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# The Role of the Arts in Early Language and Literacy Development

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Edited by  
Kathy Rushton and Robyn Ewing

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# **The Role of the Arts in Early Language and Literacy Development**



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Editors

**Kathy Rushton**

**Robyn Ewing**



Basel • Beijing • Wuhan • Barcelona • Belgrade • Novi Sad • Cluj • Manchester

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# About the Editors

## **Kathy Rushton**

Kathy is interested in the development of language and literacy in a range of educational settings, from primary school students to adults. She is especially interested in supporting translanguaging in culturally and linguistically diverse communities. As an experienced TESOL teacher, she is interested in the impact of teacher professional learning on the development of language and literacy, especially for students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

## **Robyn Ewing**

Robyn is passionate about the arts and education and the role that quality arts experiences and processes can and should play in creative pedagogy and transforming the curriculum at all levels of education. Her teaching areas include primary curriculum, especially English, literature, drama, and early literacy development. She is Professor Emerita in Teacher Education and the Arts and Co-Director of the Creativity in Research, Engaging the Arts, Transforming Education, Health and Wellbeing (CREATE) Centre at the University of Sydney.





Article

# Poetry and Motion: Rhythm, Rhyme and Embodiment as Oral Literacy Pedagogy for Young Additional Language Learners

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**Abstract:** Literacy pedagogy that integrates oracy, poetry and embodiment can foster children's language development in multiple ways: (1) oracy is foundational to children's emergent literacy as writing extends from oral language, (2) poetry uses rhythm and rhyme to support letter-recognition and the learning of phonemes and morphemes, (3) embodiment and roleplay provide semiotic support and opportunities for expressive and receptive communication. This article shares findings from a phenomenological case study investigating how literacy pedagogy that integrated oracy, poetry and embodiment impacted three additional language students aged 6. A series of weekly literacy classes in a school in Sydney's multicultural western region were observed and recorded on video. This instrument was able to capture 'micro-moments' of learning between peers, depicting how physicalisation and the use of rhythm and rhyme effectively engaged students whose first language was not used in the classroom. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to data analysis, case study findings revealed that embodied explorations of poetry immersed participants socially and imaginatively whilst pushing them beyond their additional language comfort zone. The pedagogy was also shown to increase comprehension and support the acquisition of new vocabulary.

**Keywords:** embodiment; poetry; drama; oracy; literacy; additional language-learners; ESL

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## 1. Introduction

The increasing diversity amongst students in modern classrooms is productively compelling innovation on the part of literacy teachers. Recognising the need for more culturally inclusive approaches, many educators are turning to arts-based methods to help teach language and linguistic concepts [1,2]. This is due to the playfulness and accessibility of arts methods helping to motivate language production for diverse student populations. The use of drama and physical enactment to activate children's linguistic and cognitive resources is a recent augmentation that shows promising results, especially for additional language learners [1–6]. Combining these drama approaches with poetry and music-based strategies focusing on rhythm, rhyme and syllabic rehearsal enables children to engage with texts on multiple cognitive levels [7,8]. This is supported by increasing neurological evidence linking early capabilities in beat and rhythm perception with children's later language outcomes [7,9,10].

This article reports on the significance for additional language learners when poetry and embodiment were incorporated into classroom literacy learning. Inquiry was framed around the following questions:

- (1) What do additional language learners experience during a drama-based literacy session employing poetry, oracy and embodiment?
- (2) In what ways do these experiences conform to relevant theories of literacy and additional language pedagogy?
- (3) How does the use of embodied literacy approaches impact student engagement?

Findings from this study revealed that integrating poetry and embodiment meaningfully recruited children's social semiotic capacities and created repeated opportunities for

rhythm perception and phonemic recognition. This article describes the research conducted and shares an excerpted vignette as a demonstration of findings. Discussion links the experiences observed with future directions and possibilities in the realms of literacy and language.

### *1.1. Informing Theories of Language and Learning*

Multimodal and sociocultural language theories provided the overarching frameworks used to draw theoretical links during this study. Multimodality is a conception of language influentially propagated by Kress [11]. Emerging from his work with the New London Group and multiliteracies [12], multimodal language theory proposes that globalisation and the audio-visual influence of the internet have generated a move in linguistics away from authoritarian rules of grammar towards the more inclusive domain of semiotics. Kress conceives that ideas and information are communicated through multiple, often synchronous, modes or ‘ensembles of meaning’. These modes may be visual, aural, gestural, textual or graphic, and each has its own unique affordances [11]. Students’ use of embodiment to represent objects, characters and emotions featured in poetic texts can provide a supplementary mode to help with text comprehension for additional language learners. Sociocultural theory stems from the work of Vygotsky [13], recognising that learning happens not only inside the mind of an individual but also in and through their environment. Conversations and interactions with peers are tools for learning, just as teachers, books and devices are. Sociocultural language pedagogy purposefully designs co-operative learning experiences that include frequent group work and encourage peer-to-peer conversations [14]. As Atkinson [6] argues, effective language acquisition features a combination of interaction, embodiment and positive affect. Drama-based approaches also feature these elements and can allow English as additional language or dialect (EAL/D) students to learn with and from peers in dynamically engaging contexts. Students’ desire to perform the results of their collaborations is a persuasive influence on additional language learners, coaxing more reluctant speakers to share in front of their classmates.

### *1.2. Hermeneutic Phenomenology; Participatory, Embodied and Poetic*

Given the young age and language-minoritised status of the participants, a phenomenological research approach was chosen. Quantitative measures of language output were consciously rejected as the use of empirical instruments in data gathering often results in minority students being cast through a deficit lens [15]. Capturing and comparing how participants perform in relation to mainstream language peers necessarily depicts them in terms of what they cannot do. Having worked closely with EAL/D students for many years, the researcher was motivated to depict a holistic representation of the young people involved. Research has highlighted the importance of honouring participant voices when conducting studies with marginalised populations [16,17]. In additional language contexts, the inherent power imbalances of teacher-student or researcher-participant can be exacerbated. Such contexts therefore necessitate added critical reflections on the part of the researcher to avoid unintended diminishment or misrepresentation of individuals taking part [18]. Accordingly, this case study has been informed by a hermeneutic phenomenological lens to ensure that the children, their personalities and lived-experiences, would remain central during processes of data gathering and analysis.

Hermeneutic phenomenology explicitly recognizes the influence of the researcher and has a heightened interest in the physical aspects of human experience. These reflexive and embodied characteristics were seen to align with exploration of embodied pedagogy and EAL/D students. Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to analysis also helped to address power inequities by engaging the researcher in ‘hermeneutic spirals’ of reflexive consideration, moving from parts to whole and back again, in a process explicitly understood as subjective [19]. A key proposition of hermeneutic phenomenology is ‘Dasein’ or ‘being in the world’ which positions the observer, not as consciousness perceiving, but as consciousness existing-in-relation-to [20,21]. This concept casts researchers in intersubjec-

tive relationship with participants. This is a perspective that supports classroom research being conducted alongside teachers and students, as opposed to observations being made from a 'neutral' distance. Hermeneutic phenomenology also embraces creative language as a form of knowing [22], making it well-suited to inquiry around poetry and narratives. Drawing on these influences, this case study used poetic and creative writing as part of the analytical process and sought to evoke rather than explain lived experience. This is in keeping with the hermeneutic phenomenology approach of "turning the reading of the research into an experience itself" [23] p. 29.

### *1.3. Poetry, Rhyme and Learning to Speak and Read*

The teaching observed in this study used embodied explorations of rhymed stories and poems to develop student literacy. Exposure to the rhythmic and rhyming language found in songs and poems is substantively linked to increases in children's overall phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge [24–27]. Frequent guided interactions with poetry and rhymed picture books help sensitise young children to language and literacy concepts, priming them for reading and writing [28]. Poems are often filled with vivid images and metaphors helping beginning readers to connect their physical senses with the ideas and objects the language refers to [8].

The study of poetry encourages creativity and divergent thought processes through playful exploration of language, words and meaning. In contrast to synthetic phonics, or programmes which focus on decontextualised phonic recognition and rehearsal only, poetry helps children identify phonemic patterns by observing their use in meaning-laden contexts. Poems and rhyming texts also encourage children to chant and recite in unison with reading. This form of oral rehearsal has been shown to positively impact language proficiency [25]. The repeated prosodic reading and oral recital that poems encourage make them ideal texts for advancing the fluency and phonemic skills of struggling readers [29]. Learning about poetic techniques such as rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhythm and meter can scaffold children's early interactions with language and reading by helping them identify patterns within and across texts [30]. Initiating children in joyful and communal recital of texts also encourages them to perceive of reading as a pleasurable, shared activity that is not limited to silent, solitary experiences [31].

For additional language learners, repeated oral recitation can provide valuable rehearsal of new vocabulary. The emphatic patterning and musicality of rhymes and poems can support remembering novel sentence structures. Enriching poetic approaches with objects such as props and puppets can encourage language-learner students to create performances of poems as a form of linguistic free play [32]. Students observed during this research were often seen to use performance and dramatic recreation as opportunities for oral language rehearsal. Confidence and affect are also significant factors in successful language acquisition [33,34]. The study observed that choral rehearsal and recital allowed a building of confidence in oracy with the playful, collaborative qualities of drama pedagogy creating a positive affective environment.

### *1.4. Singing and Language Development*

Songs have a particular significance in the language learning context. Each of the classes observed in this study began with a programme of singing-as-literacy. Teaching approaches that include more frequent use of songs, chanting and rhythm-based games have clear implications for the development of students' auditory perception and receptive communication skills. Accordingly, the integration of music with literacy pedagogy is gaining traction in the educational landscape [35]. Research has linked interventions using the musical concept of audiation, or the deliberate skipping of notes in a song, to progress listening and pronunciation skills for English as additional language or dialect (EAL/D) students [10]. Rhythm-based interventions have also been shown to foster improvement in children's phonological awareness [7]. Songs and poems combine musical concepts with

storytelling and give children concrete sensory tools—their voices, eyes and ears—to learn about language and the world around them.

### 1.5. *Drama as Embodied Literacy Pedagogy*

Drama pedagogies emphasise the body as a tool for learning and communication. Significant research situates learners' bodies as crucial meeting points of emotion, senses, intuition and cognition [36–39]. Ways in which our bodies engage in the writing process have been theorised from various perspectives, with speech and oral language garnering particular interest [36]. Purposeful and well-structured classroom dialogue has been shown to have profound effects on cognitive development [40,41], with oracy often described as the bedrock of written literacy [42–44]. Drama has a unique ability to encourage oracy through imaginative, improvised and exploratory talk. Drama-based approaches have been clearly connected to progressions in student literacy [1,45–50]. Drama also effectively recruits the body as an alternate mode of communication and its pedagogical strategies have great usefulness for additional language learners [1,5,51].

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. *Research Design: Interpretive Case-Study*

The research was designed as an interpretive case-study. This decision was based on available resources but was also a philosophical choice. An interpretive lens is one primed towards nuance and social complexity, as found in classrooms. This method entails thick description and can account for multiple subjective perspectives on a single phenomenon [52,53]. A key advantage of case study in educational research is its capacity to observe events in a close to naturalistic setting. Aiming to explore literacy pedagogy within a 'real-life context' [54], this design enabled observation of participants during regular literacy lessons, recording their teacher's use of poetry and embodiment to teach concepts of language.

The study took place in a small Catholic primary school with 164 students and 16 full time teachers. Despite being located in a traditionally low socio-economic suburb of Western Sydney, the area is undergoing a process of gentrification. Census data revealed a jump from 19% of the local population being employed as professionals in 2011, to 26% in 2016 [55]. Within this community, a majority of adults are educated to at least high-school levels, giving the school an index of community socio-educational advantage (ICSEA) slightly above the national average [56]. Although this is a Catholic systemic school with a public chapel located on its grounds, school leadership confirmed that a majority of its students are Hindu. Accordingly, the school promotes an openness toward other faiths and proudly celebrates its diversity. Public records from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [56] revealed that 47% of the school were from additional language backgrounds, however the school has no full-time EAL/D specialist on its campus.

The research involved 4 participants, 3 students and 1 teacher. Students were selected from an early primary class comprised of 6- and 7-year-old children from various language and cultural backgrounds including India, China, Lebanon, the Philippines and West Africa. Although most students' families had recently migrated to Australia, only a small number of parents described themselves as always speaking a language other than English in the home. The 3 children selected were identified by their teacher based on their reluctance to speak in English in front of the class. One of the children had very recently migrated from China, another's family had moved to Australia from West Africa, and the third was originally born in India. The students were all 6-year-old girls who embodied a range of progressions in English. The participating classroom teacher was highly experienced, having worked in primary schools for 25 years. The teacher was approached to be part of the study as she was identified by the researcher in a previous professional capacity as having a natural aptitude for working with embodiment and drama.

The teaching methods being observed resulted from a year-long embedded professional development in the use of drama as literacy pedagogy. The strategies employed

included students miming and creating frozen pictures with their bodies, choral reading, singing, improvised in-role responses, and co-construction of a class poem supported by clapping and beat recognition. Activities centred around two picture books over the course of the term. First was *The Spider and the Fly* by Mary Howitt [57], an extended poem about a spider who tries to coax an unwitting fly into its web. The second was *Hey, Little Ant* by Phillip and Hannah Hoose [58], a poem and song about a boy about to squash an ant on the pavement when suddenly the ant starts pleading for its life. The little creature gives the boy all the reasons why he should let him live. The boy counters with all the reasons why he should squash it. The song ends by asking the children to decide if the ant should live or not.

*The Spider and the Fly* poem created several opportunities for students to physicalize unusual vocabulary and infer emotional states by recreating characters' body language. Creating a whole class poem about an Icky Sticky Spider allowed students to identify rhyming morphemes and phonemes during composition, and then to embody their chosen words. *Hey, Little Ant* became a vehicle for students to work in pairs, learning a couplet of lines and creating physical actions to go with them. These were then shared as part of a whole class performance. They also chose which side of the moral dilemma they stood for—to squash or to save the ant. In a class forum, students imagined themselves in role as either the boy or the ant and shared a verbal justification for their beliefs.

A total of 7 field visits were conducted during weekly drama and literacy sessions. These sessions ran for 1 hour each and were conducted in the school hall to allow greater freedom of movement. Data was collected in the form of observational notes, audio recordings of a teacher interview and student focus group, and video footage of the lessons. Two cameras were used to gather video data. One was set on a tripod in a corner of the hall recording each lesson in its entirety. This camera was positioned far enough away to capture the movements of the whole group but close enough to record student and teacher voices. A small, handheld camera was also used to roam the hall during partner-work and capture in greater detail the collaborative experiences of the three students. The gathered data was coded by the researcher and descriptively reconstructed during analysis to support interpretation of participants' experiences.

This case study was conducted as part of a series of ongoing explorations by researchers at the University of Sydney into the use of drama for language development [1,45,46,48–50,59]. Ethics approval for the research was obtained under protocol number 214/551. There were significant ethical considerations to filming young children whose parents' first language was not English. Information and consent forms were adjusted to ensure they were accessibly written. Parents were supported in their understanding of the research with verbal explanations and discussion with school staff and the classroom teacher. It was also necessary to gain permission from all the parents of the remaining students as they would be incidentally filmed during classes. The school distributed an information email and opt-out form to ensure no child would be filmed without parental consent.

## 2.2. Lesson Structures: Working with Poetry, Rhythm and Movement

Each hourly literacy session began with a simple song that the children had learnt as part of a school programme in the use of music for brain and language development. Teachers incorporated singing, clapping patterns and audiation to foster phonological awareness and neural pathway development in the language centers of the brain [7,9,10]. This was followed by chanting or rhythm-based drama activities. For the first few weeks, the children would then gather on the floor around large sheets of paper to compose a simple poem about an Icky Sticky Spider. The teacher began part of a rhyming couplet, and the students would offer ideas for rhymed words to use at the end of the couplet. When a word was chosen, it was drawn around the written poem and the children would have a short count down of time to find a space in the hall and make the shape of that word with their bodies before returning to the floor. The class recited the poem several times as

they composed, clicking their fingers in a simple beat denoting the syllabic rhythm of the language.

Over the first half of the study, this compositional work was interspersed with numerous drama activities such as embodying spiders on the floor, imagining and describing a pet spider in their hands, miming passing a very wriggly spider around a circle and so on. These activities were followed by the teacher reading several pages of one of the poem-based picture books. Several minutes were spent posing questions about each page, deeply noticing features of the poem's language or plot, as well as the visual features of the book's pictures. This use of extended questioning and discussion helped extend the children's comprehension and vocabulary in preparation for the next round of physicalizing and role playing. The second part of the term centered around a song-poem where children used drama to imagine themselves in the roles of a boy and an ant, having an existential argument about the ant's right to life. Here, the teacher used whole class debate along with physicalized performances of the song to immerse the children in the different perspectives being explored. Gestures and frozen images were incorporated throughout the learning as children empathized with the characters and made connections with their own life experiences.

### 2.3. Video Data and Narrative Reconstructions

Capturing these classes on video allowed for fine-grained observation of interactions between students. Having an ability to pause, zoom-in, slow down and replay instances of significance allowed the researcher to discern small moments of learning that might otherwise go unnoticed in the busyness of a classroom. Embodied interactions offer intensely rich material for analysis. Minute pauses and gestures can be inferred to hold meaning. Goffman [60] has named this phenomenon the 'interaction order', noting that body language is a domain offering seemingly limitless microanalyses. The research process required that decisions be made about which moments of bodily communication to include. Due to the logistical parameters of this research, coding was conducted by a single author-researcher. Over repeated viewings, participants' body language was coded for instances of physicalised language and peer-mediation. Data indicating high engagement, social connection or social dissonance was also extracted. It should be noted that moments of low engagement were not analysed, although they did occur. Participants could at times be seen to slump their shoulders and sigh, or look away, appearing to lose interest. This behaviour was usually observed after students had spent several minutes waiting for their turn or sitting on the floor listening to others.

Transcripts of the lessons in their entirety were coded and categorised in a series of hermeneutic cycles. Repeated viewing and reading of materials enabled the researcher to deeply immerse in the observed learning, identifying relevant moments of embodied language and peer-support for further analysis. Large tracts of dialogue were extracted from whole lesson transcripts and integrated into narrative vignettes which aimed to depict the active experience of drama as EAL/D literacy pedagogy. Unlike the video footage which focused largely on smaller, paired interactions, the whole-lesson transcripts captured the events of entire lessons in sequence and gave a holistic perspective of the pedagogy in action. Within these transcripts, the class itself—teacher and students—emerged as a central character, one filled with dynamic personalities responding and reacting to the pedagogy with vigour and enthusiasm.

Composing research vignettes requires processes of selection, editing and refinement. Lesson transcripts needed to be compressed and elaborated upon in order to effectively describe the experience of being in these classes. In keeping with the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, the study aimed to capture for a reader the 'essence' of what these classes were like and how these strategies impacted experiences of literacy. Allowing the personalities of participants to shine through was also a key concern of the research. Aesthetic and literary tools were employed to ensure findings were presented as relatable human experiences rather than dry empirical observations.

To facilitate data transparency, full transcripts of all seven lessons were included in the research confirming the veracity of the vignettes. The most common alteration made was to extract moments from separate classes and combine them into one story to more effectively convey a sense of the busy classroom environment. All events and dialogue in the vignettes were lifted in-tact from videos and lesson transcripts, save for the occasional removal of paralinguistic features or overly repetitious words.

Member checking with the participant teacher during discussions of the research-in-progress also contributed to the study's trustworthiness. The introduction of a handheld camera to the learning environment was one factor affecting the naturalism of the setting. The camera was at times a distraction to the students. Over time the class seemed to acclimatise and simply ignore the fact that they were being filmed, but there were instances where the handheld camera inhibited children as they were carrying out their work. As a result, the roaming camera was used judiciously and with less consistency than the tripod device. Case study findings are understood to be non-generalisable to external populations and are instead used to build funds of knowledge. Findings can be generalised to theoretical propositions [61], and accordingly this case study found several links to theories of oracy, embodied learning and additional language literacy.

Following is an excerpt from the research where findings from video and transcript data were integrated into narrative form. This is from a series of three vignettes on a student named Xiao-Hong (pseudonym) from China. Xiao Hong and her family had only very recently moved to Australia, and she was still in the early phase of her English language progression. In this vignette, she is working with another student on a performance during exploration of a song-based text.

#### 2.4. Research Vignette—Xiao Hong

Today the class are working on the *Hey, Little Ant* song. Pairs of students have been given two lines each, printed on strips of paper. They must create physical actions to go with their lines and prepare to share them in front of the class. Xiao Hong sits with her partner, Michelle, as they practice reading their lines out loud. Michelle's family is from China, but she was born here in Australia. Michelle is much smaller than Xiao Hong, with a gap-toothed, very frequent smile, and a short fringe that refuses to stay on her forehead. She reads the lines out first while Xiao Hong sits and listens, reading along over Michelle's shoulder and chewing on one finger. Then, Michelle hands Xiao Hong the paper to read from and they both sing the words together. Once this is done, they stand up excitedly, pulling down their jumpers and smoothing their skirts, ready to practice their performance of the beleaguered ant. Michelle takes the lead,

'Okay, let's start.'

She points upwards with one finger as if talking to someone very tall and starts singing very loudly.

'WEEEEELL, you're a giant and giants CAAAN'T!

Xiao Hong watches and follows along while Michelle continues.

'Know what it FEELS to be an AAANT!'

With this, Michelle turns and gives Xiao Hong a short hug, to represent 'feeling.' Xiao Hong is a little surprised . . . but goes along with it. On the word 'ant' both girls drop to the floor and wiggle their fingers under their chins to show their tiny insect 'legs'.

'Take a LOOK and you will SEEEE!

Following Michelle, Xiao Hong puts her hands up to her eyes as if holding a pair of binoculars.

'That you are very much like MEEEEEE!'

Both girls point their hands towards themselves. Their rehearsal complete, the girls now sit on the floor with Xiao Hong chewing on one finger.

'Michelle, what should we do next?' She asks.

But Michelle's attention is now elsewhere, transfixed on other pairs working around them. Xiao Hong eyeballs the researcher's camera and leans forward on the floor.



‘What’s that camera for?’

And the clip comes to a hasty end.

It is time for the girls to sing their lines in front of the class. Everyone is seated on the floor and pairs of students having been taking turns around the circle. This is Xiao Hong and Michelle’s second attempt. They had a bit of trouble the first time around as the rhythm of their couplet is slightly different to the rest of the song. Ms Connor gave them some extra time to practice again and they have now re-joined the others.

‘Right girls are you ready? Up you get, one, two, three!’

She starts the song off with the little girls to help support them through the syncopated rhythm.

‘Well, you’re a giant and giants can’t ‘FEEL!’ sing the girls.

‘Oops!’ stops Ms Connor.

‘No, this line ends with *can’t*, remember?’

Xiao Hong leans back on her heels and slaps her forehead in embarrassment.

‘Let’s do it with them!’ suggests Ms Connor to the rest of the class.

‘Stand up everybody!’

The class all stand and together everyone sings the two lines, copying Xiao Hong and Michelle’s actions. Then, the two girls are invited to perform on their own again. Success! Michelle and Xiao Hong wiggle their knees back and forth with glee and drop to the floor once they are done. Xiao Hong smiles and gives her face a quick rub. Then, she gently shoves Michelle’s shoulder and whispers loudly,

‘Out in front the entire class!’

