

Writing, Drawing and Storytelling: Building Literacy and Language One Squiggle, One Zombie, and One Picture of Mom at a Time

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If you were to write a story, where would you start? Would you look to your own life experiences for inspiration, or would you tap into the world around you for ideas? Would you build on everyday happenings and spark your imagination to create new fantastic characters, objects and worlds? These questions are more easily posed than answered. As much as stories differ, so might their sources of inspiration. However, stories are closely connected to our perceptions of the world around us and may in fact be an important way we attempt to understand our world in novel ways (pun intended).

We should not be surprised to learn that storytelling seems to be an important step in the oral and written language development of young learners. In June, 2015, the NOWPlay Project conducted focus groups with educators from northern communities across the four Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan. Some of the questions posed to the participants were the following:

- How would you describe the writing or drawing of the children (ages 4 - 7) in your classroom, daycare, or Aboriginal Head Start program?
- What are some typical things that children write or draw?
- What are the difficulties that children have with writing or drawing?
- What are you hoping will be improved by participating in this project?

Unsurprisingly, there were many different responses to these questions, as numerous experiences were shared, many points of view were exchanged, and a number of real-life stories were told. Interestingly, several participants noted a link between their students' writing and drawings and stories the students were trying to tell. These educators remarked that a student's drawings and squiggles seemed to represent more than discrete, independent objects; rather, they represented unique stories. As students jotted down squiggly lines and drew pictures of guns and rainbows, zombies and pets, and Minecraft¹ and mom, they could and would often describe each image and symbol as a part of a larger narrative.

Several participants noted that the images and 'writing' (squiggles) that students produced largely stemmed from their experiences. As one educator stated, "Everything is developed right from whatever is in their head." Many students drew pictures of their mothers and other family members or tried to write their names. Yet these pictures often seemed to tell a much larger story. For example, more than simple drawings, the students' pictures of mom could be contextualized in more complex verbal representations of their experiences. One participant noted that pictures of mom usually represented larger stories, such as "what my mom did today." Even some of the more fantastic images that children drew, such as zombies, dinosaurs and dragons, seemed to be inspired by their abundant experiences with video games, television and movies: technologies, which often play an important role in their lives.

One focus group thought that conceptualizing drawings and emergent writing as “stories” was a strategy that stimulated oral language and reading development. Another focus group discussed that struggling (emergent) writers could be encouraged to build off of their drawings to relate personal stories. Three of the groups suggested that students who are good at drawing generally have stronger oral and written language skills. Some even noted that students with more developed oral and written language skills produced more complex and detailed drawings than other students. For example, students with less developed language skills would draw simple stick characters, whereas children with stronger oral and written skills drew figures with more detailed and complex features. However, one respondent in another discussion said that sometimes students who were not as strong verbally were terrific artists and drew and used Lego in complex ways. As she said, “it’s important to see that [drawing and artwork] as a communication system and it is tied to writing because it is a part of communication.”

Like the case of numerous aspiring writers before them, technology seems to play an important role (both positive and negative) in children’s written, drawn or squiggled storytelling. While Hemingway used his famous Royal Quiet De Luxe typewriter to chronicle his stories, focus group participants mentioned that students use a range of technologies to construct their images and words. Two groups talked about students manipulating play-dough and plasticine to kinaesthetically make letters and numbers. One focus group discussed how students used iPads in their school to help draw letters and shapes, and suggested that the technology was especially useful for non-verbal and struggling students to play with, draw and familiarize themselves with the alphabet. Another focus group however, thought that children’s use of iPads and other devices might be impeding their ability to write and draw. One respondent gave an example of a student who was competent when using an iPad but experienced difficulties when trying to write with a pencil. These focus group participants considered that because of technology, children no longer used chalk, crayons and pencils at home, and this might be impeding the

development of their fine motor skills and making drawing and writing without technology more difficult.

What did the focus group responses reveal about teachers’ roles in facilitating students’ writing and drawing? In a sense, if children are the authors of their own stories then teachers can be seen as both their editors and their audience. Some participants noted that they strove to expand their students’ breadth of experiences through mock play opportunities. One participant remarked that “a lot of them [children] don’t have a lot of life experiences or opportunities outside of what we have in the valley, which is pretty limited ... so I hope that we can also ... provide them mock or play opportunities of other real life experiences that they may not get to witness until they’re adults.” Hence, it was argued, if writing and drawing stories ultimately builds upon experience, an educator’s role should try to give students new experiences. Examples ranged from providing students with different flavours of ice cream to creating a mock trip to Disneyland and travelling on an airplane. Some of the participants felt that by using play to expand the horizon of students’ experiences, they would give them a larger repertoire of experiential knowledge to help build their oral and written language skills.

So, what do squiggles, zombies, Minecraft and mom have in common? The focus group participants painted a picture of students using their emerging writing and drawing skills to build narratives. Students tell stories and vignettes based on their experiences of the world around them, which often include mom, and sometimes reflect what they watch on television. No two stories are the same; some are very visual and image based, some already include sentences, while others contain only ‘squiggles’. Yet the participants saw some common elements across their students’ writing. Students were inspired by real-life experiences, students’ writing communicated a larger narrative than was initially apparent, and technology played a role, whether aiding or hindering their ability to communicate experiences through writing, drawing and tactile representations. In the focus group discussions, participants largely viewed their role as

facilitating literacy development in two important ways:

- 1) Using drawing activities in the classroom to build confidence in their students, particularly in students with less developed writing skills;
- 2) Encouraging students to build out from their experiences, and scaffolding in higher order writing skills as their students progress.

When participants were asked what they hoped to improve or gain from the NOWPlay Project, the common response centred on their hopes for a diagnostic tool that would help them to better understand the developmental writing and drawing stages of their students. Focus group discussions suggested that students' emergent writing and drawing and the stories these efforts represent are merely an early chapter in their oral and written language development.

¹ Minecraft is an independent online game where children of all ages “mine” blocks to “craft” landscapes and create their own virtual experiences. Information about Minecraft can be found at <https://minecraft.net>

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