They will read their marks with the same intensity of reading a storybook. As Graves (1983) would say, the marks "say I am" (p. 3). Symbols have meaning for them. Without meaning, true literacy cannot occur.

Children negotiate meaning through their drawings and print literacy. Their ability to reflect, retell, and relate (Schwartz & Bone, 1995) confirms the process of their learning. From the drawings and dictated stories, to marks, to invented spelling, simple sentences, and to complex narratives, children explore and (re)experience their world. The ability to read from memory, or the words they have written, mirror a depth of development at not only the cognitive level, but at the social, emotional, and spiritual levels as well. Often children struggle to find the words to reflect their inner landscapes. They strive to negotiate their experiences through print. As the visuals evolve in structure and form, so does the writing. Without the opportunity to “write a picture”, children will never unlock what is inside.

Through visual depictions, children learn to express in words what they may not have been able to before. With their drawings, many write short explanations as the picture tells it all. For some, the words take over. The drawing becomes a springboard for an outburst of written description. For all, the mind is thinking and seeing.

Marni Binder, Journal Entry, 2001

### ***Story Literacy***

Like if you tell us what to draw, we use your brain, not our brain

Grade 2 Student

Children’s drawings and stories have a sense of immediacy to them. They are visible in the present. At a workshop presentation, Larry Swartz spoke of children using their “knapsacks of knowledge” when they talk their stories and that they also chose to reveal their stories. I could not help but immediately relay this to the visual representations the children create and the text they bring to them. At times, unknowingly, children reveal what is important to them by integrating the past and

present. They move towards the future as they grow, socialize, and internalize an understanding of their world.

Story literacy weaves pictorial representation, print literacy, and sociocultural factors into an interconnected view of the child's universe. Through these building blocks of constructing their world, children merge past stories with the present and create imaginative worlds linked to the realities of their future. In my research I spoke of story literacy through discussing a number of themes that arose when exploring the pictorials: the everyday, once upon a time, and retelling. I also discussed the importance of the role of story and the story play work of Vivian Gussin Paley.

## **The Findings and Implications of My Research**

### ***Reading the World of the Child***

All learning tells a story of the world and produces images of what the world is like in its action. True learning sets the world free, acknowledges the world's own voice, allows it to speak, making incessant change.  
(Sardello, 1994, p.59)

My findings revealed seven emerging literacies from the children's artwork that was gathered and represented- spiritual, visual, gender, poetic, aesthetic, print, and story. Though I addressed overlapping qualities, it was essential for this research to separate the literacies, thus preserving the unique spirit and essence of each. As a holistic practitioner, I embrace the understanding of the whole child- the intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual. The seven literacies navigated through these domains.

My research revealed another dimension for understanding emerging literacies through child art. A unique perspective, originating from the images of children's drawings and paintings, provided an alternative to standard literacy practices.

Supported by existing literature on the arts, literacy, and multiple literacies, the discovery of new interpretations deepened the holistic view of the child. Sociocultural experiences of inner city children receive attention in attending to the connections made between personal events and relationships.

Reading the world of the child through their pictorial representations provided the prospect of reframing pedagogic text, expanding the repertoire of learning. The literacies that emerged in this research reflect the potentialities of multiple ways of identifying the interrelationship between the pictorial images and text. The textures of the children's lived worlds were experienced.

At a recent conference I attended, Bob Barton said, "The child obliges us to stay open to conversation." This conversation has been experienced and interpreted through my research. The children's pictorial representations open conversational channels at the personal and interpersonal levels, breathing interactive life into the tableaux of their meaning-making. My discovery of spiritual, visual, aesthetic, poetic, gender, print, and story literacies in the pictorial representations of children, not only revealed the intricate details of how children construct their world through lived meaning, but also unveiled the multiple ways children themselves construe their own literacies through artistic forms of expression.

The following summary of the research implications can be viewed as frames for reshaping classroom practice and most important, open up and enrich the educational possibilities of seeing the world through the eyes of the child.

1. First read the images, then the text.
2. Reading the pictorial world of the child reveals multiple ways of knowing.

3. Children's artwork guides the interpretation and holistic knowledge of literacy development.
4. Meaning-making is at the heart of all learning.
5. Multiple literacies provide new possibilities to understanding meaning-making.
6. Educating through art encourages choice of expression, creativity, and imaginative capabilities.
7. Identity reveals the sociocultural significance of past, present, and future experiences and helps build community.
8. Pictorial representations, oracy, and text are interconnected in emerging literacy.
9. Lived experiences augment learning.
10. Let them draw, let them paint, let them write, and let them create.