### 3. Results

#### *Cognitive Support and Socioemotional Motivation*

Video footage from these lessons captured frequent moments where participants were able to access sociocultural and multimodal language through the use of embodiment. During analysis, relevant moments were identified and presented in a total of 12 vignettes, 3 for each participant. The descriptive excerpt included above reveals the important role that Xiao Hong’s peer played during the construction of their performance. Adopting a sociocultural lens, it is evident that Xiao Hong was able to lean on her more experienced peer for support in reading and learning the lines to be recited. By incorporating collaborative preparation and performance into the literacy work, the classroom teacher was able to consciously partner language-learner children with more fluent peers to help guide them through activities. Use of gesture and physicalisation also provided an additional modal layer to the language work, enabling Xiao Hong to access meaning in the language that sounds and words alone could not have supplied. In one of the video clips, it was clear Xiao Hong was using the miming of peers around her to understand the word ‘gazing’. Being required to stand in front of the class and share an embodied recital added another layer to the learning as the two girls were motivated to rehearse several times to achieve the unusual rhythm of their particular line. With her partner providing social and linguistic support to bolster confidence, Xiao Hong was seen to experience the emotional satisfaction of persisting and succeeding in front of others. Having these types of experiences in the classroom is a key contributor to children’s motivation to learn. In the student focus group interview, Xiao Hong spoke about her enjoyment of learning at school, although she did not like that her parents made her do extra work at home to practice her English reading and writing. According to her teacher, Xiao Hong was highly conscientious and doing well in her written classwork but outside of drama literacy was still reluctant to speak in front of the class.

Footage of another student, Deepika (pseudonym), revealed that embodied pedagogies helped her express ideas and engage with classmates. Deepika was normally quite shy and was also physically much smaller than her peers. In an activity where she had to imagine herself in-role as the ant in *Hey, Little Ant*, Deepika gave an impassioned speech about the unfairness of being picked on because of your size. Here, the element of dramatic role

play allowed Deepika to activate a verbal fluency that had not been demonstrated during other types of literacy work. In the student focus group interview, Deepika expressed that her favourite part of the classes was the physical aspect of embodied pedagogy. Videos depicted Deepika as having trouble sitting still for long periods. During embodied learning, however, she was seen supporting her partner in creating physical actions. One scene showed her working with a classmate on physicalising a metaphor for speed. Although she did not engage much orally, Deepika was easily able to contribute creative, physical ideas.

The third student, Shani (pseudonym), was shown learning through the social aspects of collaborative embodied tasks. In a paired activity where students took turns miming different verbs for their partner to guess, Shani was supported by her partner in vocabulary acquisition. Although it took her longer than her classmate to think of words in English, Shani's enjoyment of the activity was clearly visible as she persevered through long moments of thinking. In another scene, mimicking the postures of characters in a picture book contributed to Shani's understanding of context. Focus group responses revealed that Shani equated embodied literacy with other types of learning because performances were shared and discussed much like other class work.

Video data of the classroom teacher showed her actively modelling dramatic embodiment. Footage also showed the complications of corralling a large class of young children as she was often interrupted by students' unrelated questions and concerns, or by needing to regain control of the noisy learning environment that drama produces. Frequent laughter was a feature of these lessons, with the children particularly enjoying the teacher's own comic roleplaying. During her interview, she commented on the creative nature of the pedagogies used and how they gave her a greater sense of freedom in her teaching. Her reasons for using extensive embodiment in her literacy programmes was to give students enjoyable, socially interactive experiences of texts to stimulate oracy and writing. She valued how use of embodiment could quickly communicate aspects of each student's level of comprehension, thus allowing her to make immediate teaching adjustments.

Case study data overall revealed that standard literacy activities such as identifying alliterative sounds and composing with matching phonemes were augmented through the addition of performance and creativity. Students exhibited strong engagement during work that used chanting and clapping rhythms, making shapes with their bodies, performing characters and miming imaginary objects. Videos depicted few instances of disruption or loss of focus amongst the class. Performance-based language strategies encouraged creative exploration and a sense of productive playfulness during learning. Strong themes of semiotic and socioemotional support emerged for the EAL/D participants. These findings were in keeping with multimodal and sociocultural theories of language. There are large bodies of research around the benefits of using drama for literacy pedagogy. Less understood are the implications of combining embodiment specifically with the phonetically focused genre of poetry. Findings from this case study appear to support such approaches, as the observed EAL/D learners benefitted from the addition of embodiment and rhythmic rehearsal.

#### **4. Discussion**

##### *Unique Affordances of Embodied Poetry*

A key theme of the study was the positive influence of role-play and mime on the children's experiences of poetry. Exploring poetry through the body is a methodology which capitalises on students' physical selves as sites of knowledge-production and social connection [62,63]. Embodiment has been used by humans for teaching and learning for thousands of years. It is an acknowledged pedagogical technique for increasing content accessibility for diverse communities of learners [64–67]. Although traditional, Western literacy practices still dominate classroom approaches, there is a growing understanding that these are not the only ways of reading and writing the world around us. Though we often read and write in quiet solitude, the teaching and practicing of these skills need not

always be a solitary experience. Collaborative learning has been shown to improve literacy in a wide range of age-groups and classroom contexts [68]. In this research, performing for the group and as a group allowed participants to feel socially connected while ‘rehearsing’ their nascent identities as English language-speakers.

Using poetry as the textual jumping point for language exploration also had distinct benefits. White, Mammone and Caldwell [69] outline evidence of genre-based approaches improving English language learner literacy outcomes, and poetry as a genre is unique. Poems tell stories, but they also play word-music and paint word-pictures with a playfulness and freedom that no other text-type offers. Grammar is not king in the land of poetry, instead grammar is more often a court jester, tumbling out of bounds and mocking expectations. This freedom can unshackle additional language learner students from fears of linguistic imperfections. Poems can be simple yet still highly profound. The integration of poetry and drama creates lessons that are enticing vehicles for interactive and contextual language experiences, but also have potential to cover deep philosophical terrain in the classroom. Curiosity about ethical dilemmas such as that found in *Hey, Little Ant* does not discriminate on the grounds of academic ability. Such subjects are of interest to us all and lay rich ground for authentic discussions as captured in the case study videos.

## 5. Conclusions

Researching the synthesis of embodiment and poetry for additional language learner literacy revealed clear links to oracy, phonemic perception, multimodal semiotics, and positive affect. Ability in rhythm and beat perception is associated with improved listening and pronunciation skills for additional language learners. In this study, poetry provided rich and imaginative contexts for the nurturing of such skills. By adding physical interpretation to the study of poetry, EAL/D students were able to access increased comprehension and receive valuable social support. Detailed video-observations revealed several instances when integrating embodied, rhythmic and choral exploration of poetry and songs enriched their understanding of language concepts. These methods were also seen to foster verbal fluency and generate positive affect and socioemotional motivation. Findings suggest that these strategies warrant further exploration.

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Article

# Arts-Based Approaches to Languages Education with Refugee-Background Learners in the Early Years: Co-Creating Spaces of Hope

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**Abstract:** Young learners with refugee experiences face a constellation of challenges particular to forced migration and resettlement. Experiences of trauma, violence, poverty, and disrupted or limited access to formal education and healthcare can have complex and long-term impacts on learning. Further, the sociocultural and linguistic challenges of undertaking education in unfamiliar schooling systems in transit and resettlement countries can also impede learner engagement and obscure individual strengths. However, like all student cohorts, children with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds are also unique, with individual personal, sociocultural, and linguistic attributes on which to draw. While these assets may be overlooked or obscured in traditional educational contexts, arts-based approaches to instruction can offer generative and affirming learning spaces that illuminate individual strengths and provide powerful rejoinders to deficit constructions. This article provides an overview of recent research that explores vibrant and innovative arts-based approaches to languages instruction for refugee and asylum-seeker background learners in the early years. The article takes the form of a scoping study of literature using Arksey and O'Malley's framework to map the field of research, document novel instructional approaches, and identify key themes. Our discussion is oriented toward educators who seek to innovate their own instructional practice. In addition to exploring the creative avenues for language instruction described in the literature, we consider key themes that emerged inductively from our analysis including the agentic value of arts-based instructional practices, the role of narrative in articulating experiences of place and identities, and the significance of arts-based connections between home and school linguistic repertoires.

**Keywords:** refugee; asylum seeker; languages; education; arts

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Access to Education for Children with Forced Migration Experiences

While access to quality education is a universal human right and recognised in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals as essential to "a better and more sustainable future for all" (p.na), children with refugee and asylum seeker experiences remain among the world's most educationally disadvantaged populations [1]. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" [2]. A person seeking asylum "is someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed" [3]. In 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that approximately 48% of all school-aged youth with refugee backgrounds did not have access to formal schooling [1]. Although collating enrolment data is complicated by the complexity of current global humanitarian crises, the UNHCR advises that approximately 42% of children with refugee experiences have access to pre-primary education [1]. This number increases to 68% at the primary level, decreases to 37% in the secondary years, and drops

to only 6% for tertiary educational participation [1]. As the UNHCR's 2022 global report on access to education states: "The message is clear: we are still a long way away from the full participation of refugees in exercising their right to education" [1], p. 2.

Complex and interrelated factors particular to forced displacement and resettlement impact children's educational attainment. Escaping war, civil unrest, poverty, climate emergencies, persecution, and other humanitarian crises often requires long and dangerous journeys through multiple transit locations. It should also be noted that 74% of the world's displaced people are currently living in low- and middle-income countries [4]. Formal schooling opportunities in transit camps can be ad hoc or non-existent, and subject to exposure to conflict, violence, and gender-based discrimination [5]. While the United Nations continues to petition all countries to institute explicit policies concerning educational inclusion irrespective of age, gender, or visa status [5] and to enable access to formal education for forced migrants within three months of their arrival [6], educational opportunities for displaced people vary greatly and remain subject to a range of complex barriers.

In addition to legislative and policy-level obstacles, the financial impact of school fees and associated costs including materials and transportation may also be prohibitive, particularly in contexts with limited educational infrastructure [5,7,8]. Importantly, as the UNHCR states: "giving refugees physical access to the same schools as nationals is indeed essential, but a place in the classroom does not automatically translate into inclusion" [1], p. 19. Meaningful and generative educational spaces for children with forced migration experiences necessitate culturally responsive, trauma-informed, strengths-based teaching approaches using relevant, engaging, and contemporary materials, including the critical use of digital modalities. For some children with refugee experiences, educational inclusion may also require additional provisions for language learning, mental health, and psychosocial transitions [1,9].

Without appropriate supports, learners with refugee and asylum seeker experiences may be marginalised within educational systems due to unfamiliarity with the tacit assumptions and underlying expectations regarding classroom practices and assessment [8,10–12]. Navigation of educational systems can be an alienating, frustrating, and isolating experience, particularly when the learner is undertaking the journey in a language that is new to them [12–14]. Further, disrupted educational histories mean that children with forced migration experiences may have had limited opportunities for developing academic knowledge, metacognitive awareness, print literacy in their first language(s), and proficiency in the language of instruction in the transit or resettlement country [9,14,15]. As McArdle and Tan [16] explain of children attending school in Australia: "At the same time as they need to master the English language, these adolescent students are just as concerned with what it means to "do school"—how to act as students. It is at this point that they are likely to find that existing educational and social support structures are inadequate to facilitate productive engagement in and successful transition to mainstream schooling" (p. 217).

Educational systems with limited attention to cultural and linguistic inclusion may result in deficit conceptions of learners with refugee backgrounds, obscuring students' strengths and impeding their engagement with instruction [12,14,16]. As Emert [17] notes: "Refugee students are at risk of being under-challenged academically, which amplifies the educational gaps that often exist for them" (p. 412). Further, this deficit framing may be experienced alongside covert and overt racism and discrimination—both structural and individual—and the pressures of navigating peer relationships and notions of identities and belonging. These factors may also be complicated by the complexities of forced migration and navigating contrasting aspects of 'home and host cultures' [18–20]. Finally, refugee background learners often carry significant cognitive, emotional, and psychological burdens associated with the violence of displacement and the loss of family members, friends, and home [21,22].

### 1.2. *The Importance of Arts-Based, Multimodal Learning Opportunities*

The potential for arts-based teaching and learning approaches to offer generative, authentic, and linguistically rich educational experiences is well-established [23–25]. These educational approaches are identified as particularly valuable for learner cohorts that are frequently excluded from more formal educational settings due to structural inequities, intergenerational patterns of educational disruption, and socio-linguistic disenfranchisement [21,26,27]. As McArdle and Tan [16] assert, “Where linguistic, cultural, and/or social barriers exist, research has shown that arts-rich programs have proven to assist with capacity building. Enabling students to learn through the arts can transcend those barriers to some extent and can open communication channels, resulting in deeper learning across all curriculum areas, including enhanced literacy outcomes” (p. 215).

However, McArdle and Tan [16] also caution against conceiving of arts-based forms of communication as “the developmental precursor to becoming literate in the more traditional sense”, instead suggesting that “the arts have the capacity to transcend the limited realm of words and provide alternative ways of knowing and communicating” (p. 214). Not only do arts-based approaches have the potential to bridge gaps in classroom communication that may occur when learners and educators have varying levels of proficiency in shared language, they are naturally suited to the task of engaging multimodally, an essential feature of complex and dynamic twenty-first century communication. While refugee background children may have experienced disrupted formal education, these learners also have important life experiences on which to draw, frequently acting as interpreters and cultural brokers for family members, caring for younger siblings, and navigating complex intercultural and multilingual interactions. Arts-based approaches to instruction offer vibrant and creative means of drawing on refugee background learner knowledge, insights, and cognitive and linguistic adaptability. As Emert [17] argues, “All children deserve interesting and compelling academic tasks that encourage them to view themselves as capable, sharp, creative, and accomplished” (p. 412).

## 2. Materials and Method

This article provides a scoping study of research that documents arts-based approaches to language instruction for refugee and asylum-seeker background learners in the early years. In bringing together the most recent research focused on this topic, we aim to support educators who seek to innovate their instructional practice using creative and evidence-based educational approaches. We employ Arksey and O’Malley’s [28] framework for mapping the field of research, identifying key themes in existing studies, and exploring important considerations in strengths-based approaches to languages education with learners from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds.

Our scoping study focuses on the central question: ‘How are arts-based approaches to instruction used within languages education with early years learners from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds?’ After identifying this central focus, we followed the subsequent stages of Arksey and O’Malley’s [28] framework, locating all research related to arts-based methods of languages instruction for refugee and asylum seeker background learners in the early years, which we defined as birth until primary school. We included all forms of arts-based instructional practice including drama, visual arts, photography, videography, and dance. We limited our scoping study to publications from 2010 to 2022 and used various combinations of key search terms including ‘refugee’, ‘asylum seeker’, ‘humanitarian’, ‘arts’, ‘drama’, ‘children’, ‘education’, ‘early childhood’, ‘language’, and ‘literacy/ies’. We used reference mining and hand searching of key journals to validate these search terms.

Only two studies that met our initial inclusion criteria were based in the early childhood sector see [17,29], so we expanded our parameters to extend to lower secondary school (approximately 13 years of age). From 1348 titles, 330 were retained as relevant to our study. Following a close review to ensure a clear focus on language instruction, we identified a final corpus of 12 publications for annotation and analysis (Table 1). Each



of these studies focused on arts-based approaches to languages education for learners with displacement experiences, although some also included learners with migrant and non-migrant backgrounds. It should also be noted that our scoping study was limited to peer-reviewed, academic research published in English, reflecting both the parameters of our linguistic expertise and the dominance of English as the global medium for research dissemination.

**Table 1.** Literature included in the scoping study.

|   | Reference   | Location                 | Student Age                  | Arts-Based Methods of Instruction   | Data Sources  |
|---|---|--------------------------|------------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | Arizpe, E., Bagelman, C., Devlin, A.M., Farrell, M., and McAdam, J.E. (2014). Visualizing intercultural literacy: engaging critically with diversity and migration in the classroom through an image-based approach, <i>Language and Intercultural Communication</i> , 14:3, 304–321. [30]                | Scotland                 | Primary school               | 'Journeys from Images to Words', 'River of Reading' p. 44 in [30], 'Walk and Talk Through', Text and Visual Annotations, Photo-journals | Focus groups with students<br>Interviews with educators<br>Parent/carer feedback<br>Learner artefacts           |
| 2 | Dunn, J., Bundy, P. and Woodrow, N. (2012). Combining drama pedagogy with digital technologies to support the language learning needs of newly arrived refugee children: a classroom case study, <i>Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance</i> , 17:4, 477–499. [31] | Australia                | 8–12 years                   | Drama Pedagogy, Digital Technologies  | Recorded drama sessions<br>Researcher reflections<br>Interviews with educator and students<br>Learner artefacts |
| 3 | Emert, T. (2013) 'The Transpoemations Project': digital storytelling, contemporary poetry, and refugee boys, <i>Intercultural Education</i> , 24:4, 355–365 [32]  | United States of America | 8–18 years                   | Transpoemations, Digital Technologies, 'Movies of the Mind' [33]  | Student peer interviews<br>Student questionnaires<br>Learner artefacts  |
| 4 | Emert, T. (2014). "Hear a Story, Tell a Story, Teach a Story": Digital Narratives and Refugee Middle Schoolers. <i>Voices from the Middle</i> , 21(4), 33–39. [29]  | United States of America | Elementary and middle school | Autobiographical Digital Storytelling, <i>Tableaux Vivant</i>   | Learner artefacts   |
| 5 | Emert, T. (2014). Interactive digital storytelling with refugee children. <i>Language Arts</i> , 91(6), 401–415. [17]   | United States of America | Elementary and middle school | Digital Storytelling, <i>Tableaux Vivant</i>  | Learner artefacts   |
| 6 | Emert, T. (2019). Refugee youth, digital storytelling and academic confidence. <i>European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL</i> , 8(1), 61–81. [34]  | United States of America | Middle school                | Autobiographical Digital Storytelling   | Student surveys<br>Interviews with students<br>Learner artefacts  |
| 7 | Kennedy, L.M., Oviatt, R.L., and De Costa, P.I. (2019). Refugee youth's identity expressions and multimodal literacy practices in a third space. <i>Journal of Research in Childhood Education</i> , 33(1), 56–70. [35]   | United States of America | 10 years                     | Dual-entry Journals, Dialogic Writing, Self-found Poems   | Interviews with educator and paraprofessional<br>Learner artefacts  |

Table 1. Cont.

| Reference   | Location                 | Student Age    | Arts-Based Methods of Instruction  | Data Sources  |
|---|--------------------------|----------------|--|---|
| 8<br>McArdle, F., and Tan, J.P.-L. (2012). Art as language, pedagogy, and method: Promoting learning engagement for young African refugee migrant students in urban Australia. In A.S. Yeung, E.L. Brown and C. Lee (Eds.), <i>Communication and Languages: Surmounting the Barriers to Cross-Cultural Understanding</i> (pp. 211–232). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. [16] | Australia                | Middle school  | 'Art as Language', Self-portraits, Digital Technologies  | Interviews with students, parents, and staff<br>Observations<br>Photography<br>Field notes<br>Researcher reflections<br>Learner artefacts |
| 9<br>Vitsou, M., Papadopoulou, M. and Gana, E. (2019). Drama pedagogy for refugee children: a means for empowerment and communication. <i>Babylonia</i> 3, p. 44–49. [36]   | Greece                   | 9–12 years     | 'Literacy through Drama', Persona Dolls, Puppets, <i>Tableau Vivant</i> , Freeze Frames, Improvisation | Interviews with students  |
| 10<br>Vitsou, M., Papadopoulou, M. and Gana, E. (2020). 'Getting them back to class: A project to engage refugee children in school using drama pedagogy', <i>Scenario: A Journal for Performative Teaching, Learning, Research</i> , XIV(2), pp. 42–59. [37]   | Greece                   | 9–12 years     | Drama in Education (DiE), Persona Dolls, Puppets, <i>Tableau Vivant</i> , Freeze Frames, Role Play     | Observations<br>Interviews with students  |
| 11<br>Vitsou, M., and Kamaretsou, K. (2020). Enhancing Peer Relationships in a Class of Refugee Children Through Drama in Education: An Action Research. <i>Yaratıcı Drama Dergisi</i> , 15(2), 337–354. [38]   | Greece                   | 9–13 years     | Drama in Education (DiE), Role play, Dramatization, Freeze Frames                                      | Pre and post sociometric test<br>Observations<br>Educator journaling<br>Student feedback  |
| 12<br>Wellman, S., and Bey, S. (2015). Refugee children and art teacher training: Promoting language, self-advocacy, and cultural preservation. <i>Art Education</i> , 68(6), 36–44. [39]   | United States of America | 10 to 17 years | Self-portraits, Digital Technologies   | Pre-service teacher reflections   |

Following extensive annotations of each study within the textual corpus, we revisited our central research question, with added consideration of the key themes that emerged inductively from our analysis. Our discussion was enriched by following the final, optional stage of Arksey and O'Malley's [28] framework, where we sought input from key stakeholders; an early years' educational researcher with expertise in drama-based language learning, and an early years' educational researcher specialising in cultural and linguistic inclusion. These experts affirmed the salience of the themes we identified through our analysis of the textual corpus, the clarity of our research method description, and our recommendations for future research in this field.

### 3. Results

The 12 titles featured in our scoping study offer windows into innovative, vibrant, and responsive arts-based approaches to languages education. These projects are grounded in meaningful engagement with rich, diverse texts and performative learning experiences, featuring different combinations of drama, digital technologies, writing, drawing, painting,

music, gesture, and movement to inspire students to “communicate, represent, and interpret their worlds collectively and individually” [36], p. 45. We note a dual emphasis in these studies on the importance of hope-filled learning experiences and the agentic role of students in co-creating these educational spaces. This agency is identified as particularly important for people with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds for whom forced migration may have limited past opportunities for self-determination but who possess unique strengths and knowledge for shaping their own educational experiences see [39]. In foregrounding learner agency, these studies also emphasise the role of educators as facilitators, with Emert [29] explaining: “Rather than content expert, the teacher serves more as guest artist, facilitator, and sideline coach, providing a template for the project design and demonstrating the steps in a multiphase creative process” (p. 33).

Here, as we consider our central research question ‘How are arts-based approaches to instruction used within languages education with early years learners from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds?’, we explore some of the creative avenues for language instruction described in this literature. Our discussion of the arts-based instructional approaches depicted in the research is arranged according to the four key themes that emerged inductively from our analysis of the literature. These themes emphasise the value of arts-based instructional approaches for providing opportunities to (i) generate inclusive and agentic contexts for communication, (ii) articulate experiences of place and identities, (iii) reflect on the navigation of intercultural spaces, and (iv) forge connections between home and school linguistic repertoires.

### 3.1. Generating Inclusive and Agentic Contexts for Communication

A major theme intersecting the research included in our scoping study is the value of arts-based approaches for facilitating authentic, meaningful, and inclusive communicative contexts for languages learning. While navigating more traditional, print focused classrooms may pose a challenge for students with disrupted or limited experiences of formal education, less structured, arts-based approaches may offer learning opportunities in which the linguistic load is lessened through embedded, multimodal supports. For instance, Vitsou et al. [36] and Vitsou and Papadopoulou [37] describe a six-month ‘Literacy through Drama’ program for children living in refugee camps in Greece. This program was a component of the ‘Refugee Reception and Training Structure’ introduced by the Greek government in 2016 to assist newly arrived children to develop positive attitudes to schooling in Greece, while increasing their linguistic confidence and proficiency. With these goals in mind, Vitsou and colleagues [36] hoped that “a collaborative environment devoid of fear of failure could result in stronger linguistic outcomes in favor of the newly arrived children” (p. 45).

The authors detail a range of instructional techniques included in the ‘Literacy through Drama’ program to “provide a joyful and welcoming environment and boost children’s communication skills” [37] p. 42. Persona Dolls, which are educational tools originating in the UK, were used as classroom mediators with unique backstories and experiences. These dolls helped to facilitate learner engagement and classroom communication using Arabic, Greek, and English to reflect the children’s varied linguistic repertoires. Other drama techniques included puppets to help facilitate oral language production and characterisation, *tableau vivant* activities where learners visually represented scenes from a story, and role play. The emphasis in the ‘Literacy through Drama’ program was on authentic and creative communicative contexts, rather than explicit error correction, which facilitated a learning environment in which “The integration of new knowledge occurs unconsciously and is added to existing knowledge while focus is placed on play and collaborative learning” [36], p. 44. Language learning therefore occurred via meaningful communication where the children were focused on engaging story lines and compelling narratives.

Both the ‘Literacy through Drama’ program and Vitsou and Kamaretsou’s [38] ‘Drama in Education’ (DiE) approach, which aims to enhance peer collaboration for refugee background children in Greece, foreground the importance of strengths-based approaches

to linguistic diversity. Translanguaging—where language users employ the full range of their linguistic resources for learning [40]—provides the framework for this linguistically generative approach. The authors describe how learners participating in the drama programs were encouraged to exploit a range of communicative modalities such as gestures, posture, tone of voice, and facial expressions, and to use the full range of their linguistic repertoires, including as the medium for creating signs and labels to support improvisation. Vitsou et al. [36] foreground learner quotes that demonstrate the importance of this strengths-based approach to language, including one student's comment that: "Even though I don't speak Greek well, they understood what I was saying . . . through pantomime, movements . . . some English, some Kurdish . . . some Greek. We used all languages together . . . it was fun" (p. 48). Illustrating the students' agentic role within these communicative contexts, another learner is quoted as advising: "I taught [the] teachers Kurdish words and songs from Syria . . . I liked that . . . I like talking about my house in Syria, the school and my families' customs" (p. 53).

### 3.2. Articulating Experiences of Place and Identities

The projects included in this scoping study also share an emphasis on providing opportunities for learners with refugee backgrounds to utilise arts-based approaches to communicate about their countries of origin and their new surroundings as they navigate the challenges of resettlement. For instance, Wellman and Bey [39], who describe an eight-week after school art program for refugee background children in the United States, discuss a digital self-portrait project in which students were invited to "capture their environment through juxtaposing digital photographs of places and people" (p. 41). Learners were provided with digital cameras to document "textures and sites" (p. 41) in their local environment and then use software to modify the images to create digital self-portraits. Not only did this task involve valuable opportunities for embedded language learning, Wellman and Bey [39] note that the responsibility of managing the digital cameras and choosing the compositional elements featured in the self-portraits increased learner confidence and self-determination.

Likewise, McArdle and Tan [16], who describe an "arts as language" program for recently arrived children in Australia, also explore the value of self-portraits for learners to communicate important aspects of their identities and lives via digital stories. The authors note that self-portraits were selected as a means of allowing the students to "bring their own knowledge and interests to the task", explaining: "Since we started with something they know—themselves—they had much to say, and much to tell us" [16], p. 219. The program focused on synthesising image and text into digital portfolios, utilising a range of mediums including digital cameras and traditional book making. In capturing and manipulating images that represented important elements of their lives at school and beyond, the learners were provided with opportunities to communicate about their family, communities, and elements of their physical environment such as their homes, gardens, and animals. In exploring the images featured in the children's artwork, McArdle and Tan [16] point to research that suggests that flowers and gardens are often used to symbolise stability and connection with place for people with forced migration experiences [16,41].

This sense of place is also evident in Emert's [17,29,32,34] descriptions of various learning programs for refugee background elementary and middle school students in the United States. Each program focused on a different element of digital storytelling to "create an inviting, yet demanding, authentic language learning environment" [29], p. 34. Emert [32] describes how one program built toward a 'transpoemation' task in which "learners interact with a poem in a variety of ways, ultimately creating a digital animation" to express the central meanings (p. 357). After exploring the importance of metaphor and imagery, the children created their own poems in response to George Ella Lyon's poem, 'Where I'm From'. Using a concept termed "movies of the mind" [32,33], the learners read their poems to a partner, who shared the mental images evoked by the text. Students then

made any necessary amendments to their poems to help convey the intended imagery and used software to create a digital ‘transpoemation’.

Through this activity, students were challenged with the task of integrating knowledge they had gained during the learning program, including understanding of literary devices and digital platforms for communication, to create animated poems about place featuring evocative imagery and music. While many of the students were unfamiliar with the software, Emert [32] describes how they were motivated to overcome this barrier in order to create transpoemations that articulated their understandings and experiences, explaining: “As they selected the text, the illustrations, and the music for their films, the students had the opportunity to develop intrapersonal insights and to encapsulate a meaningful cultural narrative to share with others” [32], p. 363. Emert [32] provides extracts from learners’ draft writing, illustrating the poignancy of the resulting transpoemations including one learner’s pronouncement: “I come from rain like monsoon” (p. 358).

### 3.3. Reflecting on the Navigation of Intercultural Spaces

The literature in our textual corpus also emphasises the importance of arts-based approaches to languages instruction for reflecting on the complexities, challenges, and opportunities of navigating intercultural spaces. In particular, the use of narrative is identified as a creative channel via which learners can draw meaning from their experiences. As Emert [17] remarks: “Storytelling—a skill that crosses cultures—is an apt strategy for working with language learners who are negotiating new social and educational terrain” (p. 413). Narrative-based approaches are presented as simultaneously allowing students to express their own voices and sense of self, and take on new identities and personas, as reflected by one of the learners in the ‘Literacy through Drama’ project in Greece who noted “I love being someone else and play with Aya in the puppet theatre” [36], p. 47. Narrative-based approaches are also presented as important opportunities for students to draw on their strengths, and, as Ohler [17,42] describes, “become heroes of their own learning adventures” (p. 9).

Emert [17] describes a literacy program that focused on navigating “old and new cultures”, in which learners were invited to respond to a story about a child who was struggling to adapt to a new school. As Emert [17] explains, “This was a rich topic for these children, who, each day, experience cultural barriers to acceptance” (p. 404). Following reflection and brainstorming, the children were invited to write their own digital stories in which characters were faced with a dilemma. The learners then created interactive slides that allowed readers to take the central plot in different directions according to the characters’ choices. Importantly, in developing these digital stories, the learners “had the opportunity to cast themselves as experts” and draw on their knowledge without having to “focus on the personal traumas they may have experienced” [17], p. 411.

Kennedy et al. [35] note how formal curricula may offer impoverished, reductionist, and/or “tokenized” representations of culture, instead arguing for deeper and more genuine engagement with notions of identities and intercultural interaction (p. 61). Focusing on the learning affordances of journal and poetry writing for English language learners undertaking fourth grade in the United States, Kennedy et al. [35] consider the experiences of two Chin refugee background learners from Burma, Grace and Sui, exploring the negotiation and construction of cultural identities within their writing. As the language teacher in Kennedy et al.’s [35] study explained: “I wanted the Chin students in our school to be able to share their stories in a way that no prompted writing essay would really address. Having gotten to know them well, I knew they all had amazing stories to tell and plenty to write about, if only given the space to write from their hearts” (p. 61).

Kennedy et al. [35] describe what they term “self-found poems” or the “literary equivalent of a collage” which is based on the idea of “found poetry” [35,43] in which learners identify others’ key words and phrases that resonate with them and shape these into poems (p. 62). In self-found poetry, the learners draw on key parts of their own writing to synthesise into poetry [35]. Kennedy et al. [35] provide excerpts from the children’s

self-found poems that illustrate their complex engagement with notions of cultural and linguistic identities, including Grace's declaration: "I'm bullied, because I speak different languages. I am also an American I know how to speak English" (p. 64). Through these self-found poems, "Engaging multiliteracies and multimodalism raised awareness of the many assets refugee youth brought with them, as well as the many challenges they experienced in their cross-cultural crossings" [35], p. 68. This agentic approach was identified as an important means of self-expression in which: "youth are able to author themselves, their voices, and their unique identities" [35], p. 57. In identifying how "English language learning has historically been a site of colonization", Kennedy et al. [35], p. 57, emphasise the importance of creating spaces that "honor learners' multimodal literacy practices and support their development and complication of organic identity expressions..." (p. 57).

### 3.4. Creating Connections between Home and School Language Practices

The research included in our scoping study also illustrates the value of arts-based engagement for establishing strong connections between home and school language practices. An important element of drawing on learners' existing language resources is to incorporate differentiated "entry points" [30], p. 307; see also [35] or pathways to engaging with the curriculum. For instance, in the 'Journeys from Images to Words' project, Arizpe et al. [30] worked with teachers and learners at a Glaswegian primary school to harness imagery as a communicative tool to support the children's engagement with literature that explores the theme of migration and journeys, including *The Rabbits* (2000), *Gervelie's Journey: A Refugee Diary* (2008), and *Boy Overboard* (2003).

Arizpe et al. [30] utilise a range of arts-based strategies to support the children's engagement with these texts, including Bednall et al.'s [44] concept of a 'River of Reading', which Arizpe et al. [30] describe as a "visual collage using the accessible metaphor of a river to represent children's reading outside of school, at home and in their local communities" (p. 311). The 'River of Reading' task provides learners with an opportunity to create a visual representation of the text types that are significant to them, such as extracts from comic strips and magazine articles to "buil[d] on the visual skills students brought from their experiences with familiar home and popular culture literacy practices" [30], p. 315.

Other visually mediated learning activities in the 'Journeys from Images to Words' project included the use of speech and thought bubbles, illustrations, and "narrative graphic strips" as multimodal responses to text (p. 313). The authors also describe the use of photo-journals, where students were invited to "photograph elements of home life and organize them into collages in order to share events and stories in the classroom" [30], p. 313. Through engaging with texts that explore the topic of journeys and migration, the children had the opportunity to consider the complexities and emotional aspects of intercultural engagement, and ultimately to "explore the intercultural worlds we inhabit" (p. 308). Arizpe et al. [30] include learner quotes that indicate the importance of these educational experiences, with one child exclaiming: "I loved reading the books . . . It made me think about my family and our journey from Pakistan. It made me write my own journey story so that other people can know more about what can happen to families around the world" [30], p. 309.

Dunn et al. [31] describe an arts-based project focused on intercultural and multilingual encounters, that they implemented for children with refugee experiences attending an Australian primary school. Dunn et al. [31] created a series of lessons exploring the adventures of Rollo, a young robot who travelled from a distant planet and lost her dog, Sparky. Dunn et al. [31] describe how Rollo, played by a member of the research team, arrived in the classroom with no knowledge of English, inviting the children to determine which language she was using and why she needed help. Dunn et al. [31] explain: "Our purpose in positioning Rollo in this way, apart from creating opportunities for strong identification with her situation, was to provide opportunities for the children to be empowered as language experts, for all of them had more English than she did and were therefore positioned as teachers rather than learners" (p. 483).

Over the course of the project, additional characters were introduced to build on Rollo's story, incorporating new language via oral and digital text, such as Sparky the dog's email messages containing clues regarding his location. The children used a range of technologies to respond to these texts and to help shape the evolving story of Rollo, Sparky, and the other characters. As the collaborating teacher in this project articulated: "the children were developing both language and narrative competence as they lived a story rather than read a story" [31], p. 488. Noting the importance of considering the children's experiences with trauma when selecting the program content, Dunn et al. [31] explained "we wanted a character and a story that might offer some resonances to their own experiences but one that also provided sufficient emotional distance to ensure protection" (p. 483).

#### 4. Discussion

The research in this scoping study provides important insights into the value of arts-based instructional approaches as differentiated "entry points" into language learning for children with refugee backgrounds [30,35]. These alternative and creative pathways into the curriculum are intended to build on learners' strengths and offer equitable opportunities for engaging with new knowledge. For instance, in discussing the importance of valuing children's home language practices and offering a range of creative, visually mediated ways of engaging with the curriculum, Arizpe et al. [30] observe "these strategies created a level playing field where students could construct meaning from the text and from their context by using their visual skills, home literacy practices and previous personal experiences" (p. 314).

However, these studies do not construct arts-based, multimodal engagement as simply a means of entry to more traditional approaches to language instruction. Rather, these projects recognise the inherent value of multimodal, artistic communicative forms and their "legitimacy and promise . . . as a powerful means of engaging marginalized students beginning with their strengths, not their deficits" [16], p. 212. Arizpe et al. [30] caution against considering "a movement from the coded image 'towards' the word" or a view "that words reflect more refined, higher order thinking", advising that "The images are useful because they act as cues and also have intrinsic value in themselves" (p. 318).

Overall, the authors included in this scoping study promote the value of arts-based language learning programs for expanding listening skills, oracy, vocabulary, and intercultural engagement. Further, most of the studies share a common emphasis on integrating digital modalities into arts-based instruction as an essential means of preparing refugee background children for 21st century communicative demands. The latter emphasis on digital literacy is identified as particularly important for learners who have encountered disruptions in access to formal education and opportunities for engaging with technologically mediated forms of communication. As McArdle and Tan [16] suggest "Any current understanding of lifeworlds and of social and cultural capital needs to take these new technologies into account" (p. 216).

##### 4.1. Implications for Scholar-Practitioners

In addition to the key themes we have discussed, our engagement with the literature has identified important considerations for scholar-practitioners seeking to integrate arts-based approaches to languages education with learners from forced migration backgrounds. Firstly, while learners may encounter challenges when navigating traditional classrooms due to a lack of formal schooling experience, it should not be assumed that they will be any more acquainted with less structured educational approaches and/or arts-based learning activities see [31,36,39]. As with any classroom, it is important to provide clear expectations for learning in non-formal settings and seek community consultation regarding cultural appropriacy. Likewise, it may take some time for learners to realise that their languages and knowledges are genuinely valued in these educational spaces, both as educational

resources and as valuable sociocultural, linguistic, and epistemic repertoires in themselves see [30].

The literature also identifies the importance of collaborating with the appropriate discipline experts to ensure that arts-based approaches do not “become surface “busywork” [16], p. 216. In describing the ‘Art as Language’ program, McArdle and Tan [16] emphasise that “The arts were not separated from language learning, nor treated as a “trim” or as peripheral. We provided explicit instruction, both in English language development and artistic language, skills, and techniques” (p. 220). The research included in our scoping study identifies the importance of artists and teachers working together see [16], with Dunn et al. [31] noting the critical role of the classroom teacher in extending and reinforcing language learnt through the drama sessions. In fact, many of the studies in our textual corpus describe a planning phase prior to the arts-based interventions, in which classroom teachers, teaching assistants, visiting artists, and members of the research team consider the students’ life experiences, and sociocultural, linguistic, and learning requirements to ensure the program will be responsive, engaging, and challenging see [16,32].

Another notable commonality in these projects is their culmination in an exhibition or performance for an audience of peers and/or family members. For example, Emert [32] describes how the ‘transpoemation’ project concluded in “a learning fair environment”, that provided an important opportunity for alternative assessment, advising: “In teaching others what they had learned, the students were able to provide evidence of their own learning” within an “authentic social setting that invited them to cast themselves as experts” (p. 361). Such agentic roles affirm the value of students’ epistemic and intercultural perspectives and provide a striking contrast to how “they are typically cast in the role of ‘at-risk child’” [32], (p.363). Likewise, Vitsou et al. [36] describe how the ‘Literacy through Drama’ project was “completed with a theatrical performance by the children in front of their community and relatives back again in the camp”, with one learner noting: “I really enjoyed our drama play at the end of the school year . . . all together we showed to our families what we did in the Greek school” (p. 47). Inviting an audience to attend a performance or exhibition of curated work can also help inform learners’ creative choices throughout the program and offer authenticity to arts-based practice that is sometimes lacking in educational contexts [31]. However, as Wellman and Bey [39] observe, it is important to be sensitive to family members who may not feel comfortable or able to attend such exhibitions due to experiences of disenfranchisement, unfamiliarity with formal educational systems, or the challenges of resettlement.

Finally, while the literature discussed in our scoping study argues for the importance of meaningful language learning experiences in which students have opportunities to communicate about topics that matter to them, the authors also identify the need for caution when navigating content that may be triggering see [30,31]. Educators need to be prepared for the way that learners may “use art as a means for sharing, or working through their past experiences” [39], p. 38, and have the appropriate specialist supports in place to offer trauma-informed/healing focused assistance. Likewise, the complexities and nuances of navigating intercultural spaces and identities are important considerations. As Arizpe et al. [30] note: “While generating discussion of migration in the classroom is vital, a conscious effort must also be made to avoid treating new arrivals as ambassadors of a coherent, essentialized culture. This runs the risk of cementing their alterity by valuing migrants for their ability to represent difference, instead of valuing them for their more realistic, hybrid identities” (p. 319).

#### 4.2. Potential Considerations for Future Research

Our engagement with this small yet robust corpus of research exploring arts-based approaches to languages instruction with learners from displacement backgrounds raises important questions regarding educator preparedness. As the research attests, successful implementation of arts-based programs of learning necessitates educator awareness of the potential instructional value of such approaches, and knowledge regarding ways to



embed these learning experiences within existing curriculum frameworks, facilitate classroom engagement, and collaborate with artists and discipline experts [16,29,31]. Further, understanding of trauma-informed and healing-focused instructional approaches is also essential to teacher preparedness. Wellman and Bey's [39] study of pre-service educators' experiences working on an eight-week after school arts program offers important insights into the potential to enhance professional preparation via involvement in such opportunities. Further research regarding educator preparedness to harness the benefits of arts-based forms of languages instruction when working with learners from displacement backgrounds could inform initial teacher education programs and future professional development opportunities.

It should also be noted that many of the projects featured in this scoping study take place in settings where there are fewer restrictions regarding curriculum content and assessment, such as after school programs or summer camps. While this flexibility is not always possible in more formal educational contexts, one potential approach is to create 'pockets' of less structured learning experiences during lessons, where the emphasis is on creativity and communication of meaning. As Kennedy et al. [35] suggest: "Shifting, even in small ways, toward a participatory model of learning that honors the cultural wealths and deep knowledges of all learners can have a positive impact on the learning experiences of refugee youth in the long term" (p. 67–68). Further research to document ways of incorporating arts-based interventions in more formal educational settings, perhaps even considering how such approaches might support languages assessment, could build on the foundational research discussed here and guide educational policy regarding inclusive practice for learners with disrupted formal education backgrounds.

Finally, while our intention in this research was to document the creative ways in which arts-based instructional practices are currently being employed in languages education for young learners with displacement backgrounds, we also wish to acknowledge the potential value of these approaches as research methods. As McArdle and Tan [16] note: "Arts experiences can prove a powerful means for generating rich data, sometimes making learning and thinking visible in a direct and immediate way, not available through more traditional research methods" (p. 216). Particularly in contexts where educators and learners have varying levels of proficiency in shared languages, such approaches can offer richer and more equitable means of engagement [16,30,45]. Each of the 12 studies included in our review deliberately elevates learner voices, for example through focus groups, student directed interviews, or textual artefacts, to evaluate and shape the learning program being described. These creative and student-centred ways of co-constructing educational experiences have great potential to inform inclusive practice in a range of learning contexts. We encourage interested practitioners to engage with the studies described here, both as a source of inspiration for arts-based instructional practices and as a means of exploring creative and innovative methods for research and program evaluation.

## 5. Conclusions: Co-Creating Spaces of Hope

Importantly, these accounts of arts-based, multimodal languages education foreground such approaches as a means of "restoring hope for a positive future" [36], p. 45, emphasising the potential for languages education to fortify and sustain learners experiencing the trauma and violence of displacement and the challenges of resettlement. The projects included in our scoping study share a common emphasis on honouring learners' knowledges, experiences, and understandings, and highlight the value of fun, interesting, and engaging educational experiences that elevate learner voices and build on existing strengths. Such approaches have the potential to offset the deficit constructions that refugee background learners may encounter in more traditional educational environments, providing culturally and linguistically inclusive and responsive learning spaces. Importantly, these studies also illustrate the need for high expectations and targeted opportunities for learners with forced migration experiences to engage with the complex and critical linguistic repertoires essential to 21st century communication.

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Article

# Children's Meaning Making: Listening to Encounters with Complex Aesthetic Experience

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**Abstract:** This paper describes young children's symbolic meaning-making practices and participation in complex aesthetic experiences in a contemporary art museum context. Through an ongoing long-term research and pedagogy project, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia (MCA) is working with researchers to provide regular opportunities for young children (aged birth–5 years) and their families—all members of the same early childhood education (ECE) services—to encounter art works, engage with materials, and experience the museum environment. The program provides a rich experience of multiple forms of communication, ways of knowing and ways of expressing knowings: through connecting with images, videos and told stories about artists and their practice, sensorial engagement with tactile materials, and embodied responses to artworks and materials. Children also experience the physicality of the museum space, materials for art-making and the act of mark-making to record ideas, memories, and reflections. The project supports the development of a pedagogy of listening and relationships and is grounded in children's rights as cultural citizens to participation, visibility and belonging in cultural institutions such as the MCA.

**Keywords:** early childhood; language development; arts-based experience; living literacies; art gallery; contemporary arts

## 1. Introduction

For the past five years, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia (MCA) has collaborated with researchers from the Macquarie School of Education, Macquarie University, on the Art & Wonder: Young Children and Contemporary Art (referred to hereafter as Art & Wonder) research project, illuminating how very young children encounter contemporary art in a gallery space, and how rich pedagogy might emerge from these encounters. The MCA is a not-for-profit organization, collecting artforms including painting, photography, sculpture, works on paper and moving image. The MCA currently holds over 4000 works by Australian artists. The National Centre for Creative Learning (NCCL) was launched by the MCA in 2012, offering arts-based learning to all age groups. In 2016, feeling the need to deepen their pedagogical expertise in the early childhood years, the NCCL approached the university and initiated the discussion that led to the project.

Through this ongoing longitudinal research and pedagogy project, the MCA provides regular opportunities for young children (aged birth–5 years) and their families—all members of the same early childhood education (ECE) service—to encounter art works, engage with materials, ideas, representation, and language, and experience the museum environment. The project has supported a considered reconceptualization of what is possible and what is productive when working with very young children in both the gallery and early childhood education contexts, applying and integrating theory and research findings from across a range of disciplines including museology, child learning and development, visual arts, language, and literacy.

The key overall aims of the research were to:

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- (a) Explore the impact of actively and regularly welcoming young children, their families and teachers into the context of the public, cultural, creative space of an art gallery—from the perspective of children, their families, their teachers, the artist educators and the museum.
- (b) Describe the ways in which young children bring meaning to, and make meaning from, engaging with contemporary art within a museum context.

In this article, we focus on young children’s meaning-making practices and participation in complex aesthetic experiences in a contemporary art museum context. First we will present some examples of children’s responses to repeated museum visits and encounters with artist educators, individual art works, specific exhibitions, spaces, and materials. We then describe how the children’s revisiting and returning to these experiences over time supported the building of connections and establishment of relationships with spaces, materials, artists, and exhibits. We then provide an analysis which explores the question “*What could happen between young children and a museum that could not happen anywhere else?*” [1] (p. 78).

### 1.1. Language Development and Arts-Based Experience

The powerful impacts and benefits of creativity and arts-rich educational experiences for young children is well established [2,3]. Play with materials by artist educators, artists and children is a form of abstract and creative thinking and problem solving in a material world. Using rich specialized vocabulary has been associated with later academic achievement, including decontextualized talk [4], complex syntax [5], and academic vocabulary [6]. As children hear more specialized language in context, they are more likely to use and understand it. It also supports more complex understandings of what art is and can be, both in terms of the work of artists and their own artmaking [7]. This is a sophisticated combination of understandings of language and techniques giving the children access to a wide range of symbolic meaning making practices [8].

### 1.2. Young Children and Art Museums

Museums of any kind are complex spaces, unlike other public and private spaces in their form, scale, practices, and content. Haggard and Williams cited in [9] “*suggest that leisure pursuit or informal learning opportunities such as museum visits are important for identity building and enabling people to understand others better*” (p. 10). Recent international research has also identified the rich experiences, cultural connections, expertise, authentic learning, and aesthetic engagement that are specific to museum and gallery contexts [10–16]. Museology has only lately (in the last 25 years) come to considering young children seriously as agentic museum participants/visitors in their own right, not just as passive members of family groups with adults and older children [17]. Museum research interest in children has tended to focus on school aged children and their learning, usually in the context of family or school field-trip group visits [18].