<b>Literacies</b>	<b>What the Child Experiences</b>	<b>What the Teacher Experiences</b>
Spiritual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>external expression of inner meaning</li> <li>expression of issues of concern</li> <li>expression of emotions</li> <li>expression of personal identity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>deeper awareness of the inner landscapes of children</li> <li>ways children identify with significant events and people</li> <li>connection between “inner speech” and symbolic forms of expression</li> <li>an awareness of the whole child.</li> </ul>
Visual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expression of thought and feeling in visual form</li> <li>interpretation of significant events and people in their lives</li> <li>exploration and development of personal narrative</li> <li>expression of personal identity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>multiple perspectives children bring to their meaning-making</li> <li>how children construct personal narrative through identity</li> <li>the importance of visual representation as an alternative and viable expression</li> <li>the depth visual images provide in literacy construction.</li> </ul>
Poetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>exploration of real and imaginary worlds</li> <li>development of imaginative capabilities</li> <li>understanding of text</li> <li>interpretation of text in an alternative and creative way.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the understanding children demonstrate of poetic text</li> <li>appreciation and significance of imaginative capabilities</li> <li>the connection children make between real and imaginary worlds</li> <li>how children construct textual understanding through visual images.</li> </ul>
Aesthetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expression and application of creative and imaginative capabilities</li> <li>joyful participation and response through art events</li> <li>exploration of the senses</li> <li>active engagement in learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the significance of creativity and imagination in learning</li> <li>the importance of integrating the arts in all language areas.</li> <li>how aesthetic encounters engage the sensual quality of learning</li> <li>how children interpret artistic experiences.</li> </ul>
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>social and cultural influences</li> <li>differences in gender roles</li> <li>exploration of gender relationships</li> <li>exploration of cultural influences (e.g.- media).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>how children identify with gender roles</li> <li>the influence of popular culture on gender identity</li> <li>ways to address gender issues</li> <li>how to create balance in allowing children to explore perceived gender roles and equity work.</li> </ul>
Print	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the meaning of images and words</li> <li>text as a complement to pictorial representations</li> <li>exploration of contextual significance in drawing and writing</li> <li>negotiation of meaning through images prior to writing and reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the styles children pass through in connecting drawing and writing</li> <li>how children read their drawings and writing.</li> <li>the significance of “writing a picture”</li> <li>drawings as a form of graphic thought that transfers to print literacy.</li> </ul>
Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expression of the everyday</li> <li>relating to and understanding of stories read and stories told through painting and drawing</li> <li>understanding of story form</li> <li>exploration of meaning-making in pictorial form.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>how children connect the concept of story into everyday experiences</li> <li>how children construct meaning-making</li> <li>awareness of children’s understanding of story form</li> <li>importance of choice in storywriting.</li> </ul>

## Final Thoughts

Education is not the filling of the pail but the lighting of the fire.  
(William Butler Yeats, in Smith, 2001, p.48)

After a year of being away from the classroom, I returned to my school to teach Grade 2. I looked forward to this renewal with enthusiasm. I entered a situation where I had not taught any of these children before, though I did know many of them. These children came from classrooms that did not reflect the holistic, arts-based philosophy I had developed. The new challenge was to apply my own research to this situation.

I embraced this new beginning with the evolving wisdom I had gained through the research process. The lived experiences of these children did reveal their multiple ways of knowing. Through their artwork, I was again able to explore the literacies I had already discovered. The potentiality for new emerging literacies presents itself as I continually recreate an authentic learning environment.

My research reflects a vision that seeks out the essence of the lived experiences of children. It is the pursuit for deeper meaning in my practice through providing artistic encounters that yield the rich images of meaning-making. A world that reveres the arts and provides education through art is a world where

Even the  
Everyday  
becomes an  
occasion  
for honor.

(The Learning About Learning Educational  
Foundation, 1977. p. 12)

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- Palmer, P. J. (1993). *To know as we are known: Education as a spiritual journey*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
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### ***Recommended Children's Books***

- Aliki. (1998). *Painted words*. New York: Green Willow Books.
- Bedard, M. (1999). *The clay ladies*. Toronto, ON: Tundra Books.