A museum experience can be a significantly new experience for a young child. Excitement and wonder exists alongside a need for safety, familiarity and attachment [17]. Research involving young children has found they can be unpredictable in terms of their attention and the value they place on the museum itself as a constructed space and place, the conventions of movement and interaction within the museum and their interest in and interactions with exhibits [17,19]. Their responses to the museum can also be quite delayed, arising in conversations and comments weeks after the museum visit [20]. Young children respond aesthetically to the qualities of exhibits in museum collections and to museum spaces themselves [20–22]. The opportunity to revisit a museum and its collection, to have time to experience and then re-experience the museum, the collection, ways of knowing and associated language and concepts support the development of schema, those crucial conceptual frameworks that underpin comprehension of texts and experiences in other contexts [17,23].

The contexts of museums and galleries are not always unproblematic places for young children [15,24–26]. The visible absence of very young children is apparent in most art galleries and contemporary art museums. Terreni’s research has revealed tensions relating to the (often overt, at other times more subtly implied) exclusion of young children (and their families and teachers) from public museums and galleries. Barriers to participation range from physical access issues to openly discriminatory practices and biases against young children, often founded in deficit-based perceptions of what young children are capable of and where they belong. These perceptions may be held by museums themselves but also by children’s families and teachers [27–29].

Collection content, and the practices associated with the care and exhibition of the collection, has also had an influence on research undertaken in museums, in large part because of the perceived relevance of collection types to various audiences. Piscitelli and Anderson’s research [30] with 4–6-year-olds found the children preferred social and natural history museums over science and art museums. These researchers interpreted this preference as being because social and natural history museum collections were more recognisable/familiar to children, founded in life experience. Art galleries have tended to receive less research attention, especially in relation to children as visitors [18] and thus museum based visual arts pedagogy is a neglected area of research [13,26,31]. Such visible absence of very young children may be attributed to children’s age as well as a perceived lack of ability to engage appropriately within the boundaries of socially and culturally acceptable ‘museum art gallery visiting’ norms [15,32].

### 1.3. Living Literacies Approach

While the Art & Wonder project was not conceived of primarily as literacy focused, the potentials for young children’s learning and development are fundamentally related to language, literacy and meaning making processes. The project sits well theoretically in the Living Literacies approach, drawn from New Literacy Studies, whereby literacy is regarded not as a set of measurable skills but as a social practice, embedded in social groups and situations [33]. The emergence of literacy occurs within the experience of language, objects, materials, spaces and feelings, in both the past, present and future. Memory and reflection act on/with the present moment and the realization of what might be [34]. The approach functions theoretically to support research methods that capture the process of living literacy:

*“A living literacies approach is generated through the sites and spaces of the literacy projects undertaken. Collaborative and interdisciplinary by nature, it enables artists, community partners and researchers to work together in a more entangled way while acknowledging and foregrounding expertise that comes from different spaces.” [34] (p. 14)*

The Art & Wonder program provides a rich experience of multiple forms of communication, ways of knowing and ways of expressing knowings: through connecting with images, videos and told stories about artists and their practice, sensorial engagement with tactile materials, and embodied responses to artworks and materials. Children experience the physicality of the museum space, materials for art-making and the act of mark-making to record ideas, memories and reflections. The project supports the development of a pedagogy of listening and relationships and is grounded in children’s rights as cultural citizens to participation, visibility and belonging in cultural institutions such as the MCA [28,32]. This has been a collaborative, reflective process between the museum, artist educators, the university researchers, the children, families and ECEC teachers with considerable evolution occurring over time in the processes and experiences being provided to the children.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants and Program Description

All the child participants (aged birth–4 years of age) were either enrolled at Mia Mia Child and Family Centre or their younger siblings. Planned visits to the museum occurred

at eight-week intervals, with a total of four visits over six months, from 10.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. The children attended with their family members (for example, a parent and/or grandparent and younger siblings) on a day they were not enrolled to attend Mia Mia. Teachers from Mia Mia also attended. The COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on the program, with no programs being run in 2021. The program was resumed in early 2022, with a new group of child participants and their families.

The visits had the following schedule:

- a. Meeting artist educators in the MCA foyer
- b. Walking together to the NCCL
- c. Settling in, in a circle, welcome with the big pink ball of string
- d. Listening to an introduction to the artist educator practice and explanation of the focus artist
- e. Visiting the gallery, seeing focus artworks with the artist educators
- f. Returning to the NCCL space
- g. Playing and interacting with art materials in the studio workspace
- h. Drawing and representing
- i. Eating lunch together before farewells

Families were given a blank book by the artist educators on the first day of the program, to journal and record any observations, collect anecdotes, photographs, and drawings before and after each visit. This book was called the 'Special MCA Book'. Children were encouraged and supported to exchange letters with the artist educators between visits. Families were supplied with pre-stamped postcards to which the artist educators responded. This process supported the development of relationships, sustaining their continuity and promoted mark making, reflection on experience and literacy as a social practice.

## 2.2. Data Collection

The data for this study were generated through three sources:

- (a) Photographs: Professional photography was utilized to capture subtle cues, sensory responses and interactions between children, artworks, and others in the MCA.
- (b) Artefacts: Children's drawings, journals, letters, and observations of responses to artworks were included as research artefacts. These represent the constructive process "which purposefully bring shape and order to their experience, and in so doing, the children are actively defining reality rather than passively reflecting a "given" reality" [35] (p. 124). Through this process, children are both knowing reality and creating it to communicate.
- (c) Interviews: Separate focus group interviews were conducted with families, Mia Mia teachers and artist educators. The interview questions were open-ended and designed to elicit participants' perspectives about the MCA program. Sample questions included: Can you please tell me how you are finding the program? Have you noticed any changes with your child over the past few months after visiting the MCA? The emphasis in this question was to elicit a sense of what particular influence the museum experience was providing children and families. These were subsequently recorded and transcribed.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis was utilized, enabling the identification and organization of data themes to facilitate interpretation [36,37]. The focus of the analysis was framed around the question "What could happen between young children and a museum that could not happen anywhere else?" [1] (p. 78). Beginning with the focus group data, each transcription was closely read, seeking patterns and similarities which could inform emerging themes. By using the process of constant comparative reviewing of the data [36], each author independently identified relevant passages in the transcriptions for themes. The statements were then collated and a joint comparison of these by the authors occurred to identify which aspects of the program the participants had explicitly discussed. The second level

of analysis involved revisiting the photographs and examining key concepts from these images and comparing with the emerging data.

### 3. Findings

Two key themes emerged in relation to the language related impact of the Art & Wonder program as it evolved and how engagement with contemporary art in this museum context supported children's meaning making. Participation was grounded in provision of a shared language for responding to and describing aesthetic experiences and ideas. These provisions were grounded in intentional planning practices, founded on conscious, responsive reflection on the process over time.

#### 3.1. Language for Participation

A key function of language is as a tool for expression and a vehicle for engagement with other people and social institutions, in this case a museum. Artistic knowing and communicating involves a special type of literacy that is as important and complex as spoken and written communication [38]. Children learn artistic discourse through intentional teaching with the artist educators. As Wright [39] explains, "children need opportunities to depict and interpret, which involves sensory, tactile, aesthetic, expressive and imaginative forms of understanding" (p. 5). Children use a range of representational resources which merge and interact to represent the many ways of expressing themselves. Language, however, was a key resource for the children.

##### 3.1.1. Establishing a Sense of Belonging and Confidence

Children and families participated in social routines of informal welcomes on arrival at the museum foyer (Figures 1 and 2), and a formal welcome process in the NCCL and then farewell on departure. This created a feeling of welcome, safety, belonging and connection that supported participation and confidence in both children and adults.

*Initially when we all sat down in a circle and passing on the pink giant thread from one person to the other, that exchange in that connection, we all felt the big sense of belongingness in a group and the importance of each and every member of us joining in that one space. Immediately, I think that was really good start. Immediately from that start, we kept on continuing it from there. It was a nice idea to introduce the names and how they can contribute what we thought that can be shared, the ideas. Yeah, it was nice.* (Parent)

*You can see, you know, the positive attitude that I had which filtered to him, and that made him feel a lot more relaxed and enjoy it too. Yeah, it's a working partnership, amongst the family members.* (Parent)

Families overcame barriers to access and inclusion that traditionally restrict the involvement and participation in public cultural life of families with young children, gaining confidence and increasing cultural capital and creative arts participation for families.

*I feel more confident from this experience to revisit again involving the other members [of the family]. It extended into, also, recommending it to our friends and everyone that we know, of such a great experience, enriching experience that we've had, as well as not being afraid to join another membership elsewhere because that familiarization, revisiting, just makes it more special.* (Parent)

The repeated experience of visits over time, interspersed with letters and postcards (see Figures 3 and 4), supported the further development of relationships between artist educators, children and families and greater depth of engagement.

*I think that multiple visits, I think the artists educators developed relationships, knowing the personality of different individual children are going to be like. So, in a group, when we were asked a question and each child had the opportunity to answer, some of the other children were confidently being able to articulate what was on their minds. {Child's*



name), could be a little bit timid, although he had an answer, he didn't know how to quite voice it, but then when, on a one-to-one basis, when the questions were asked, he was more comfortable to voice out. That was nice, when it was not just all directed in a group, overwhelming, but even like intimate sessions. You know, when he was doing his own water painting, oh, so tell me about what you're doing (Child's name), and he was more able to express and share what he was doing. (Parent)

I think the fact that it was spread out over the period of time it was kind of ... and also with the letters and things they sent and all the back and forth with all the letters and post cards made it so much more meaningful. As I said, spread it out over that period of time, where to start with it was fun and exciting ... But by the end it was much more meaningful, and the relationships were meaningful because there was that real connection, on-going connection. (Parent)



Figure 1. Welcomes in the MCA foyer and walking together to the NCCL.



Figure 2. Settling in, in a circle, welcome with the big pink ball of string.

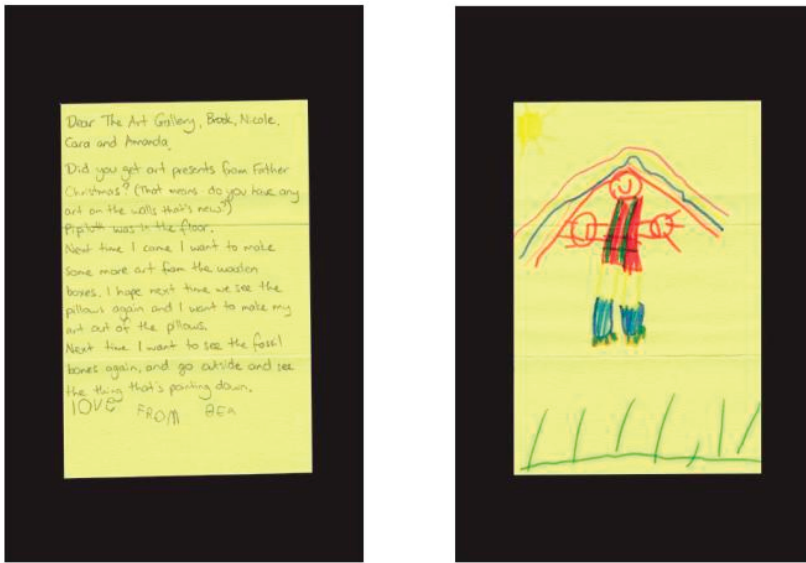


Figure 3. Bea's letter and drawing to the artist educators.



Figure 4. Letters and postcards.

A feature of the welcome routine was the use of laminated photographs, to introduce artists and materials and presage what was going to happen across the visit (Figure 5). The photographs also supported explicit discussion of rules and protocols for behaviour and interactions with artworks in the gallery spaces of the museum, in particular the rule of "hands behind your back" (Figure 6). Used in this way, the photographs provided a positive model for children to follow. The photographs were used again in the gallery spaces to remind children of concepts and plans as well as later in the program during the formal farewell to summarize the events of the visit in a manner that supported comprehension, reflection, and confidence in the museum.



**Figure 5.** Use of photographs to illustrate artists, visit events and protocols.



**Figure 6.** Hands behind your back.

### 3.1.2. Shared Experience

An unexpected finding was revealed in the parent focus group, highlighting the ongoing impact of the visits to enhance child/ parent relationships and communication:

*We could discover it together, and he could see that and for us to both enjoy discovering something new together, regardless of age or theme ... that was very special in that way, where we could prepare, the homework stuff we did, like brought in something from home, we could do that together, prepare together. That was a nice journey, where it was all kind of equal, not age based or 'mummy has more knowledge than me'. It was just discovering something new together. It was very special. (Parent)*

### 3.2. Intentional Planning and Resourcing for Aesthetic Experience and Response

A key feature of the Art & Wonder project was the intentional planning for aesthetic experience and response, a process that inherently involved language, and the provision of time, space, and a place for deep engagement with language, materials, and concepts. In particular this involved the introduction and explanation of key vocabulary and the description of artworks, processes, materials, thoughts, and feelings. Meaning making by children was supported through opportunities to observe, listen, speak, manipulate artist materials, and make marks.

#### 3.2.1. Dedicated Space (Time and Place)

Gallery visiting time included time for children and their families to experience the space and artworks together and artist educator led explanations of key artworks and installations (Figures 7 and 8).



Figure 7. Family time in the gallery.



Figure 8. Artist Educator led discussions about artworks in the gallery.

The conversations and adult-supported observations and explanations in these times were an opportunity for the children to hear and use vocabulary such as painting, collage, tools, installation, and sculpture as well as descriptions of colour, shape, symbols, intentions, themes and meaning that had been presaged in the welcome activities prior. Family members could also relate artworks to children’s known interests, thus building strong contextual and conceptual relationships.

In contrast to the main formal gallery spaces, the Jackson Bella Room is a dedicated space for interactive, multisensory tactile artwork, located within the MCA NCCL and made accessible through artist educator led experiences. Each year, an artist is commissioned to create a new work for audiences to engage with specifically through the senses, including touch which is normally discouraged within the gallery environment. Liam Benson, for example, created *Hello, Good to Meet You* in 2019 (Figure 9), about horses, their physicality, environment, and social behaviour. The work included video and audio elements and, most notably a giant fringed mane of fabric streamers which almost covered half the room. Benson reflected:



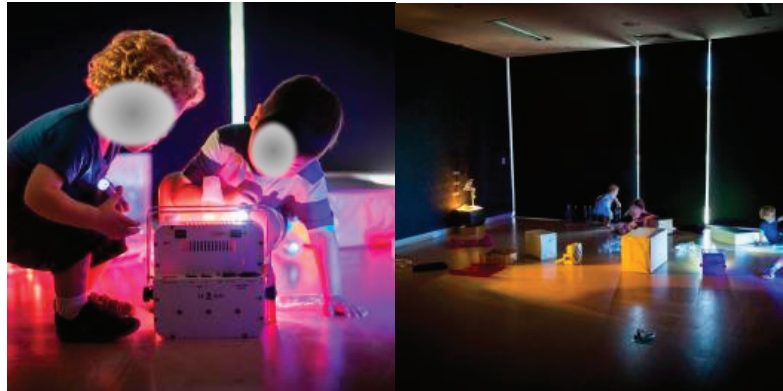
**Figure 9.** Interacting with *Hello, Good to Meet You* (Benson, 2019).

*“I love seeing the way children interact with the artwork, particularly the giant fabric fringe mane made up of the spectrum of colours . . . The children stroked, brushed, flicked, pulled, caressed and held the fabric in a variety of ways. I witnessed expressions of happiness, excitement, curiosity, wonder and sensorial stimulation. The children loved hiding among and behind the mane. Many would find themselves going from a handheld tactile engagement to a full body immersive experience with the mane. It’s joyful to be part of and witness.”*

A key element of the program was that there were no expectations placed on children in relation to time or a ‘right’ way to ‘do art’:

*. . . they were given enough, sufficient, ample time to do it. It wasn’t hurried or rushed, okay, soon we’re going to . . . I mean, it wasn’t like that at all. It’s when the educators and us adults just took a step back and just let them be in charge of their own exploration and you could just see wonderful things from each and every one of the children doing things in different ways, . . . trying it for themselves. Just thinking creatively. (Parent)*

The NCCL studio space was critical for this, where the artist educators provided carefully curated art materials, related to the artworks viewed in the gallery visit. The museum visits provided dedicated space for children and families to interact with the artist educators, with materials in the studio (as diverse as space, light, water, fabric, ‘junk’ including boxes, manufacturing offcuts and organic materials for example) (Figure 10) and the concepts and processes associated with contemporary art.



**Figure 10.** Materials for play in the NCCL studio.

*... watching them in that space with the water and the light and everything was a real reminder to just kind of let them explore and give them time to explore. Yes, in theory it's great, and maybe it doesn't happen so much in practice but for me it was a reminder of that ... (Artist Educator)*

Play in the studio was routinely followed with a mark-making opportunity, around a shared table with shared materials (Figure 11). This supported the children to make marks on materials provided as well as in their journals. The artist educators joined the children and to observe and interact, share reflections with the children as individuals and in smaller groups (Figure 12).



**Figure 11.** Mark making together.



Figure 12. Reflection on journals.

### 3.2.2. Language of Art-Making and Exhibition

The artist educators shared their own preferred arts play materials and works in progress, scaffolding an understanding of the multiple and diverse voices of the materials they choose to work with. Throughout the Project they have curated the Studio space with materials that provide a glimpse into the exhibiting artist's assemblages and playful conversations and messages.

The introduction, explanation, and usage of the specific language of art and artmaking is a central element of the Art & Wonder project. Examples of specific language that was introduced to children include terms such as *installation* and *tools*.

Recognition that young children experience life and the world using all their senses, but especially touch evolved over several sessions. While many artworks might only be looked at, sensory materials and tools were provided for children to handle with explanations of how they related to the making of artworks, the intentions of artists and how art is exhibited in the museum.

*... it was much improved in the third and fourth sessions when they do have something to touch. That made a big difference ... it redirected that, you know, quite age-appropriate urge to touch things ... So rather than saying no and don't all the time, I could say yes, but here. (Parent)*

Language to describe processes and intentions, feelings was extended as children found ways to explain their responses, ideas and understandings:

*Thomas: it looks like treasure -like beads of a necklace.*

*Adi: It looks like rain.*

*Jackson: it looks like a rainbow.*

*Georgia: Glittering.*

*Jackson: It's shining!*

*Nicole: How do you feel when you look at this artwork?*

*Malachi: I feel calmed down.*

*Nicole: What can you hear?*

*All -I can hear the ocean! -rain -waves -beads falling down -water! water!*

*Georgia: Where are the stingrays going?*

*Malachi: When the rain fell down, the stingrays went away.*

*Adi: I think that stingray is the boss and the others will follow it.*

*Jackson: I think it's beautiful. All the colours ... the rainbow ...*

*"Excuse me, Brook? If Abdul Rahman Abdullah comes in the gallery, could you tell him that I love it?" (Adi, 4 years)*

*“Throughout the Art & Wonder project, I have come to be acutely aware of the myriad of connections and threads between the way in which young children experience the world and the way in which many artists work close looking; non-linear, inquiry led investigation; the body and its empathetic sensory experience; making meaning, connections and asking questions, to name a few. As an early learner, meaning is not fixed yet and as an artist we describe the world trying to unravel these fixed definitions and find new ways of seeing the world in which we live. Watching her work on building an installation (Figure 13) or combining materials from different parts of the room is not dissimilar to my own practice as an artist. The outcome is unknown, the meaning can shift and change as the work progresses, the pleasure of testing and transforming materials.” (Artist Educator)*



**Figure 13.** Art making in the NCCL studio.

### 3.2.3. The Artist

The artist is a figure of some fascination for the children:

*“One of the things we learnt early on from the children was when we introduced artists and their practice they needed to know where they were and if they would be coming into the gallery. The artists were real people and they wanted to make a connection to the artist that had made the artwork. We subsequently brought images of the artists to show the children and to introduce them alongside their artwork. I had not seen images of many of the artists myself so I was also making connections alongside the children. The artist image is now a resource available across all our programs and is supported by the artist voice in the form of a quote.” (Artist Educator) (Figure 14)*

Benson was able to physically attend the program and the children responded with eagerness and confidence to share their ideas and art making. Benson felt a connection with the children and admired the confidence he saw in them.

*“I also noticed the significance of the newly formed relationship in our free social time within the program. Several children brought their personal art journals to show me their creative process and creations. There was a confident pride in what they wanted to share with me, and I feel this interaction and moment held significance for us because we were connecting as fellow artists and creative makers.” (Liam Benson, artist, see Figure 15)*

The unique opportunity to encounter not only the photograph of the artist but to meet and engage directly with the artist as he shared his artwork and process with the children was only possible in this museum context.





Figure 14. Introducing the artist, Liam Benson.



Figure 15. Liam Benson talking with a project participant.

### 3.2.4. Children's Artistic Responses at the Museum and Later

The process of communication between the artist educators and the children became a critical source for understanding the impact of the program on children. Purposeful and authentic reasons for written communication were created. The development of identities as artists, explorations of materials and forms and capacity to explain this was evident:

*Yep, so he was kind of using what we had at home, reflecting back to what we experienced at the MCA, just arranging it in a different way. So he would say, oh this is part of what I saw at MCA that I'm going to make my own art. Yeah, so not just always drawing or painting, but actually being tactile and using the resources, which makes art as well.* (Parent)

*'I feel like at home {Child's name} definitely explored more how to be artistic and there was definitely more collage. I emailed you a picture of the sculpture she created out of a plastic bag and some other white things at home, all by herself, and then made it an artwork that I have to hang in the hall.'* (Parent) (see Figure 16)



**Figure 16.** Child's Sculpture (plastic bag and other white things).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The ongoing experience with art, artists, materials and a museum context created by the Art & Wonder program at the MCA has demonstrated firstly the competence of very young children to adapt to museum environments, especially where the museum itself has been prepared to accommodate the needs of young children and their families. Opportunities to revisit the museum, physically but also through the ongoing written communication between the children and the artist educators and reflection in the children's journals, were emphasised in the data as key factors in children's engagement, confidence and sense of belonging. The children experienced adults authentically 'listening' to their meaning making: the responsive, reflective nature of the artist educators' engagement with the children gave status to children's meaning making in its many forms: verbal, visual and embodied. Young children have not necessarily been regarded as welcome, capable and agentive museum visitors (and thus cultural citizens) in the same way as adults and older children [15–18,25–28]. The crucial nature of the public, cultural, creative space of the museum environment in this process cannot be underestimated. The proximity of artworks, spaces for viewing and contemplation, the studio and the expertise and knowledge of the artist educators, supported by the early childhood development and pedagogy expertise provided by the university and EC centre educators, synergistically created this learning as noted in other international museum based research [10–12,14–16].

The techniques and experience developed by the Art & Wonder project, to engage with children and support their engagement with art and the museum, positions the MCA powerfully as an advocate for young children and a source of expertise and models for the inclusion of younger children as legitimate museum and gallery audiences. Artist educators responded to children's strong desire to form relationships with individuals and supported the children to learn the often-complex cultural protocols of interacting (or not) with artworks at a gallery. The development of this understanding of cultural protocols and living literacies impacts the children, as with these strategies they can move confidently through gallery and museum spaces at the MCA and beyond. It has also had an impact on families, who were surprised and delighted by their children's competencies and, as a result, have felt a greater sense of confidence in accessing galleries and museums with their young children.

The core, foundational nature of language has been emphasised by the program. Children's language and literacy development were enhanced while experiences with materials, people and artworks supported children's understandings of others and the world. Authentic opportunities for exploration provided by the artist educators scaffolded meaning-making in the context of relationships and shared experience. Art & Wonder has contributed to the language development of the children through the provision of key terminology and vocabulary to take and make meaning, to understand and express knowings, feelings and experience and support shared participation at the museum and beyond [7,38]. Arts-based learning provides exposure to and opportunities to use more complex language and access to a wider range of symbolic meaning making practices found

to support later learning achievement [4–8]. Art & Wonder is an excellent example of ways that a Living Literacies approach can be utilised to explore and develop authentic literacies embedded in a social grouping where relationships and sharing of ideas, knowings and feelings were valued [33,34]. Children’s experience of multimodal symbolic communication through aesthetic experience with artworks, mark making, movement, photographs of artists, their materials and tools, letter writing and journal keeping all supported emergent literacy. Children were also ‘reading’ cues for museum protocols, for example the white line on the floor in front of artworks. The sensitively guided arts-based experiences enhanced symbolic communication, promoted relationships, developed confidence and supported the communication of ideas and feelings to others.

Future plans arising from this project include initiatives to support connection between early childhood education and care services with museum- and artist-led, rich, arts-based learning across all areas of Sydney and into Regional NSW. At the professional development level, the project provides further impetus to include practical early childhood teacher pre-service and in-service professional development in visual arts pedagogy, and artist educator professional development in early childhood pedagogy.

#### *Limitations*

While this research contributes to the growing body of international research on children in museums, there are limitations in this research which need to be acknowledged. The inclusion of only children from Mia Mia families in Sydney, Australia, limits the extent to which these findings can be generalised to both national and international contexts. The funding made available to Art & Wonder that supported, for example, the hiring of a professional photographer for every session is an expense that may not be possible for other galleries and museums. Having a dedicated space where these experiences can be created in studio is another aspect that should also be considered. As further research on children in museums emerges, future research will be needed to continue exploration of artist educators’ understandings and observed practices across diverse contexts and ways in which the complexity of arts education can be seen as integral to professional pedagogical practice.

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Article

# Talking Together: The Effects of Traditional Māori Pedagogy on Children's Early Literacy Development

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**Abstract:** This article presents findings from a project that sought to determine the effects of a home-based literacy intervention on bilingual (English and Te Reo Māori) preschool children's early literacy skills. The culturally responsive intervention, which was adapted from Tender Shoots, incorporated traditional Māori teaching and learning approaches, such as the use of storytelling, songs, games, and reminiscing about the past, as practices for supporting key cognitive skills crucial to foundational literacy, specifically phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge. Over a 12-week period, during which the intervention was conducted, data were gathered from eight Māori preschool children and their families. The study utilised a crossover design. Four children and their families participated in the Rich Reading and Reminiscing (RRR) component of the intervention, which ran for six weeks, followed by the Strengthening Sound Sensitivity (SSS) portion of the intervention. The remaining four children completed the intervention in the reverse order of delivery. The crossover approach established a control in the study and allowed the effects of each part of the intervention on the aforementioned cognitive skills to be more clearly revealed. Overall, the data indicate that traditional Māori pedagogical practices helped to strengthen the early literacy skills of the children participating in the study.

**Keywords:** literacy; early years; Māori; oral traditions; Indigenous pedagogy; phonological awareness; vocabulary knowledge

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## 1. Introduction

Children's literature and the arts play a crucial role in supporting early learning and development [1–4]. In particular and amongst other things, children's literature fosters strong communication skills, helps children to become better storytellers, and supports the formation of solid connections for children to the world around them [5–7]. This paper presents findings from research that sought to determine how a home-based literacy intervention supported children's early literacy development. In particular, this paper considers the role of traditional Māori pedagogy and practices on key cognitive skills associated with early literacy, specifically phonological awareness, story comprehension and retell skills, and vocabulary knowledge. Drawing on children's imagination and penchant for play, a culturally responsive literacy intervention, adapted from *Tender Shoots* [8], was piloted with eight Māori families and their preschool children. Each family spoke some level of Te Reo Māori (the Māori language) in their home. For every family, though, English was the dominant language in their home, where it was heard and spoken at least 80 per cent of the time. During the 12-week intervention, in both English and Te Reo Māori, families played games with their children, read or told stories, sang songs or chants, and reminisced about the past—all of which were pedagogical practices used in traditional Māori society to transmit knowledge and skills from generation to generation [9]. This article commences by describing the oral nature of traditional Māori society and the practices used in teaching and learning in that era. Following this, the intervention is described, and some of the results from the pilot are presented. The article concludes by illustrating the role that traditional Māori pedagogy can play in fostering contemporary skills in early literacy development for bilingual preschool children.

## 2. Māori Oral Traditions and Pedagogical Practices

Before British settlers arrived in New Zealand in the early 19th century, traditional Māori society was entirely oral in nature [10]. Knowledge, customs, skills, practices, values, and history were transmitted among generations orally [11]. More specifically, songs, storytelling, and chants, in particular about the past, were some of the methods used to teach children about the world around them, which included lessons about times past and those to come. [12] contends that oral traditions and narratives “contain the sum total of past human experience and explain the how and why of present day conditions” (p. 11). His contention applies accurately to traditional Māori society, where oral traditions have long been, and continue to be, both a repository for historical knowledge and a means by which intergenerational knowledge transfer occurs [13].

Moon [14] argues that the oral traditions in pre-European Māori society had significant cultural and social implications, impacting not only the way in which knowledge was transmitted and stored, but also determining who in Māori communities took on the role of holding and passing knowledge from one generation to the next. Traditional Māori society was organised into a series of structures, those being whānau (families), hapū (tribe), and iwi (extended tribe) [15]. Families were the smallest of the three kin groups and were made up of three or four generations of people, approximately 30 people in total. The main function of the family, as in many cultural groups, was the procreation, education, and general nurturing of children [16]. Metge [17] notes that the family provided children with their early education, teaching them about genealogy, language, tribal history, customs, and acceptable behaviour, using songs, chants, and storytelling to do so. Extended family members also played a role in teaching children, often taking responsibility in singling out particular skills and aptitude in children and fostering these skills by encouraging children to learn through play and mimicking elders [18].

Metge [17] observes that as children in traditional Māori society grew older, they spent less time playing, instead devoting their time to assisting their parents and learning the roles and responsibilities associated with their gender or the position in the family. Regular practice of various skills, and exposure to tribal knowledge associated with those skills, was a key learning approach in traditional tribal contexts [19]. To support this learning, elders in the family composed songs or chants that documented historical figures and events, or reiterated traditional beliefs and political alliances, singing these near the children so the children gained the knowledge contained within the compositions [20].

In contemporary times, little has changed regarding the influence of families on children’s learning and development, and this includes familial shaping of children’s early literacy skills [2,6,21,22]. On a daily basis, children are presented with opportunities to strengthen their early literacy skills in a range of settings, including in their homes [23]. In fact, language and literacy are typically first encountered at home [24], and the practices and beliefs in this home environment related to early literacy play a key role in the development of children’s literacy. Numerous studies document, in particular, the influence that shared book reading, conversations, telling stories, singing songs, and playing games within families can have on strengthening children’s emerging literacy [2,25,26]. In essence, when families read with young children and engage them in literacy and language activities in a supportive manner and environment, children’s early literacy skills are more likely to be well developed [2,6,21,27].

Alongside the ongoing influence of families on children’s learning, aspects of Māori oral traditions also remain in contemporary times, such as whaikōrero (formal oratory), karanga (welcome call), mōteatea (traditional chant), haka (war chant), waiata ringa (action song), karakia (incantation or prayer), whakataukī (proverb), the telling of pūrakau (stories or legends), and creation narratives [28]. Additionally, Reese and Neha [29] note the importance of reminiscing about the past in Māori culture and that it is an activity that still occurs among both younger and older generations. Conversations about the past are evidence that remnants of Māori oral traditions continue to be practiced in modern times, and these conversations serve two main purposes. Firstly, they connect children to

oral narratives and the lessons or messages embedded in those stories, and secondly, they provide children with an opportunity to ‘tell a story’ by reporting on an event or a tale that occurred in the past [9].

In summary, Māori oral traditions emerged and developed over generations in an environment that relied solely on these traditions to store, communicate, and transmit knowledge and learning. However, the arrival of the written word in the early 19th century brought significant changes to Māori society. New settlers, predominantly from Britain, began to arrive in New Zealand in 1814, and their numbers slowly increased in the 1820s and 1830s [30]. The settlers brought with them a variety of different technologies and skills, such as agricultural tools and household items, including new ways to store knowledge, specifically by using the written word. Literacy, in this case referring to the written word, had a profound effect on Māori society, and Māori actively embraced print culture, reading, and books [31]. This led to social changes, where prestige shifted from those who were skilled orators to those who were able to read and write [14].

During this period of social, political, economic, and technological change, learning that occurred in schools made its way into communities. The more literate that Māori became, the more their perceptions and knowledge expanded, and the broader their horizons became due to reading, the higher the demand for written materials became (Derby, 2021). O’Regan comments on Māori enthusiasm for literacy, stating:

There is usually genuine surprise and shock when I start to introduce the history of Māori literacy prowess . . . with the Māori newspapers and proportionately higher rates of literacy at the turn of the [20th] century than non-Māori. Over 95 per cent of my academic and professional audiences are usually completely unaware of the fact that Māori have such a literary heritage [32].

The richness of Māori engagement with literacy discussed by O’Regan were supported by Haami [33], who poses a counter-argument to the modern-day notion that “reading and writing [were] Pākehā [New Zealanders of predominantly British descent] things that Māori weren’t interested in and didn’t need” (p. 9). Instead, Haami argues that Māori “enthusiastically . . . utilised and adapted literacy for their own purposes . . . . Reading and writing is not exclusively for Pākehā but has . . . been entrenched in Māori society for over a century” (p. 10). A full survey of the interactions Māori had with literacy and their impact on Māori society is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to note the swift and enthusiastic adoption of literacy by Māori in light of contemporary claims that to teach literacy to Māori children is a form of neo-colonisation, or to perform well in literacy as a Māori child is to compromise one’s identity as Māori [11,34]. The premise of such claims is at odds with historical evidence to the contrary, and is a deficit, dangerous, and wholly inaccurate claim to make about contemporary Māori learners.

The intentions of this section were to describe the oral nature of Māori society and the methods used to teach children in traditional times. These practices, specifically singing songs, reciting chants, telling stories, and talking about the past, were then woven into an early literacy intervention, which was trialled with Māori preschool children and their families, in order to determine the effect of traditional Māori practices on key cognitive skills associated with early literacy development. In light of the central role families played in fostering children’s learning in traditional Māori society, in keeping with this pedagogical approach, the intervention was trialled with families in the home, rather than in an early childhood setting. The following section explains the intervention, from conception to implementation.

### 3. The Study

#### 3.1. Key Cognitive Skills Associated with Early Literacy

It has been noted that the primary goal of the study was to explore the efficacy of a culturally responsive, home-based literacy intervention in advancing preschool children’s early literacy skills. In particular, the key cognitive skills considered were phonological awareness, which some scholars argue is the single best predictor of later literacy



skills [35–37] and vocabulary knowledge, which plays a crucial role in children’s literacy development [38,39], particularly reading comprehension. While phonological awareness skills enable children to decode a text, this on its own is not enough. Children also need to comprehend the content of the text in order to draw meaning from it, and this ability is reliant on familiarity with the meaning of words [40]. Additionally, there is an interdependent relationship between phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge, with evidence suggesting that children with larger vocabularies are more likely to have stronger phonological awareness skills [41–43]. Champion et al. [41] argue that as children’s vocabulary knowledge grows, the need to identify differences between similar sounding words increases. This need leads to increasingly segmented lexical representations, and children must employ their skills in phonological awareness in order to differentiate between similar-sounding words. Story comprehension and retell skills were also considered in the intervention [9], but will not be discussed in the context of this article.

Notably, findings from numerous studies indicate that shared book reading and dialogic conversations with children that include activities such as reminiscing about past events, asking open-ended questions, singing songs, reciting rhymes, telling stories, and playing games serve to foster early literacy skills, such as phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge [21,27,44–46]. Also of note is that family practices, including those outlined above, support the growth of children’s vocabulary knowledge and phonological awareness skills [2,47]. Weigel [27] contend that families who read and write regularly are more likely to have larger vocabularies, and they use these wide range of words while their children are present. Furthermore, they argue that children who observe members of their family reading books and other written material are more likely to ask questions about the materials, and to acquire a richer set of vocabulary and greater ability to discern between different words as a result of these interactions. The contentions outlined in this section were of relevance in this study because the study specifically explored any changes to early literacy skills as a result of the intervention trialled with the children and their families.

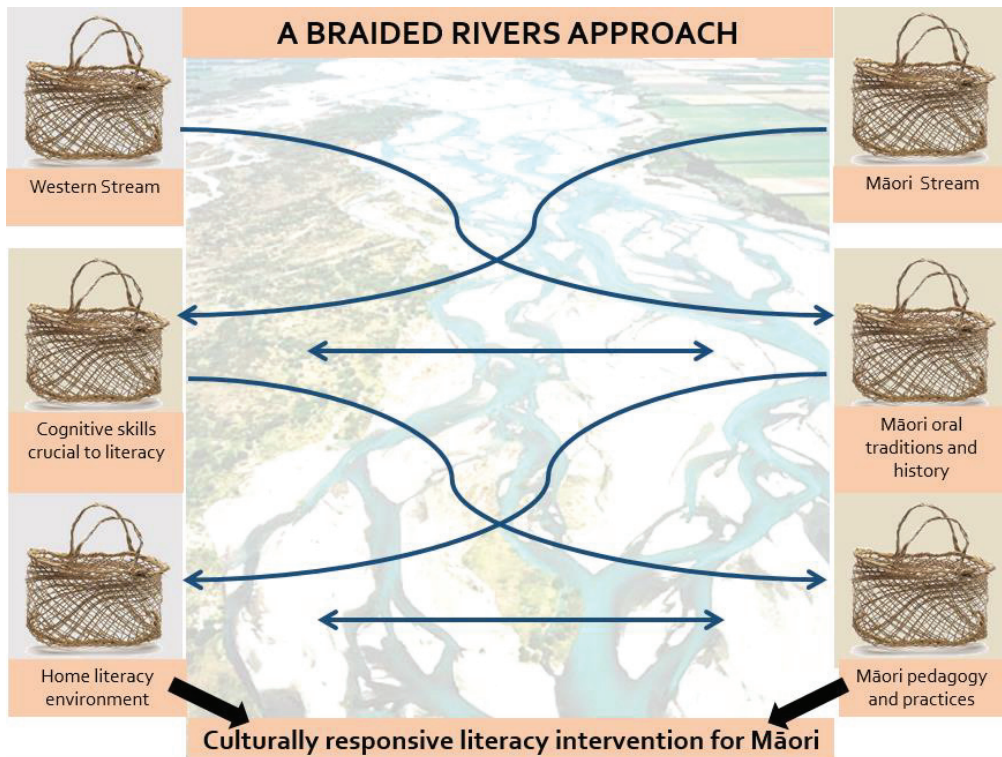
### 3.2. He Awa Whiria Framework

The He Awa Whiria framework was applied to adapt the intervention from *Tender Shoots* [8]. The framework draws inspiration from Indigenous and Western streams of knowledge, with Macfarlane et al. [48] proposing that:

Western knowledge and theory, although fundamentally sound, are culturally bound, and are therefore not able to be transferred directly into another (Indigenous Māori) culture. It is therefore necessary to make a plea for an interdependent and innovative theoretical space where the two streams of knowledge are able to blend and interact, and in doing so, facilitate greater sociocultural understanding and better outcomes for Indigenous individuals or groups. (p. 52)

Essentially, Macfarlane et al. argue that a blending of Indigenous and Western bodies of knowledge results in an approach to research that is more powerful than either knowledge stream is able to produce on its own. The framework and how it was applied in the context of this study is depicted in Figure 1 below.

The baskets under the Western stream represent research concerning the cognitive skills associated with early literacy, including phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge and the influence of the home literacy environment on children’s literacy development. The baskets under the Māori stream represent Māori oral traditions and history with literacy, as well as traditional pedagogical approaches and practices. This framework guided the adaptation of the intervention from *Tender Shoots*, and resulted in a culturally responsive literacy intervention that was trialled with eight bilingual Māori preschool children and their families.



**Figure 1.** A Braided Rivers approach to a culturally responsive literacy intervention for Māori.

### 3.3. *Tender Shoots* and *He Poutama Mātauranga*

It has been mentioned that the intervention trialled in this study was adapted from *Tender Shoots*, which has two components: Strengthening Sound Sensitivity (SSS), which aims to enhance children's phonological awareness abilities, and Rich Reading and Reminiscing (RRR), which focuses on developing vocabulary knowledge and story comprehension and retell skills. RRR encourages a move away from an 'adult reads, child listens' approach to storytelling and instead proposes an interactive style that turns a storybook into a conversation between the child and the person reading the story. This method helps children to learn new vocabulary, to understand connections between events, to better understand their emotions, and to tell better stories themselves. SSS promotes families pointing out and playing with the sounds in words during shared book reading. This helps children understand that words are made up of smaller units of sound, which can be manipulated to form other words, thus stimulating their phonological awareness skills.

With its focus on conversations and storytelling practices that occur within families, the researcher identified the resonance *Tender Shoots* had with Māori pedagogy and oral traditions. The researcher applied the *Cultural Enhancement Framework* [49], which is a tool used to adapt interventions for use with Māori. The new version of the intervention was named *He Poutama Mātauranga* to reflect the oral tradition in which one of the gods in the Māori creation narrative, Tāne-o-te-Wānanga, ascended to the uppermost heavenly realm in his quest for superior knowledge. In this narrative, Tāne, who, in the creation narrative, is said to be the progenitor of humankind, the forests, and all the creatures of the forest, rose through the twelve heavens to the highest realm and acquired the three baskets of knowledge named Te Kete Tuauri, Te Kete Tuatea, and Te Kete Aronui. It is said that Tāne then returned to Earth with the knowledge, and, once there, created humankind from the

Earth [16]. A ‘poutama’ is a stepped pattern that symbolises both genealogy and various levels of learning and progression [50]. ‘Mātauranga’ in this context is best interpreted as knowledge, wisdom, understanding, and skill [50]. Therefore, *He Poutama Mātauranga* reflects a quest for knowledge and captures the cumulative, progressive nature of the skills the intervention aims to promote.

### 3.4. The Research Setting and Participants

The early childhood centre involved in the study was Nōku Te Ao, which is located in Christchurch, New Zealand. It provides early childhood education to children aged 0–5 years. Nōku Te Ao, which means ‘the world is mine’, granted permission to use their name in publications. They are classified as a dual language centre, meaning the teachers engage with the children in both English and Māori. The participants involved in the study were four-year-old Māori children attending Nōku Te Ao and their families. The two criteria for selection were that children were four years of age for the duration of the 12-week intervention, and that they attend Nōku Te Ao. The centre manager extended an invitation to participate in the study to families who had a four-year-old child attending Nōku Te Ao. Eight families in total agreed to take part in the study, with the final cohort of participants comprising two boys and six girls. Data collected during pre-intervention interviews with the mother of each child indicated that every child started at Nōku Te Ao at age two years old or younger, and none of the children presented with any medical challenges at the time of the study or at birth. Each mother had beginner to intermediate levels of reading and speaking in the Māori language, but English was by far the dominant language for all of the children. The vast majority of them were exposed to English in the home for 80 percent of the time or more. Three of the children heard or spoke a third language in their home, those languages being Tongan, Japanese, and Samoan.

### 3.5. Research Design

Due to the relatively small number of participants in the study, a single case design was deemed to be the most suitable [51]. This design meant each child acted as their own control, which meant stronger conclusions were able to be drawn from the findings. The single case design sought to gain insight into three things:

1. Whether there was an observable and important change in the dependent variables (phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge);
2. Whether the observed change in the dependent variables post-intervention was a result of the application of the independent variable, where the intervention was the independent variable in the study;
3. Whether this change is something that is able to be generalised across time, setting, and target.

As mentioned above, the study also utilised a crossover design. The eight participants were split into two groups of four and were randomly assigned to the intervention sequence. One group completed the RRR portion first, which ran for six weeks, while the other group completed the SSS component, which also ran for six weeks. The groups switched at the midway point of the intervention, which then ran for a further six weeks. This feature of the research design established another control in the study [52] and allowed comparisons to be made between the two groups on the basis of the nature and timing of their engagement with the intervention, thus increasing the rigour of the findings.

### 3.6. The Intervention

Prior to the intervention commencing, families who had agreed to take part in the study were invited to participate in either an RRR or an SSS workshop, both of which would explain how to conduct the activities associated with each component of the intervention. Each workshop ran for approximately two hours and followed the same format of a PowerPoint presentation with time for questions, although the content differed depending on whether the focus of the workshop was RRR or SSS. The presentation essentially outlined

why RRR or SSS is important in cultivating strong language skills in preschool children and how families were to engage with and record the activities they completed during the intervention. Following the workshop presentation, families were given the opportunity to ask questions. Finally, at the end of each workshop, they were provided with tip sheets to take home to remind them of key points covered in the workshops.

The researcher created resources to support the activities included in the intervention, and sourced 24 children's books, 12 of which were allocated to the RRR portion of the intervention. These books were chosen for RRR because they were stories about events to which children could relate with ease, such as going on a picnic or visiting extended family. The remaining 12 books supported the SSS-focused activities and were selected due to their use of rhyme and/or alliteration in the text. For a full list of the books used in the intervention, see [9]. After the families had completed the instructional workshops, the researcher gave two storybooks to each family per week for six weeks, one in English and one in Māori. They were asked to read either book, or both books, three times each over the course of the week. During each reading, they were required to read a series of sticker prompts strategically placed by the researcher throughout the book. Two examples of sticker prompts are 'Can you find something on this page that rhymes with 'boat' and 'What does 'burrow' mean?'. The researcher recorded how many readings were completed by the families using a reading chart, which was stamped by the child after each reading or activity was completed (see [9] to view the chart). This chart also allowed the researcher to see whether families were using more English, more Māori, or a mixture of both languages during the intervention. Families provided the completed charts to the researcher at the end of the intervention.

The sticker prompts created for each book, which families were asked to read aloud when they read the book with their child, had questions or statements on them, which became incrementally more difficult with each reading. The prompts in the books that aligned to the RRR workshops were related to understanding the story, learning new words, understanding emotions, and connecting the story to the world around them. The prompts in the books that aligned to the SSS workshops attempted to foster skills in hearing the sounds in words, particularly syllables in words, sounds that rhyme, and the initial phoneme of a word.

In addition to this, families completed activities each week, which drew from traditional Māori pedagogical practices mentioned at the outset of this article, and included singing songs, playing games, having interactive conversations, and reminiscing about the past with their children. The activities included in the RRR component of the intervention encouraged families to ask open-ended questions about the book they read as well as outings they had that were similar to those in the book, explain the meanings of new words, reminisce about the past, and make connections with the child's world. The books and activities utilised in the SSS portion of the intervention focused on stimulating children's ability to detect the sounds in words—in particular, words that rhyme, the initial phoneme of a word, and manipulating the sounds in words.

### 3.7. Data Collection

As mentioned, both the RRR and SSS components of the intervention were conducted for six weeks each. Using game-based assessments, data were collected prior to the intervention beginning, referred to in the study as 'pre-intervention', in order to establish a baseline against which to measure any subsequent change in children's phonological awareness skills and vocabulary knowledge. There was a two-week break between the group changeover, and at this point, further data sets were gathered so as to determine any shifts that may have occurred as a result of the RRR and SSS activities. This point in the research is referred to in this article as 'mid-intervention'. Following the mid-intervention break, the groups switched and completed the other portion of the intervention. Data sets were gathered at the conclusion of the intervention, referred to as 'post-intervention', as well as six months after the intervention had ceased. This final data collection aimed to capture

whether any changes in children's early literacy skills were sustained over a longer period of time.

During the four sessions of data collection, children were asked to identify initial phonemes in both English and Māori words, to syllabify English and Māori words by clapping the number of syllables in each word, and to name a series of objects by completing a picture naming task. At each data collection point, three repeated measures of the initial phoneme identification tasks and the syllabification tasks were taken pre- and post-intervention, and two were carried out mid-intervention. This method produced an average score for each child and allowed for greater insight into children's capabilities at that point in time. Children were asked the questions related to the picture-naming task once during each round of data collection.

Figures 2 and 3 below provide examples of a Māori language initial phoneme identification question and a Māori language syllabification question, respectively.

Here is a kete, a whetū and a pēpi. Which one starts like this? (/p/)



**Figure 2.** Initial Phoneme Identification task in the Māori Language.



Here is some pounamu. Can you say pounamu?  
Now can you say it with your hands?