- Bornstein, R. L. (1997). *That's how it is when we draw*. New York: Clarion Books.
- Browne, A. (1998). *Voices in the park*. London: Doubleday.
- Brumbeau, J. (2000). *The quiltmakers gift*. Duluth, MN: Pfeifer-Hamilton Pub.
- Burningham, J. (1996). *Cloudland*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Chase, E. N. (1996). *Secret dawn*. Richmond Hill, ON: North Winds Press.
- Curtis, C.M. (1994). *All I see is part of me*. Bellevue, WA: Illumination Arts Pub.
- Fox, M. (1997). *Whoever you are*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Co.
- Gavin, J. (1997). *Children like me: Our favourite stories from around the world*. Bolton, ON: Fenn.
- Mcrae, R. (1991). *Cry me a river*. Sydney: Angus & Roberston.
- Micklethwait, L. (Ed.). (1993). *A child's book of art: Great pictures, first words*. London: Dorling Kindersley.
- Micklethwait, L. (Ed.). (1996). *A child's book of play in art: Great pictures, great fun*. London: Dorling Kindersley.
- Near, H. (1993). *The great peace march*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- Raczka, B. (2002). *No one saw: Ordinary things through the eyes of an artist*. Brookfield, CT: The Millbrook Press.
- Ryder, J. (1996). *Earthdance*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc.
- Swamp, J. (1995). *Giving thanks: A Native American good morning message*. New York; Lee and Low Books.
- Thomas, S.M. (1998). *Somewhere today: A book of peace*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Co.
- Wilson, J. (2000). *Imagine that*. Toronto, ON: Stoddart Kids.
- Yenawine, P. (1991). *Colors*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art/Delacorte Press.
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## Appendix 1: The Storytelling Project

The storytelling project took place at Lord Dufferin P.S., an inner city school in downtown Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I was privileged to be a part of this wonderful project. This storytelling project allowed participating students, staff, and parents to share their personal stories with others, and honour the diversity and commonalities that lie within us all. By remembering the past, we all were able to celebrate the present, and imagine the future.

The project took two years. There was extensive in-service for teachers, storytellers in the school, and a storyfest to share the stories. Parents were part of the process from the beginning. After the oral stories were shared, they were transformed through writing and art into a book entitled: *Family Stories from Lord Dufferin P.S.* (1999). The artwork was displayed at a local art gallery as well.

The culmination of the project was a video entitled: *The Storytelling Project: Our Community Speaks* (Toronto District School Board). It was a wonderful event that celebrated the successes of a community in coming together.

For those wishing to learn more, I have written about the Storytelling Project.<sup>1</sup> It was one of the most rewarding times in my teaching career, and provided an exemplary model, for holistic education, and illuminated the importance for imaginative and authentic learning for a school community.

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<sup>1</sup> Binder, M. (in press, publication date 2004). Remembering the Past, Celebrating the Present, and Imagining the Future: The storytelling project at Lord Dufferin P.S. Storytelling as spiritual literacy. In J. P. Miller & S. Karsten & D. Denton & D. Orr & I. Colalilo-Kates (Eds.), *Holistic learning: Breaking new ground*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

## **Appendix 2: Curriculum Practices that Nurture and Foster Imaginative Capabilities in the Primary Classroom**

### ***Visualization Sessions***

- enhance and encourage meaning- making
- oracy skills
- artistic expression- verbal and non-verbal
- emergence of personal cosmologies
- poetry work enhanced
- imagining- what if's, as if's.

### ***Drawing***

- choice
- storywriting
- record understanding of learning (e.g.- science- water cycle)
- depict detail graphically
- graphic thought.

### ***Poetry***

- poem of the day- Monday to Thursday, a poem is explored by the class. On Friday a vote is taken on the favourite poem. The poem is then put into a poetry book and illustrated.
- use of poetry books in classroom collection, Borrow-a-Book program
- poetry on tape- listening to words
- choral reading, chants, individual.

### ***Literature and Literacy***

- quality literature- picture books, chapter books- teacher read and children read
- artistic merit in book illustrations
- retelling- oral, written, and drawing/painting
- story play- work of Vivian Gussin Paley
- storytelling- known stories- e.g.- fairytales
- family stories- shared culture heritage, sense of place and history
- honouring voice- ideas, experiences, and modes of expression.

### ***The Arts***

- paint readily available in classroom
- variety of materials used for drawing- crayons, markers, coloured pencils
- class books- retelling a story, illustrating a poem- collage work, cut and paste
- use of drama, movement , and music- in poetry work, role-play, puppetry

- choice of what to paint and draw
- self-portraits at least three times a year
- books on different artists and styles
- posters reflecting different art styles and cultures.