**Figure 3.** Syllabification task in the Māori Language.

For the picture naming task, children were shown an image from a storybook used in the intervention and were asked to name what the image depicted.

### 3.8. Analysis and Results

The study drew from analysis methods used in replication design [53]. Yin [54] argues that replication of a study across single cases (in this instance,  $N = 8$ ) produces patterns, which can be taken as evidence of a general phenomenon and from which solid conclusions can be drawn. For case study analysis, including single case design, Trochim [55] states that what he refers to as 'pattern-matching logic' is one of the most rigorous techniques to employ in order to analyse and interpret data, such as those sets gathered in this study.

More specifically, data relating to the phonological awareness skills of each child were analysed and statistically validated using a two-standard-deviation band method [56].

These results were plotted on a graph for each child and for each portion of the intervention, in both languages [2]. The crossover design revealed that it was only after each child had completed the SSS portion of the intervention were they able to identify initial phonemes in English and Māori words and identify the number of syllables in English and Māori words, at a rate that was significantly above chance. In other words, the children were not simply guessing the correct answer but rather were able to draw on their skills in phonological awareness and use these to identify the right response to each question. All the children, irrespective of the sequence in which they completed the intervention, improved to a point that was significantly above chance, thus allowing conclusions to be drawn about the positive shifts that occurred in their phonological awareness skills as a result of the intervention [9].

The data gathered using the picture naming task, which revealed any changes to vocabulary knowledge, were analysed by comparing the mid- and post-intervention results with those gathered pre-intervention. Each child scored 0 out of 8 pre-intervention, but after completing the RRR portion of the intervention, which focused specifically on expanding children's vocabulary, children were able to name an average of 4 out of 8 new words. Again, the crossover design allowed conclusions to be made about the effects of each component of the intervention on the specific skills they targeted, as well as on the impact of the intervention as a whole on children's early literacy skills.

Crucially, all the children maintained, or in some cases, further improved, their skills in phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge six months after the intervention ceased.

#### 4. Discussion

It was mentioned at the outset of this article that the overarching intention of the study was to explore the effects of a home-based literacy intervention on children's early literacy skills. This article specifically highlights the role that Māori oral traditions and pedagogical practices, the latter of which include singing songs, reciting chants, telling stories, and reminiscing about the past, can have in supporting children's early learning in the contemporary era, as these practices did in traditional times. In particular, the effects of Māori oral traditions and pedagogy on key cognitive skills associated with children's early literacy development, those being phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge, were considered.

In the opening sections of this article, Māori oral traditions and pedagogical practices were described. The wholly oral nature of traditional Māori society—in particular the significant role that storytelling, songs, chants, and an awareness and sharing of the past played in passing knowledge from generation to generation—was used to inform the development of a culturally responsive literacy intervention, adapted from *Tender Shoots*. The newly created intervention, with its focus on engaging children in interactive conversations, storytelling, singing songs, reciting chants, and reminiscing about the past, was grounded in Māori oral traditions and pedagogy, and in particular, reflected the premise that talk and discussion were effective methods used to teach children about the world around them—learning that was subsequently passed from generation to generation in oral form through the centuries.

Overall, the intervention, which was trialled with bilingual Māori preschool children and their families, had a significant positive shift on fundamental cognitive skills that support children's early literacy development. Each child in the study, after completing the SSS portion of the intervention, had stronger phonological awareness skills and, it has been noted, maintained these improvements six months after the intervention ceased. In fact, the crossover design of the study revealed that it was only after completing the SSS portion of the intervention that positive shifts were made in children's phonological awareness skills. In other words, at the mid-intervention data collection round, the phonological awareness skills of the children who completed the RRR portion of the intervention first remained unchanged from their baseline scores, thus allowing strong conclusions to be drawn about

the effects of the activities included in the SSS portion of the intervention on children's phonological awareness skills.

The same pattern emerged for the cohort that completed the RRR component of the intervention first, with their vocabulary knowledge showing improvement at the mid-intervention data collection point, whereas the cohort who engaged in the SSS portion of the intervention first demonstrated no expansion of their vocabulary knowledge from pre-intervention scores. Again, this pattern allowed for solid conclusions to be made about the effects of the RRR portion of the intervention on children's vocabulary knowledge. In addition to this finding, irrespective of the order in which the children completed each component of the intervention, all the children expanded their vocabulary knowledge as a result of the RRR portion of the intervention, and again, these gains were sustained six months after the children and their families completed the intervention.

Crucially, families discussed other changes in the children as a result of the intervention, noting that the children were more likely to ask what new words mean, had improved listening skills, were more inclined to ask questions during shared book reading, and were more engaged in their learning overall. Despite the smaller number in this pilot study, which could be interpreted as a limitation of this work, the methods used here were well received by families and provided strong and conclusive data sets needed by the researcher to answer the research questions. Further studies employing these methods, but possibly of longer duration and with a broader focus, would reveal subsequent shifts in children's learner identity and self-efficacy as a result of the intervention. Certainly, these preliminary findings bode well and support the need for further investigation of the influence of the intervention on these critical learner attributes and practices.

Finally, in traditional Māori society, the family unit played a pivotal role in fostering children's learning, and, in order to align the intervention with this pedagogical approach, the intervention was trialled in the home with families leading it, as opposed to with teachers in an early childhood setting. The findings revealed that, just as it was in traditional times, the families involved in the study had a significant impact on children's early learning—in this case, specifically fostering children's foundational literacy skills. In addition to this, families reported that they embedded many of the strategies employed in the intervention after the intervention had ceased, which indicates not only the sustainable nature of the strategies used but also the commitment each family has to its child's learning. Ultimately, these findings lend weight to the importance of involving families in children's learning and in fostering strong partnerships between the home and school or early learning environments. The findings in this study demonstrate that families are willing and able to play a crucial role in supporting their children's learning.

## **5. Conclusions**

Children's literature and the arts have long supported children's early learning and development, both in various cultural contexts and in different historical eras. The findings presented in this article, which were produced in a study that explored the role of traditional Māori pedagogy and practices on key cognitive skills associated with bilingual Māori preschool children's early literacy development, reveal that practices from the arts, such as storytelling, singing songs, and reciting chants, play an integral role in fostering foundational literacy skills, specifically phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge. The findings also illustrate the impact that Māori oral traditions and pedagogical approaches and practices can have on supporting children's learning in contemporary times. These approaches and practices include the central role that families play in teaching children, as well as the effect of singing songs, telling stories, reciting chants, and reminiscing about the past on children's early literacy skills. As an aside, but allied with the main arguments in this article, a crucial point alluded to in this work was the historical interactions of Māori with literacy, and in particular, the swift and enthusiastic adoption of this new skill by Māori in 19th century New Zealand. Alarmingly, there is a school of thought that contends that to be concerned with Māori children's literacy acquisition and outcomes in

contemporary New Zealand is a form of neo-colonisation. However, such contentions are resoundingly debunked upon examination of the historical evidence and the actions of previous generations of Māori with regards to literacy—a skill which was highly valued by Māori and ought to remain so (and indeed in most quarters remains of immense value) in the 21st century and beyond. In closing, to reiterate the central argument in this work, children’s literature and the arts—in the context of this study in the form of traditional Māori pedagogy and oral narratives—have played, and continue to play, a crucial role in supporting children’s early learning and in fostering strong connections to the world in which we live.

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Article

# Representing Identity: The Importance of Literature and the Translanguaging Space for EAL/D Early Years Literacy Learning

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**Abstract:** Quality literature is a natural fit when choosing resources to support learning in early years settings. This qualitative research reports how literary texts can be used to foster EAL/D students' poetry writing and represent their identity. During professional learning, teachers were supported to select a range of engaging literary texts and design quality literacy experiences focused on thirdspace drama and other creative strategies. Students were afforded agency to respond to the texts and then employed Janks' redesign cycle to craft identity text poems using their home language(s) and English. The lesson sequence generated a creative translanguaging space, and the poems highlight the richness of the students' stories and give voice to their distinctive views of self and the world.

**Keywords:** literacy; literature; English teaching; translanguaging; drama strategies; early years; identity; professional learning; translanguaging space; poetry

## 1. Introduction

Valuing the rich cultural and linguistic repertoires that young learners bring to any educational setting [1–3] can be the key to engaging young students and developing understandings and skills in English [4,5]. Identities are “infused or sedimented into literacy practices” [6] (p. 9), and when students are not able to understand and recognise their own linguistic resources, they “may internalize deficit views of their own skills” [7] (p. 31). Including the use of first languages or dialects (translanguaging) [8] alongside English in educational settings aligns with both the Australian National Curriculum [9] and the “Belonging, being and becoming: Early Years Learning Framework” [10]. Classroom practices that are underpinned by and enact these principles of diversity support improved educational outcomes for students from backgrounds that do not mirror the dominant linguistic and cultural background of the society in which they are being educated [6,11–13].

Central, therefore, to literacy education is facilitating learning experiences that help young learners of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) to make connections to texts that ensure institutional access and inclusion. Janks argues that what we need is a “world in which we can learn from pure differences, be excited by conflictual perspectives, and all be treated with openness and care” [14] (p. 125). This project looks to identity text production as a pedagogical tool by which to foster engagement in learning and achievement and enable the development of “identities of competence” [6] (p. 17).

The key aims of the research were to:

- (a) Explore the extent to which professional learning on creating identity texts in the translanguaging space might bring about change in the classroom practices of primary teachers and create space for EAL/D students' languages and identities to be valued and shared, and
- (b) Understand how teachers navigate any emergent tensions between innovation and the routinised ‘this is how we do things’ when EAL/D Stage 2 students redesign literary texts and present their distinctive perspectives about their home country.

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In this article, we review the literature on translanguaging, the translanguaging space and the impulse towards acknowledging and using the linguistic resources of students from diverse backgrounds. We then describe professional learning undertaken as part of ‘The Identity Text Project’ by teachers from a low-socio-economic Australian primary school in which a high proportion of students have English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). Following this, we offer the findings from analysis of teacher and student artefacts generated in response to reading and redesigning Bronwyn Bancroft’s quality picture storybook *Why I love Australia* [15]. The article closes with a discussion of the insights gained from this study, including the positive outcomes that emerge when teachers innovate and make the classroom a place where the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students are fostered.

### 1.1. Translanguaging, Language and Literacy

Strong research evidence already exists demonstrating that language development, including greater language development in the second language (L2) or dialect [16], is supported through practices and pedagogy that allow students to use their home languages in the classroom [17]). Translanguaging, a term originating from Williams’ research in Welsh settings, is now being widely used [12,18–20] to avoid a conceptualisation of bilingual language in which, depending on the situation, one linguistic system is privileged over the other, as is the case with “code switching” [21] (p. 7). Translanguaging has been described as “new language practices that make visible the complexity of language exchanges among people with different histories . . . [It] releases histories and understandings that had been buried within fixed language identities constrained by nation-states” [22] (p. 21). Translanguaging, thus, does not involve boundaries between languages [23] but rather captures the everyday practices of bi/multilingual learners as they employ flexible multilingual practices without clear linguistic boundaries to navigate their world. Garcia, Ibarra-Johnson and Seltzer [24] identify four primary translanguaging purposes:

1. Supporting students as they engage with and comprehend complex content and texts.
2. Providing opportunities for students to develop linguistic practices for academic contexts.
3. Making space for students’ bilingualism and ways of knowing.
4. Supporting students’ bilingual identities and socioemotional development (p. 7)

The purposes above emphasise the high level linguistic, cognitive and social capacities [8] inherent in communicating in more than one language and challenge the deficit perspectives of multilingual students so often present in EAL/D classrooms [7,25].

From a sociolinguistic perspective, translanguaging reflects the fluid language practices of bilingual communities. It also describes pedagogy through which teachers shape connection between the dominant school language practices and the language practices students bring with them from prior to school experiences. Increasingly the research evidence indicates that the “process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience is constructed through language so calling on ones’ full linguistic resources is integral and can be agentive” [25] (pp. 16–17). Translanguaging in early years settings can offer young children ‘joyful’ learning with bilingual students responding positively to developmentally appropriate translanguaging based authentic language experiences. Research has shown peer interaction in a buddy pair configuration using a translanguaging framework encourages students to take linguistic risks [26]. Working in translanguaging buddy pairs supported language development through bidirectionality with students’ interactions evolving from spoken to written mode leading to more complex writing and a less formulaic approach to writing [26].

Classroom practice that embraces translanguaging more easily establishes equitable, empowering language learning [2,13,23,27–29] by transforming teacher-student power relations [18] and shaping inclusion and social justice in an educational context. Teaching practices, however, that do not embrace the translanguaging framework can marginalise students and undermine the rights of language-minority students [22] and this is exacerbated when students are unable to even use their first language for learning [12].

### 1.2. *The Role of Literature in the Development of Language and Literacy*

Text selection in educational settings is of vital importance for both language and literacy development, especially for marginalised students. Providing many opportunities for students to use both their home languages and dialects as well as Standard Australian English (SAE) supports the development of oral language and engagement. The development of metalanguage, the language to talk about language, is especially important in the development of literacy for EAL/D students and especially for those students who are socially disadvantaged. Social disadvantage is realised in language use, or the development of orientations towards either a restricted or elaborated code of language use [30]. How language is used at home and in students' communities may not reflect that of the school, no matter what language or dialect is spoken [25,27].

The first texts children encounter in homes and educational settings are often more spoken-like and may include repeated refrains and rhyme. These features support the development of both oral language and literacy, as developing understandings about the structure and features of familiar texts aids prediction as a text unfolds [31,32]. Spoken-like texts, which are grammatically intricate, are much easier to read than more lexically dense written-like texts, so the introduction of new concepts and vocabulary in more spoken-like texts can encourage interaction and engagement. For instance, poetry as Huisman [32] contends, can provide opportunities to explore both "levels of expression and wording" as well as "semantics and context" (p. 8). Furthermore, Duckworth and Tett [33] identify the value of narrative in enabling students to use their imaginations to connect their personal and public worlds and explore cultural dissonances, ambivalences and complexities that exist within their lives. By articulating this complex network, students are given the opportunity to examine the role of individuals, culture and community in shaping their perception of self. "It is imagination that draws us on. That enables us to make new connections among parts of our experience, that suggests the contingencies of the reality we are envisaging" [34] (p. 30). Multimodal texts which provide a link between spoken and written language can also support understandings about the mode continuum [35–37], the differences between spoken and written language. This in turn can provide opportunities for reflection about language use, the first step in developing the foundations of literacy [36].

Bishop [38] conceptualises literature's capacity for connection by arguing that quality literary texts can function as 'windows' that open up glimpses to new and different worlds. When young learners engage with the proffered worlds of the text, the text becomes a 'sliding door' which provides opportunities to make connections to their own lives. "Readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author" ([38] (n.p)). Literature also has the capacity to be a mirror, with Bishop posing that "when lighting conditions are just right" literature "transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own loves and experience as part of the human experience" [38] (n.p). Viewed in these ways, encounters with literature play a central role in language and literacy development in the early years.

### 1.3. *The Identity Text Project: 'Identities of Competence' and Promoting Literacy Development*

This section of the paper canvasses how teachers can create opportunities for their students to respond to literature by creating *identity texts* that enact the "kind of pedagogical initiative that is required to get students engaged with literacy and enable them to develop identities of competence" [6] (p. 9). Identity texts encourage students to draw on their lived experiences and utilise their full linguistic repertoires, including home languages, to craft creative work or performances. Creation of the texts is orchestrated by the classroom teacher within the pedagogical space of the classroom by holding a mirror up to students in which the students' identities are "reflected back in a positive light" [6] (p. 3).

Studies have explored the creation of a vast array of identity texts including language trajectory grids [39], poetry [2], language maps [7,28,40], biographical texts [41], readers' theatre scripts [42], multilanguage digital narratives [43,44], and multilingual flip

books [45]. When shared with audiences of peers, teachers, parents/carers, and the broader school community, the texts have been shown to generate positive feedback resulting in affirmation of self in interaction with the audience(s). Identity texts therefore function as a powerful pedagogical tool that can promote equity for students from marginalised social and language backgrounds [6].

Research has shown that the creation of identity texts can:

- Affirm students' identities as intelligent, imaginative and linguistically talented [6,13,42,46]. D'warte's study of language mapping in linguistically diverse settings also aligns with Cummins' definition of identity text but does not employ the term [28].
- Increase students' awareness of the relationship between their home language and the language of the school [6,39,42].
- Encourage students to connect new information and skills to their background knowledge [6,42].
- Enable students to produce more accomplished literacy work in the dominant language of the educational setting [6,19,23,46].

Identity texts therefore represent an “instructional tool that transforms the interpersonal spaces within the classroom to enable students (particularly those from marginalised groups) to develop and showcase identities of competence linked to literacy and academic work generally” [6] (p. 32). When dual language texts are created students and teachers negotiate identities such that power is generated for both. “How students are positioned either expands or constricts opportunities for identity investments and cognitive empowerment” [6], (pp. 32–33). This perspective positions identity investment as a sociological construct in which language learners are conceived as possessing a complex identity that is reshaped through experience and across time—with the influence of social power relations and interactions experienced being central. Creative genres enable students to create enactments of identity [42] and poetry offers rich possibilities for young EAL/D writers as the medium rewards brevity and offers a safe transition from spoken to written language. It also provides a vehicle for voicing personal representations of language and identity [2,33,34]. These representations of identity are important in challenging perceptions of self, especially during early years of schooling and are valuable in cultivating a sense of belonging, relatedness to the community and enhancing learner engagement.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research Context

Australia is characterised by a multicultural and multilingual landscape [13,47]. As such many classrooms comprise students and teachers from a range of different backgrounds. Over “350 languages are spoken in Australia, including Indigenous languages that are passed on as a mother tongue, those that are being awakened and revived, as well as emerging pidgins, creoles and lingua francas; migrant languages” [2] (p. 3). In New South Wales (NSW), the Australian state where this research was conducted, around 36.9% of students have a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) [1]. This diversity is acknowledged in curriculum documents for example the Intercultural Understanding General Capability in the Australian Curriculum [9].

*In the Australian Curriculum, students develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture. Intercultural understanding involves students learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect [9].*

English, however, is the *de facto* national language [13,48] and most Australian schools are English only settings “where common educational policies and practices target universal individual development of Standard English literacy compared and measured by high stake, traditional tests” [49] (p. 298). The major test is the National Assessment Program Literacy

and Numeracy (NAPLAN), undertaken by all Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 Australian students during their primary and secondary years. Test performance expectations have been shown to narrow the choices teachers make in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and resources [2,34].

Below, we outline the research design and methods of our study, including how the trialectic of spatiality [50,51], as manifested in Li's Translanguaging Space [52,53], and Janks' Redesign Cycle [54] function as frames for the research.

## 2.2. Research Design and Participants

This case study research was carried out as part of a larger multi-site case study professional learning project titled 'The Identity Text Project' in which we worked as leaders of professional learning with primary and secondary teachers from five school sites. The study is Human Ethics Research Committee (HERC) approved, all necessary permissions were sought and obtained, and all artefacts were anonymised. We report case study data from one primary school in metropolitan New South Wales, Australia, in which 92% of students were from LBOTE and 72% of students were from the bottom quartile of socio-educational backgrounds, as determined by the schools' Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) ranking on the Australian My School website [55]. Relative to many other students, the student participants in this study can, therefore, be viewed as being marginalised. This is because the monolingual nature of instruction NSW schools does not fully value their linguistic capabilities, and their low ICSEA context has the potential to limit access to key resources and professional models that support academic success for students in other settings.

Participants were six ( $n = 6$ ) volunteer Stage 2 teachers of students in Stage 2 (approximate ages 8–9 years) from the case study school and their students. The teachers worked 'elbow-to-elbow' with Author 2 during a 14-month period of professional dialogue, collaboration and sustained intervention based on identity texts. The case study design was employed with a view to yielding rich qualitative data around teacher practice and student-created texts in a strongly EAL/D setting, and we acknowledge the limitations this case study design places on the generalisability of results.

## 2.3. Analytical Lenses

The trialectic of spatial practices [50,51], as manifested in Li's translanguaging space [52,53], was employed to examine the characteristics of and interactions between the spaces that shape the teaching and learning investigated in this study. Janks' critical literacy Design-Redesign Dimension [54] was utilised as a complementary conceptual frame in the design of the classroom activities and in data analysis. The cycle's four interrelated dimensions of power, access, diversity, and design/redesign functioned to support students to deconstruct existing texts and create texts that imagine new possibilities and perspectives of themselves and the world [54,56,57]. These analytical lenses are outlined below.

### 2.3.1. Trialectic of Spatial Practices (Socio-Spatial Theory)

Comprised of the (i) perceived (everyday practices), (ii) conceived (dominant, ideal) and (iii) lived spaces of representation, the trialectic of spatial practices [50] offers a lens through which to view educational settings. Soja [51] relabelled these spaces as firstspace, secondspace and thirdspace, and we adopt this nomenclature in this research. Table 1 offers an overview of the spaces in the context of EAL/D educational settings where English is the language of instruction.

Transformative or thirdspace pedagogy allows teachers to employ practices that are relevant and responsive to the language, literacies, and life experiences of classrooms typified by 'super-diversity' [58]. Transformative pedagogy affords students agency to depart from conventional classroom practices and social realities and instead invites them to analyse and understand their lives and settings, and to scrutinise dominant larger social perspectives and power relations [6]. Because the first, second, and third spaces are sites of contestation, individuals and school systems function as mediators to bridge the



political, ideological, and practical divisions between the spaces, allowing the spaces to be interrelated. This means that teachers play a critical role in “engaging with pedagogical change” [18] (p. 7) and have capacity to invoke evidence-informed practices that challenge secondspace and firstspace constraints to bring about change.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of first, second and thirdspace in EAL/D education settings.

| Space       | Characteristics  |
|-------------|--|
| Firstspace  | Space of everyday routines and practice<br>Bell times, lesson arrangements, daily routines.<br>Resource availability /constraints.<br>Normalisation of the monolingual classroom resulting in erosion of student agency, voice<br>Typified by tight deadlines, sometimes pragmatic decision making.<br>No time for creative classroom practice<br>Narrowing of curriculum and pedagogy in response to high-stakes testing and performativity pressures.<br><i>This is how we usually do things.</i>  |
| Secondspace | Ideal educational setting and practice as espoused by curriculum documents, politicians, those with societal power.<br>Commentary of critique (Mockler, 2022).<br>Performativity measures.<br>High-stakes testing—pressure to invoke pedagogy to improves test results<br>Resistance to creativity<br>Resistance to multilingual teaching and learning practices<br><i>This is how you should do things.</i><br>Transformative pedagogy: translanguaging space.<br>Subversion and reimagination<br>Space to “resist, subvert and reimagine everyday realities’ (Ryan and Barton, 2013, p. 73). |
| Thirdspace  | Possibilities for an expanded form of learning and new knowledge<br>Remaking taken for granted practices and beliefs about monolingual language practices.<br>Identity texts.<br>The Redesign Cycle<br>Thirdspace practice relating to EAL/D literacy development requires intentionality of practice to be enacted <i>What if... ?</i>  |

### 2.3.2. Translanguaging Space and Utilising Linguistic Repertoires

The concept of ‘translanguaging space’ [52] is employed as a lens through which to explore teachers’ classroom work involving identity text creation and translanguaging. The usual monolingual, monocultural practices in subject English are challenged when EAL/D students are afforded agency to tell their distinctive stories using all their language resources. A new classroom space shaped by thirdspace pedagogy is created. Labelled the ‘translanguaging space’ by Li [52,53] this space allows students to choose when and how they employ their linguistics resources and offers a space for learners to explore dimensions of identity as Li explains:

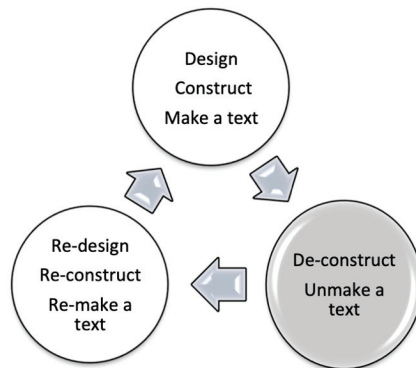
*‘... different identities, values and practices ... [to] combine together to create new identities, values and practices’. [It] creates a social space for the multilingual user by bringing together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into one coordinated and meaningful performance’ [52] (p. 1223).*

An innovative, open space, the translanguaging space reimagines the boundaries between old and new) and embraces criticality and creativity—the latter being an element of classroom practice under threat from high-stakes test responses in many educational settings [46,59,60]. The translanguaging space is, therefore, transformative, and allows

students to explore relationships between cultures and play with identities, values and practices in ways that might lead to reshaped understandings of self and others [52].

### 2.3.3. Redesign Cycle

The third complementary lens informing this study is Hilary Janks' 'Redesign Cycle' [54,56]. To be literate in contemporary society, students require skills and knowledge to engage critically with texts and construct meanings through a range of lenses and perspectives. This means teachers need to provide critical literacy experiences that enable students to "read both the word and the world in relation to power, identity, difference and [provide] access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources [56] (p. 227). All texts can be deconstructed (unmade) and subsequently reconstructed (redesigned) in ways that offer different representations of the world [54]. Students engaged in a process of reading and then writing in response to a text can be invited to problematise and rewrite the world [56] in a process of design and redesign as shown in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1.** Janks' redesign cycle [61] (p. 152).

In this project, the redesign cycle was employed to offer students from diverse backgrounds ways to engage critically with a text, identify the extent to which the text represents their voice(s) and experiences, and then opportunities to remake the text into an identity text that represents their language(s), world(s), and identity(ies). The transformative redesign pedagogy, therefore, enacts a thirdspace stance in which students might engage in learning that facilitates social action that promotes greater understandings between groups and makes a difference in the way the students think about their self and others [57,62].

### 2.4. Data Collection

Data collection instruments were authentic texts generated during usual classroom routines and interactions. The instruments sought to give voice to participant perspectives but do so in ways that did not add additional workload to already busy teachers. To map the complexity of the teaching and learning experiences and minimise distortion or bias, data source triangulation was undertaken via the use of three data sources. Consent was received for the following project artefacts to be released to the researchers for analysis and publication.

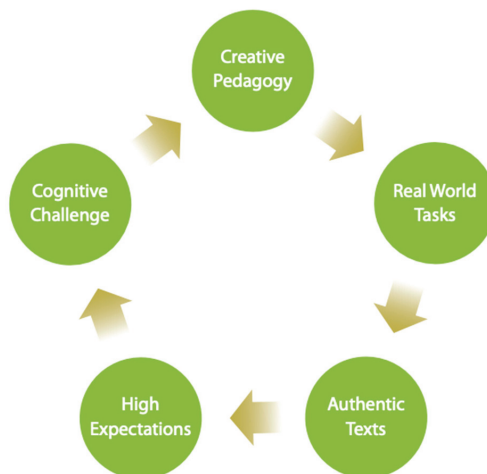
1. Site Documents: These were collected in all phases of the research and included meeting agendas and notes created by Author 2, teaching units of work, and correspondence with the school executive.
2. Work Artefacts: Teacher-gathered student work samples were collected during Phase 4: (i) Venn diagram showing planning (ii) poetic redesign of Bancroft's literary text.
3. Teacher Focus Group Reflection: The focus group was audio recorded and then transcribed, including reflections on teaching programs, teaching practices prior to

the collaborative professional learning, and teaching practices after the 'Identity Text' unit of work. Data were collected at the end of Phase 4 and were recorded during a staff meeting.

**Phase 1:** The initial phase of the project involved a series of meetings over several school terms, attended by teachers and EAL/D specialist teachers from the school and members of the school executive. Attendees engaged in professional dialogue and reflection regarding possibilities for developing student literacy. The aim was to achieve improvements within a framework that fosters wellbeing and eschews narrowing pedagogy and curriculum and to pursue creativity and innovation in classroom practice—in other words, thirdspace pedagogy. Identity text production was suggested and agreed to as the focus for a Stage 2 unit of work framed around representations of identity and home country. Students would be supported to read and critically engage with published literary texts and then create their own identity text poem through the cycle of design-redesign [54]. A workshop titled 'Who let the poets out?' was offered to introduce the power of poetry for personal expression and its capacity to be a transgressive medium offering scope for cultural expression and the exploration of national boundaries.

**Phase 2:** The second phase involved the development of sustainable and easily implemented protocols and procedures for data collection by participating teachers. These included: purposive selection of three students from each class from whom artefacts would be gathered and who were representative of the range of academic abilities and had strong attendance; assignment of teacher roles including hard copy and scanning of work artefacts and a recording and transcription of a reflective discussion about the project at its conclusion.

**Phase 3:** The third phase comprised a two-month period of collaborative professional learning attended by Stage 2 teachers and members of the executive ( $n = 10$ ). Author 2 conducted an initial workshop during which teachers were introduced to and explored the nature and potential benefits of identity text production including the way identity texts and the translanguaging space can disrupt a transmission pedagogy that views EAL/D students as blank slates [2,6,39]. During a series of meetings and informal elbow-to-elbow mentoring, teachers were then supported to design and implement the learning and teaching sequences that would support students to write the identity text poems. The 'Fostering an inclusive creative pedagogy for EAL/D principles' (Figure 2) model was employed to plan the lesson activities for the literature-focused redesign cycle. The strategies and resources employed during the identity text unit of work are shown in Table 2.



**Figure 2.** Fostering an inclusive creative pedagogy for EAL/D principles [7] (p. 2).

**Table 2.** Supportive Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms framework.

| Element             | Strategy and Resources  |
|---------------------|---|
| Creative pedagogy   | Use of ‘Walk in Role’ and ‘Advance Detail’ to explore characterisation and point of view in texts.<br>Use of poetry scaffold ‘X is like . . . , Y is like . . . ’ (Koch, 1990) to support redesign of the student selected literary text representation of Australia. |
| Real world task     | Interviewing family member to gather an oral narrative from home/community.<br>Creation of redesigned poetry text or collaborative creation of an original script for Readers Theatre.  |
| Authentic texts     | Use of translanguaging encouraged to:<br>- Support learning<br>- Represent cultural background in events and dialogue<br>Reading and critical analysis of literary texts and their perspective of Australia.  |
| High expectations   | Scaffolded redesign task.<br>Student agency in authorial decisions.<br>Realistic but defined deadlines.   |
| Cognitive challenge | Transformation of medium from original picture book to poem.<br>Redesign cycle using <i>Why I love Australia</i> (Bancroft).<br>Use of textual conventions and form.  |

Phase 4: This final research phase involved the teaching of the redesign unit of work that incorporated the strategies and resources outlined in Table 2. Researcher 2 maintained site visits and worked elbow-to-elbow with teachers as they implemented the identity text focused unit of work, explored quality literary texts and shaped a translanguaging space for their students.

### 2.5. Data Analysis

The data analysis lenses employed in this study position the identity text unit of work in the firstspace, secondspace and thirdspace, and then refine the analysis of the thirdspace practice using the Redesign Cycle as a frame. Braun and Clarke’s [63] reflexive thematic analysis approach was employed with the coding representing our interpretations of the patterns emerging from the data set. We employed a theory-informed or deductive approach.

Data coding was an iterative process with multiple, independent spaced readings conducted to generate the ‘bones’ of the analysis [64]. In Phase 1, each researcher independently familiarised themselves with the data, making analytical annotations, researcher notes, and analytical memos. The researchers then assigned descriptive labels to the data (Phase 2). In Phase 3, the theoretical frame of the trialectic of spatial practices [50,51] was employed to analyse (i) site documents and (iii) teacher focus group reflections data sets. The themes of firstspace, secondspace and thirdspace were independently applied to the data and sub-themes identified. Each researcher generated a code book and agreed definitions were then decided upon and employed in a 2nd sweep of Phase 3 data and in the Phase 4 data sweep. The themes and sub-themes were reviewed to ensure the codes form a coherent pattern and offer an apt representation of the data. The code book with definitions for each theme/sub-theme was then finalised and data items including work sample extracts and focus group quotations were selected for inclusion in data reporting.

Second-tier deductive coding of the thirdspace theme was undertaken through analysis of (i) site documents, (ii) student work artefacts and (iii) teacher focus group reflections. Janks’ three principles of critical literacy theory were employed as themes: (i) naming the problem; (ii) imagining new perspectives; and (iii) promoting improved understanding of and relationships with others [54]. Janks’ principles reflect and prompt new literacy practices and so align well with the innovative nature of the thirdspace. The titles of Janks’ three critical literacy principles were fleshed out to create labels that better represent the

patterns in the data sets (see Table 3) and sub-themes were identified. The use of Janks' principles as a lens is adapted from Mantei and Kerwin's [57] approach in their study of the 'Redesign' process in a series of Grade 6 critical literacy lessons.

**Table 3.** Themes utilising socio-spatial and redesign cycle frames.

| Theme          | Subtheme   |
|----------------|--|
| 1. Firstspace  | English-only practice.<br>Talk/drama strategies in preparation for writing.<br>Textual choices: use of literary texts to support development of identity texts.  |
| 2. Secondspace | Search for strategies and resources to enhance student engagement.<br>Literacy development aims.<br>Desire for high quality literacy PL.<br>Interest in fostering community connections.   |
| 3. Thirdspace  | Naming the problem: understanding the power of texts to position readers.<br>Imagining new perspectives: literary texts that value identity<br>Promoting improved understanding of and relationships with others: connectedness to and within communities: Identity texts and translanguaging space. |

A third tier of deductive coding was undertaken on the student work samples. The second and third of Janks' principles were employed namely ii) imagining new perspectives, and iii) promoting improved understanding of and relationship with others with close textual analysis used to identify the stylistic features employed by the students.

Detailed notes were kept and intercoder reliability checks were conducted at each phase mitigating against single coder subjectivity. Discrepancies were minimal and were resolved with minor amendments or refinements to code book descriptions. Coding definitions, researcher annotations and notes, and textual analyses were retained as an 'audit trail' [64].

### 3. Results

This section reports data from all data instruments with the themes based on the first, second, and thirdspace from socio-spatial theory. Janks' three principles of critical literacy theory (naming the problem, imagining new perspectives, and promoting improved understanding of and relationships with others) are employed as thirdspace subtheme frames. An overview of the themes and subthemes is shown in Table 3.

#### 3.1. Firstspace

Analysis of site documents and teacher focus group reflections show the impact of firstspace routines and pressures on teachers' choice of strategies and resource selection.

##### 3.1.1. English-Only Classroom Practice

The data show that, prior to undertaking the identity text project professional learning, classrooms of participating teachers were English-only spaces with translanguaging not encouraged. Despite most teachers being multilingual, home languages were not encouraged, and teachers did not seek space for sharing stories that draw on students' cultural backgrounds. Following the identity text PL and unit of work, teachers demonstrated a shift towards embracing the translanguaging space. This perspective is exemplified in the following comment: "My students found it very interesting to bring input from family from home . . . I'd give more opportunity [in the future] for them to bring in artefacts or photographs that they could elaborate on in terms of their writing". Another teacher voiced a common view when stating they would continue to encourage the use and creation of identity texts because "personalizing it with their identity intrigues them more so they're

more involved in their learning . . . obviously everyone likes talking about themselves!”. Other examples of the shift to valuing translanguaging include:

“We did some drama skits, and the kids were like ‘Yallah’ it was really, really natural to them, . . . they were bouncing off each other”.

“Encouraging the students to use home language which they found quite interesting and excited to use in their writing. A lot of them started to put brackets, meaning English, what it is, and they were happy to share and reflect on each other’s writing.”

Teachers also embraced the translanguaging space, with several reporting a shift to using their own language(s) in class to create a safe space for multilingual talk: “I started speaking . . . the way my parents would, so they got the confidence to start speaking in their own language”.

### 3.1.2. Talk/Drama Strategies in Preparation for Writing

Amongst the busyness of day-to-day routines, teachers initially reported rarely using drama strategies, seeing them as challenging and time consuming. Likewise, the use of classroom talk as a collaborative preparation for writing was not routine but following the identity text project professional learning, most teachers reported they would now be more likely to incorporate talk into their everyday classroom practice. In response to the question ‘What had an impact on the quality of writing?’, Teacher L responded. “We recorded them . . . and got them to listen to themselves”. Another teacher noted “If you can speak it, you can write it” (Teacher J). Teacher R’s response when asked ‘What would you extend as a result of this project?’ was representative of the views of the teachers in relation to an intention to place greater emphasis on the drama-based talk tasks encountered in the project: “. . . definitely incorporate more time for talk before they start writing, more collaboration . . . rather than speak to one person, speak to a number of people”.

### 3.1.3. Textual Choices: Use of Literary Texts to Support Development of Identity Texts

All teachers in the study reported being interested in using literary texts that offered rich opportunities to explore identity and construction of meaning and power but agreed the firstspace pressures left them with minimal time to explore new literary texts. Feedback on the rich literary texts suggested during the professional learning workshops and then utilised in class by teachers was positive, for example, “I initially found the students very engaged orally when they were given the opportunity to discuss and speak and listen to others . . . this increased their confidence overall in writing or my students” (Teacher J). Teachers reported intending to continue to use the texts to support literacy development and to engage their students.

### 3.2. *Secondspace*

From the outset, this was a project intended to generate change that would move teaching and learning towards meeting ‘ideal’ secondspace policy and curriculum aims. The impetus for the professional learning project stemmed from the school Executive’s desire to foster student engagement and literacy. Analysis of meeting documents revealed the following key themes:

- Search for strategies and resources to enhance student engagement;
- Literacy development aims;
- Desire for high-quality literacy PL.

The executive embraced our recommendation to achieve these aims via a teaching unit based on identity texts and drama/talk strategies. They also expressed keen interest in the possibility that the identity text work might, in addition to the above stated aims, foster community connections. The quotations below from teacher focus group reflections demonstrate the impetus towards meeting the above secondspace aims noted in the data.

“When it is focused on them and their history, their family obviously they’re more engaged and more inclined to talk about it”.

“Khadija . . . her story was like something you wouldn’t have imagined . . . but it was so detailed as well, and it actually got chosen by her group to be performed. It was that interesting to the, . . . it was a way for her to engage in writing without engaging in writing per se . . . She had the group there to support her to do it”.

### 3.3. Thirdspace

#### 3.3.1. Naming the Problem: Understanding the Power of Texts to Position Readers

Every literary text studied in an early years’ classroom represents a distinct perspective on the world and one that may not align with that of a student who is reading the text. Because a text represents a distinct perspective on the world, it privileges the interests of some people and ideas and marginalises others [57]. The texts, textual features and contextual information are summarised in Figure 3 below.

| Text and author  | Form               | Features  | Contextual information   |
|--|--------------------|---|--|
| ‘Stories’<br><i>Jagera</i><br>Lionel Fogarty (1990)  | Poem               | References first contact between English colonists and Australian Aborigines and belonging to the land.<br><i>‘Cook didn’t find us<br/>We found them first’</i>   | Lionel Fogarty, an Indigenous poet and activist.   |
| ‘My Country’<br><br>Dorothea Mackellar (1908)  | Poem               | Lyrical descriptions of Australian landscape.   | Dorothea Mackellar, a poet stating her love of Australia rather than England, the country of her ancestors.  |
| <i>Wishes, lies and dreams</i><br><br>Kenneth Koch (1970)  | Poetry starters    | For example:<br>X is like . . . Y is like . . .   | Kenneth Koch, a poet writing with disadvantaged bilingual students in the USA to produce ‘identity text’ poems   |
| <i>Australians All: A history of growing up from the Ice Age to the Apology</i><br><br>Nadia Wheatley (2013) | Historical Recount | Recounts and stories from the perspective of children living in many places and eras of Australian history. The stories range from pre-history and pre-colonisation up to the Prime Ministers’ apology to the First Nations Stolen Generations. | Nadia Wheatley, an Australian author famous for her picture book <i>My place</i> which traces the waves of migration in Australia by examining one local place shared by all protagonists across time. |
| <i>Why I love Australia</i><br><br>Bronwyn Bancroft (2010)   | Picture book       | Double page syntagms illustrating places in Australia. Accompanied by lyrical descriptions often in the form of an extended noun group such as:<br><i>‘Waves that pound beaches and make patterns with driftwood and shells.’</i>               | Bronwyn Bancroft is an Indigenous artist, illustrator and scholar.   |

**Figure 3.** Literature selected by participant teachers to support the development of identity texts.

Historical recount and picture book analysis activities (Figure 3) in the unit were designed to help students develop and articulate understanding of a text’s power. They did this by exploring the ways in which the text represents a particular perspective on the world—a perspective shaped by the author’s context, the author’s stylistic choices, the purpose for creating the text, as well as the context of the reader responding to the text. Analysis of the teachers’ text selection showed that they provided a range of perspectives, which, while naturally limited, encapsulate the origins of Australia in the colonising of the original First Nations and the resulting waves of migration from Britain and other countries around the world. Working with these texts represented thirdspace innovation for the teachers, as both the texts and the perspective-focused approach were new territory for the teachers.

The purposely selected texts included two by Indigenous Australian authors: *Why I love Australia* by Bronwyn Bancroft [15] and excerpts from the poem *Stories* by Lionel Fogarty. The latter was read alongside the poem ‘My Country’ by Dorothea Mackellar to provide two very different perspectives. It is important that the Indigenous author of *Why I love Australia*, Bronwyn Bancroft, was included, as the text provides an insight into why a

minority First-Nation person loves Australia as she shows there is already a gap between her perspective and mainstream perceptions about Australia—a wide enough gap to invite others to share their perspectives. The stories in *Australians All* also provided students with further contextual information about the groups of people who have made their homes in Australia and help form contemporary Australian society.

### 3.3.2. Imagining New Perspectives: Literary Texts That Value Identity

Central to the development of identity texts were rich experiences with quality literary texts. The unit of work site documents show that teachers worked collaboratively to design a range of literacy-based activities that would enable students to:

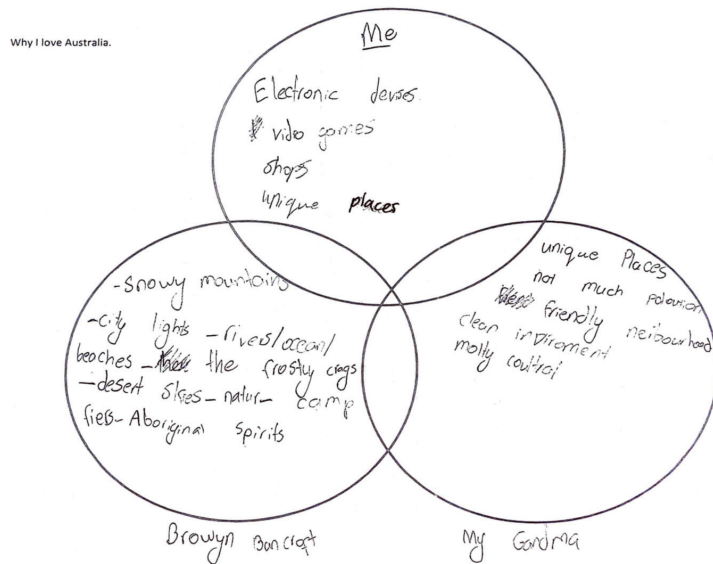
- (a) Engage with stories from their own lives and language backgrounds, for example: interviewing family members and creating readers' theatre from family stories.
- (b) Read and engage critically with literary texts: *What aspects of Australia/Australian life does the author tell us about? What aspects are selected for praise? How does the author show us they like/dislike aspects of Australia/Australian life? Do I agree with the author's perspective? Is the author's Australia the same as/different to my Australia?*
- (c) Write a poem that redesigns one or more of the literary texts about Australia. In preparation, students respond to the prompt 'X, my home ...'. Students were given the option of employing the poetry scaffold 'X is like ... , Y is like ...' developed by Kenneth Koch in his book *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* [65] or appropriate stylistic patterns from one of the literary texts they had studied.

When lesson tasks from the teaching programs were mapped against the 'Supportive strategies for multilingual classrooms' (Figure 2), analysis identified that a suite of arts-based EAL/D targeted strategies was also implemented to support reading of the literary texts, scaffold movement from spoken to written on the mode continuum and facilitate the design-redesign process in response to the literary texts about Australia. Data from the teacher focus group reflections support this finding. Creative pedagogy that was utilised included: (i) Walk in Role: where students represent the emotions of a character as they "walk" in role as the character and answer questions from class members [66] and (ii) Advance/Detail I which a student (Teller) tells a story from their life in Australia and their partner (Listener) can say 'Advance' to encourage the Teller to move ahead in the story or say 'Detail' to invite the Teller to provide additional detail about the people/events being described [66]. Teacher L reflected in the following way: "... 'Advance Detail' ... it just got them to have that discussion and then increase the information they were putting in, utilizing the language that they had spoken by getting their partner to scribe exactly what they said".

Cognitive challenge is evident in students' preparation for their production of the identity text poems. Students constructed Venn diagrams mapping three perspectives, namely, that of the student, the author of one of the texts the student had read in class, and a family/community member the student had interviewed. The task prompted students to identify the aspects of Australia the author and family member chose to represent and then articulate their own perspective. Stage 2 student Nemaan's representation of three perspectives (self, Bancroft and grandma) in Figure 4 is representative of the patterning identified in the participants' Venn diagrams with the three perspectives being largely distinct.

The representations created using the prompt 'Why I love Australia' draw attention to the alignment and differences between the three perspectives and validate the students' perspective alongside that of a published author and a respected family or community member. It is a high-challenge task (Figure 2). The differences in choice of elements being listed demonstrates student autonomy and independence of voice and a keen imagining of new perspectives.





**Figure 4.** Different perspectives Venn diagram: preparation for redesign of Bancroft's text.

The main text that was used to develop the poems below was Bronwyn Bancroft's *Why I love Australia*. The Indigenous perspective Bancroft provides starts with the land, and in the rich text she offers both verbal and visual descriptions of scenes from Australian cities and country. The redesign was foregrounded by the students' perspectives of Australia which focused on local places, family and community and the poem was shared with class members and family. Writing the poem thus enacts the authentic text and real-world task dimension of the Supportive Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms framework (Figure 2). Students were able to appropriate vocabulary, structure and grammatical features to describe their own towns or aspects of Australia that they love. Bancroft often uses just an extended noun group to describe an image in her book, and students borrowed this and other sentence structures to write their own poems. The Stage 2 participants are all aged 8 or 9 years old, and many have only their limited experiences on which to draw. Nonetheless, the lyrical qualities of the original text are obvious in students' redesigns. Typed versions of Eal's and Nabel's handwritten poems are provided below.

'Lebanon my home'

*The Lebanon breeze is like a smooth and untouchable flowing storm.*

*The loud music of drum beats banging and clicking across the city town of Tripoli..*

*The enormous and deafening waves splashing and roaring along the chikka beaches . . .*

*The green Cedar trees standing confident with cheer and pride!*

*The mixed blends of tasty Kafaneh squeezing freshly into your mouth with a crunch, crunch, crunch...*

(Eal Stage 2)

'Australia my heart'

*In Australia our fireworks go Kaboom, Kaboom, Kaboom from our spectacular Harbour Bridge*

*Sparkling glitter down the midnight sky every year.*

*Colourful bright rides at Kuna Park looks like diamonds shining (sic) between my brown eyes*

*The billowing waves crushing on the wet golden soft sand*

*Kangaroos hopping, hopping, hopping with their joeys in their pouches.*

(Nabel, Stage 2)

Allowing students to draw from their personal experiences but scaffolding their efforts to express their ideas during the redesign process, generated creative responses that value identity and first languages but also enact the creative use of English. This is exemplified by the excerpts in the Figure 5 analysis. The poems have been annotated to identify figurative elements from Bancroft's text that have been remade in the students' identity text poems.

| Poem   | Analysis of the redesign  |
|--|---|
| <p>'My Country' (Ciwa)<br/>Fiji is <u>like a strong warrior</u>.<br/>Full of great and polite people, ...</p> <p>'My Country' (Kadisha)<br/>Lebanon is <u>like beautiful birds that tweet</u>.<br/><i>The freezing snow that falls from the sky,</i><br/><i>The beautiful Bayrot filled with lits (sic) of places.</i><br/>...</p> <p>'Lebanon my home' (Latif)<br/>The Lebanon breeze is <u>like a smooth and untouchable flowing storm</u>.<br/><i>The loud live music of drum beats banging and clicking across the city town of Tripoli.</i><br/><i>The enormous and deafening waves splashing and roaring along the chikka beaches. ...</i></p> | <p>Use of <u>simile</u>.<br/><i>Extended noun groups with adjectival clause re-made from Bancroft's text.</i></p>   |
| <p>'Waves' (Idris)<br/>Rough <u>waves pounds</u> the <u>beaches</u> smelling like salty (sic) fresh fish.<br/>Glittering, shiny see-through ocean stalking.<br/>Foreigners tasting disgusting salty water.<br/>Excited kids <u>making patterns with shells</u> as a big tsunami wave splashes on them.<br/>The waves sprints and spreads across the shore. People scream and runs (sic) to safety.</p>   | <p><i>Vocabulary</i> and structure of the descriptive statement appropriated directly from Bancroft's text but used for a different purpose – to describe summer in Australia.</p>  |
| <p>'Afghanistan my home' (Husna)<br/>Bright green juicy fruit trees, standing strong and free across the grasslands happy to be here.</p>  | <p>Extended noun group:<br/><i>Bright green juicy fruit trees = Adjectives + Noun ... standing strong and free across the grasslands = Adjectival clause</i><br/>Statement about the author's feelings:<br/>... happy to be here.<br/>As in the text the subject and the verb are omitted "I am..."</p> <p>Vocabulary and structure of the descriptive statement taken directly from Bancroft's text for example:<br/>Extended noun group describing an image, here in the student's mind rather than on the page.<br/>Followed by a statement about the author's feelings.</p> |
| <p>'My home' (Bilal)<br/>The cold and glowing Arz snowfields where the laughter of kids are heard as they slide down the hill tops.<br/>The chirpy and energetic shop keepers blarring (sic) out 'yalla, yalla' to the locals.<br/>The beautiful and peaceful city of Tripoli filled with laughter and joy.<br/>Corner shops open round the clock and shopkeepers shouting 'Uhlán wa Sahlan' meaning welcome in as they do business....</p>  | <p>Translanguaging - use of students' first language</p>  |

**Figure 5.** Analysis of the of the identity text poems created during the redesign process.

### 3.3.3. Promoting Improved Understanding of and Relationships with Others: Identity Texts and Translanguaging Space

One of the ways that student agency was developed in this project was by encouraging students to choose the country they would write about. The range of choices of the sixteen texts produced were: Australia (6), Afghanistan (2), Fiji (2), Lebanon (5), Iraq (1). While the written text of Bancroft's *Why I love Australia* is brief, the language used is complex and

the visual images are rich and engaging. *Why I love Australia* (Bancroft) [15] and showcases beautiful illustrations and the evocative imagery of the written text. A comparison with the students' poems demonstrates the extent to which the students have appropriated the language patterns and other stylistic elements of Bancroft's literary text to represent their relationship with their chosen country and the people that inhabit the various landscapes they describe.

The thirdspace learning for the teachers was through the process of designing a complex task and by also providing a scaffold in the selection of a complex literacy text which students redesigned. Analysing the students' texts showed development of literacy in the use of grammatical features and the structure of the poems as well as a keen awareness of audience in that they include descriptions aimed at painting evocative pictures of their chosen landscape, including the utterances and people that symbolise the various dimensions of their community.

The data demonstrate that the redesign process empowered students as experts and brought about shifts in how they were positioned relative to others in their classroom. Clear about the purpose of their texts, the students took on the role of teacher in translating for an audience who did not share their own unique cultural and linguistic repertoires. Teachers reported that informal student–student and class level dialogue occurred about similarities and differences across languages and countries. Also evident was a keen sense of the need to explain 'difference' and the confidence to acknowledge and articulate this. This articulation of difference is exemplified in Bilal's poem: 'Corner shops open round the clock and shopkeepers shouting *'Uhlan wa Sahlan'* meaning *welcome in* as they do business'. Similarly, Daoud and Araceli use the very rhythm of Bancroft's text as well as some of the rich metaphors, such as "*chattering under rooftops*" but redesign it to give their own unique representation of their urban homes. Daoud's "*slow tyres driving by*" and the touching sense of safety in a home that is "*like a candle in the dark*".

'My town'

*Rows of trees with their vibrant leaves going side to side.*

*Chattering under rooftops, bang the balls, pound the bright yellow fence.*

*Red lava lights, slow tyres driving by, ticking blinkers going right and left.*

*A beautiful double story (sic) home with comfort like a candle in the dark.*

(Daoud, Stage 2)

References to family, home languages and elements of community are indicative of a translanguaging space beyond the immediate self and focused on human dimensions of the Australian landscape, such as neighbourhood, multiculturalism, safety and the concept of home. For instance, Rebuz' description of the local neighbourhood constructs a powerful auditory evocation of the town. "The chirpy and energetic shop keepers blaring (sic) out 'yalla, yalla' to the locals". Similarly, in Araceli's poem, several famous Sydney landmarks are selected and presented as accumulative symbols of the exciting, vibrant lifestyle associated with 'Australia my country'.

*... The cold and glowing Arz snowfields where the laughter of kids are heard as they slide down the hill tops.*

*The chirpy and energetic shopkeepers blaring out "Yalla, yall" to locals.*

*The beautiful and peaceful city of Tripoli filled with laughter and joy.*

*Corner shops open round the clock and shopkeeper shouting "Uhlan wa Sahlan" meaning welcome in as they do business.*

(Rebuz, Stage 2)

'Australia my country'

*The superb Blue Mountains filled with adventure.*

*Mayhem on the streets of Luna Park as everyone rushes to their favourite rides like hurricanes.*

*Multiple shopping areas at every station crowded with shops and people.*

*Melodic, thundering music filling the Opera house like elephants trumpeting in an echoey cave*

*'Brr, Brr, Brr' . . .*

*The billowing salty waves crash on the scorching sand as cool as it's dangerous at the beach.*

*Australia my country.*

(Araceli, Stage 2)

In a translanguaging space, use of home language(s) is always optional, with students invited to choose from their linguistics repertoire as desired. Whilst the work sample data show that most students used translanguaging for emphasis, characterisation, and verisimilitude, one teacher noted evidence of subtractive bilingualism in play in that a few students opted not to add in their home language "because they felt really, really embarrassed [of their knowledge of their home language]".

The translanguaging space is both a challenge to monolingual classroom practices and a conduit for developing student agency and this is highlighted in the annotated excerpts in Figures 5 and 6. The evidence is seen in students translating for their audience, demonstrating the seamless use of linguistic repertoires and the development of language and literacy in English. Bancroft describes place and physical locations in Australia, and this scaffold is then used and redesigned, resulting in unusual comparisons that create a strong sensory description of the spaces students have selected to share in their poems, excerpts of which are in Figure 6.

| Poem   | Analysis of the redesign   |
|--|--|
| <p>'My Country' (Ciwa)<br/>Fiji is like a strong warrior,<br/>Full of great and polite people, ...</p> <p>'My Country' (Kadisha)<br/>Lebanon is like beautiful birds that tweet,<br/>The freezing snow that falls from the sky,<br/>The beautiful Bayrot filled with lits (sic) of places. ...<br/>Lebanon my home (Latif)<br/>The Lebanon breeze is like a smooth and untouchable flowing storm.<br/>The loud live music of drum beats banging and clicking across the city town of Tripoli.<br/>The enormous and deafening waves splashing and roaring along the chikka beaches. ...</p> | <p>In these examples the students' redesign of the original text has involved them striving to create evocative descriptions of their landscape so their audience can 'see' the students' world</p>  |
| <p>'Waves' (Idris)<br/>Rough waves pounds the beaches smelling like saltey (sic) fresh fish.<br/>Glittering, shiny see-through ocean stalking.<br/>Foreigners tasting disgusting salty water.<br/>Excited kids making patterns with shells as a big tsunami wave splashes on them.<br/>The waves sprints and spreads across the shore.<br/>People scream and runs (sic) to safety.</p>   | <p>Bancroft describes place, physical locations in Australia, and this scaffold is used to encourage unusual comparisons that create a strong sensory description of the spaces the student has selected to share in the poem.</p>   |
| <p>'My home' (Bilal)<br/>The cold and glowing Arz snowfields where the laughter of kids are heard as they slide down the hill tops.<br/>The chirpy and energetic shop keepers blarring (sic) out 'yalla, yalla' to the locals.<br/>The beautiful and peaceful city of Tripoli filled with laughter and joy.<br/>Corner shops open round the clock and shopkeepers shouting 'Uhlani wa Sahlan' meaning welcome in as they do business....</p>   | <p>Translanguaging - use of the first language challenging monolingual classroom practices.<br/>The translation 'Uhlani wa Sahlan' meaning 'welcome' demonstrates the seamless use of the student's two languages to articulate meaning. The home language is used to create verisimilitude in reproduced dialogue. 'The chirpy and energetic shop keepers blarring (sic) out 'yalla, yalla' to the locals'.<br/>Appropriation of the repetition employed in the literary text is in evidence and used creatively by the student to construct their representation of the country they are describing.</p> |

Figure 6. Analysis of the evocative descriptions in the students' identity text poems.

Data from the teacher focus group also reinforce the above shifts towards an improved understanding of and relationships with others. For example, “I heard stories I hadn’t heard before . . . it gave me a background into who they are and what they experienced” (Teacher D).

When reporting these results, we acknowledge the limitations of this study in that we are reporting case study data from one site of a larger professional learning program and from a relatively small sample size from a specific research setting. The presence of rich, thick description, however, allows researchers and educators to make decisions about generalisability to other early years settings. Overall, the findings from our research conducted in one low SES EAL/D school show that disruption of firstspace thinking and pedagogy can be achieved through the thirdspace redesign of purposefully selected literary texts. The identity texts focused unit of work developed by the teachers following a period of professional learning, supported the: development of textual knowledge regarding how readers might be positioned by a text, supported teachers to employ creative strategies to foster talk in preparation for writing, and created opportunities to value students’ language and backgrounds.

#### 4. Discussion

This article has focused on the extent to which professional learning about identity texts in the translanguaging space [52,53] led to changes in classroom practice that created space for the identities and languages of EAL/D learners to be valued and shared. The professional learning supported teachers to make judicious use of quality Australian literature that offered unique representations of Australia, and then develop lessons that invite students to analyse the texts and explore their perspectives of Australia in relation to the perspectives of others [61]. The project was framed by socio-spatial theory [50,51] in that it sought to mediate the everyday routines of the first space (busy, monolingual focused learning) and the ideals of the secondspace (policy acknowledgement of diversity and high-stakes testing pressures) to facilitate thirdspace, innovative practice. Teachers reframed teaching and learning in subject English so students could work in the translanguaging space, where creativity and criticality are embraced [52,53]. Janks’ Redesign Cycle [54] informed the innovative practice, with teachers supporting students to move from analysis (unmaking/deconstructing Bancroft’s text), through the redesign process (reconstructing/remaking Bancroft’s text), to the design and construction of each student’s poem. New perspectives of self and others [57] were able to be generated through unmaking and remaking Bancroft’s picture book *Why I Love Australia*. By considering whose story is being told and how the story is being assembled the students were able to explore notions of power and demonstrated this by identifying both shared and distinctive perspectives [54,57]. In reconstructing Bancroft’s text and bringing their experiences, linguistic repertoire and identity to the fore, students challenged the narrative offered in the Bancroft text and were empowered to imagine and articulate new perspectives.

Our analysis of site documents, student work artefacts, and teacher focus group reflection data reveals that the collaborative professional learning on identity texts supported teachers to make resource and pedagogical selections that created rich opportunities to develop students’ understandings about literature written in English and supported the development of literacy and language. As has been reported elsewhere [2,6,12,25,41,67], the outcome was students’ improved understanding of their own and others’ language and cultural backgrounds. The texts analysed in class not only prompted a valuing of student agency and voice by encouraging students to express their own perspectives on their country, but also valued the student’s linguistic and cultural repertoire [6,7,12,18,53]. For marginalised students such as those in this project, this empowerment prompted the use of fresh imagery to depict their worlds as evidenced in their identity texts. Literary texts were appropriated as a scaffold in this project, which most of these young EAL/D learners needed, but through this process their unique voices were amplified. Participating teachers reported that their students were engaged and empowered by a learning environment

(translanguaging space) and process (redesign cycle), which allowed them to tell their own stories [6,42]. Participating teachers designed learning in ways that gave their students opportunities to make a direct connection between their family and their school. Students canvassed family and community members about their perspectives and compared it to the texts that they encountered at school, thus achieving the project's secondspace aim to foster connections with community.

For the educators in this project, recognising the firstspace, the space of everyday routines and practice was the initial step. The educators wanted to develop the literacy of their students and were aware of the disadvantages their students face [but monolingual practices which solely focus on the development of English language and literacy had been commonly accepted as the best way to support students. This monolingual focus on acquiring English, however, does not recognise the complex interrelated nature of students' linguistic repertoires [2,39,41,47,53] nor make use of the family or community as sources of knowledge [49]. Creating a translanguaging space is an innovation as it directly challenges educator's concept of the monolingual, monocultural Australian classroom [39,46,47,49,67] as the only space to develop English literacy and language in the early years.

Prior to the project, the educators had experienced a reluctance to employ creative EAL/D pedagogy due to time constraints, minimal knowledge of appropriate strategies and a lack of support in developing translanguaging as part of normal classroom routines. After professional learning on creating identity texts in the translanguaging space, teachers in this study felt more confident to challenge firstspace and secondspace pressures relating to high-stakes testing and English-only literacy. They were able to create space for their early years EAL/D students' languages and identities to be valued and shared. The outcomes reported in this study bode well for the future work of these teachers engaged in supporting the literacy development of early years learners. Follow-up research is, however, required to establish the extent to which the new practices become teachers' habitus. Overall, the findings invite educators working in early years settings to reshape their practice to create a literature-focused translanguaging thirdspace that fosters students' creativity and shapes improved understanding of self, others and the world.

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Article

# Engaging Methods for Exploring ‘Funds of Identity’ in Early Childhood Contexts

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**Abstract:** Globalisation has contributed to increasing diversity with children and families, bringing multiple languages and cultures into early childhood settings around the world. While this has enhanced our settings, research suggests that educators are struggling to find ways to support children’s learning and development in super diverse contexts. Standardised curriculum and pedagogy have complicated matters by suggesting that all children can achieve the same outcome if given the same program. Failing to recognize and acknowledge the complexity of teaching and learning in diverse settings leads to practices that position children and their families as deficient, viewing children and families based on what they lack rather than building from their strengths. In this manuscript we look through the theoretical lenses of funds of knowledge and funds of identity. The two constructs are brought together to explore how innovative, creative arts-based methods from two different research projects in ECE settings across Australia and Chile made children and families’ funds of knowledge and funds of identity visible and potentially impacted learning, participants’ perspectives, and community engagement in these diverse settings. We offer evidence of the ways arts-based methods promoted creativity and agency for all participants in and across both early learning contexts.

**Keywords:** funds of knowledge; language; identity; community engagement

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## 1. Introduction

In the last decades, children and families from different economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds have continued to enrich educational settings. Global technological developments have also precipitated a paradigm shift in all aspects of life and in educational practice, influencing the ways very young children learn and make meaning. This has prompted governments around the world to realize the importance of the early period of their citizens’ lives and, correspondingly, the significance of early years education. The vibrancy and dynamism of early childhood settings requires new ways of thinking, and a move towards curriculum and pedagogy that recognizes and acknowledges the complexity of teaching, learning and assessment in our globally diverse settings. This begins with recognizing what children and families bring to the classroom, and building on their strengths rather than starting with what they might lack. Failing to recognize young peoples’ evolving capacities and identities and the diverse ways of knowing being and doing they bring to classrooms leads to practices that position children and their families as deficient.

Scholars and educators across contexts agree that Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a critical time for children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic learning and development [1,2]. Recent research reveals that approaches that consider and incorporate the strengths of communities are of critical importance in early learning and raise critical questions about the role of language and identity in nurturing children’s holistic development in early childhood contexts. Correspondingly, curriculum and teaching that affirms and builds on young peoples’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds and identities

have shown to have a positive impact on learning and teaching (see for example, [3–8]). A well-established tradition of play-based pedagogies underpins teaching and learning in many early childhood settings; this has contributed to the emergence of a growing body of research that centres on using arts-based methods to harness young peoples' knowledges. Arts-based approaches involve young people in making meaning in different ways, and these new and innovative pedagogies are transforming learning experiences across the curriculum [9,10].

In this paper, we draw on the theoretical perspectives of “Funds of Knowledge” [11] and “Funds of Identity” [12] to revisit research undertaken in different ECE settings, in Australia and Chile. In the Australian early years school-based research, communities were super diverse, where between 70–99% of the school population were speakers of languages other than English. In Chile, the research was conducted in early learning centres, located in communities experiencing high levels of poverty and where families were not engaged in their children's learning. While the constituent communities for each of the studies were different, our aim in this paper is to explore the ways creative arts-based methods were mobilised across these key transitional educational phases. We analyse the ways arts-based methods made funds of knowledge and funds of identity visible across these diverse contexts. We are influenced by Freire's [13] notion of learners as knowledge generators, rather than knowledge receptacles, and the contention that education is broader than schooling. Mindful of the different characteristics of participants in each context, “Funds of Knowledge” and “Funds of Identity” [12] are brought together to analyse the potential of arts-based methods to affect learning and classroom participation in each context, despite these differences, we consider how arts-based methods promoted creativity and agency for all participants across contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

A substantial body of research has demonstrated the important role families and communities' everyday experiences play in the creation of authentic learning opportunities. For example, ground-breaking work by Rogoff and colleagues [14], has described how young people learn by observing, listening, and collaborating in shared tasks. Sociocultural theory contends that children learn through informal, everyday interactions and these experiences are the reservoir from which children draw to develop more complex conceptual knowledge for later learning [15]. Funds of Knowledge [16], a key framing for this research is defined as the bodies of knowledge which underpin everyday life. These encompass multiple dimensions, cognitive and applied knowledges, beliefs, skills, and understandings and practices. While much ethnographic research has revealed these rich reservoirs, particularly in non-dominant communities, they can frequently go unacknowledged in educational contexts. Yet, curriculum and learning experiences that build on and extend the existing knowledges of diverse children, families, and communities continues to evolve in ECE settings. This work is underpinned by social justice concerns, and a desire to understand how children's and families' funds of knowledge and understandings can position learners at the core of educational practice, and thereby enhance educational equity for all students and communities.

Creativity and play are at the heart of global early years learning, this is an established concept, particularly in contexts before formal schooling settings, where fostering children's curiosity, imagination, and creativities [17] take centre stage. In these contexts, play offers children a way to explore, represent, and express themselves, and the world that they inhabit, using diverse avenues of expression and representation, this often includes the application of innovative arts-based approaches. Two distinct types of play commonly appear in the literature, free or child-directed play and teacher-directed play; these are fundamental tenets of early learning practice. Research highlights the important role of the educator in play, educators consolidate and extend learning through micro interactions that scaffold children's exploration, stimulates their thinking, and enriches their learning [18]. This proves most effective when educators are familiar with children's family contexts and

practices, and learning is connected to scenarios about which children have knowledge. It also facilitates connections between the children's learning and their families, as families see their knowledges being used as resources for learning [19,20]. Play based pedagogies have also grown in popularity across school contexts, garnering interest from educators across grades. Brice Heath [21] however, notes that play, and in particular play for learning, has gradually been influenced by the proliferation of technology. Brice Heath contends that technology has had a significant influence on changing the nature of play, particularly for mainstream middle class children, by taking the emphasis off face to face and social and imaginative play, and towards technological engagement. In this regard, it is crucial to recognize the interdependence of play, social class, and economic access, as evidence suggests disadvantaged and marginalized families often having less access to these resources.

Yet multimodal communication holds a central place in free play or child directed play, especially in the early years. Young children demonstrate wide ranging capacities that include accompanying language with creating, drawing, imagining and embodied practices, such as for example, movement and dance. These enacted and embodied practices enable children to "play at being and doing" [21]. Building on this notion, arts-based pedagogies have been shown to illuminate children's ways of being, knowing and doing while enhancing their learning and development across contexts. Ewing [22] contends that the arts are fundamental to the learning of all young people and argues that engagement in the arts shapes thought and activity. Evidence suggests, emerging methodologies and pedagogical approaches are assisting educators in supporting children's communication, confidence, participation, inclusion, and identity [4,22]. Over the last decades much empirical sociocultural and ethnographic research has focused on understanding more about the contexts of children's everyday lives. Recent research has focused on capturing children's own perspectives on their lives, particularly in high poverty and culturally and linguistically diverse contexts [23–25].

The sustained move away from conducting research on children, to researching with children in social science has positioned young people in both early years settings and formal school settings as legitimate knowers and experts in their own lives. Danby and Farrell [26] argue that very young children are "competent interpreters of their everyday worlds" (p. 35), expressing themselves with insight and nuanced meaning. These evolving approaches are supporting educators to connect to and develop rich relationships with families and communities. Researching with children continues to incorporate a wide range of embodied practices such as those discussed above, and more recently includes technology and the production of multimodal artefacts, including but not limited to, video diaries, photography and mapping exercises [27,28]. These methods are facilitating didactic teaching approaches for engaging with the funds of knowledge of students, their families and the wider community in increasingly, innovative and creative ways.

Cummins' Identity texts, [29] for example, encompass an acknowledgement and exploration of students' linguistic lives through creative work or performances. Similarly, work by Martin [30] engaged young children aged 6–7 and older, in creating coloured silhouettes as ways to represent their languages in settings where over 19 nationalities were represented. Digital cameras have been used with young people as young as three years old to explore their life- worlds—at home and in the community [18,31]. In this research, the use of cameras had wide ranging effects including establishing and strengthening relationships with families and communities and offering tangible prompts for a range of language learning experiences. Research by Kervin and Mantei [32] undertaken with 4–5-year-olds, captured children's understandings of their prior to school community, and themselves as part of that community. Researchers found children's choice of images and annotations provided insight into their perspectives of rules, routines and home experiences within the centre setting. In this research, digital story telling, became a powerful means of self-expression, enabling students to express themselves, their understandings of the world and their sense of belonging. Arts-based methodologies offer the possibility of revealing emerging understandings of children's social worlds beyond the social worlds of adults.

We next turn to the theoretical framing that underpins this research and directs our thinking and analysis of the research findings.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Funds of Knowledge has proved a powerful concept for mobilising distinctive pedagogical approaches for teaching in non-dominant communities, for example in contexts where community languages are widely evident, where families have migrated from other countries and where children and families experience economic and social adversity. These resultant pedagogies are based on recognition of the knowledge and capacities that children have learned in their homes and communities. Ground-breaking research conducted by Moll et al. [15] in Latino communities in which researchers observed and recorded family knowledges and then worked with educators to realise a curriculum that acknowledged the cultural assets in children's homes, is well documented. Moll et al. [15] use the term 'funds of knowledge' to refer to those 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being' (p. 133), pertaining to 'social, economic, and productive activities of people' (p. 139) in local communities. Adaptations of this approach in schools has ensured many educators know of the concept [33], although the theoretical underpinnings and deeper implications are less well understood across the education community. In Australia, the concept has mostly been taken up in research collaborations in secondary schools [33], although there are examples of its use in teacher education programs [11,34] and in early childhood contexts [35]. More recently the concept of 'funds of knowledge' has been elaborated and a new related concept 'funds of identities' promoted. The conceptualisation of funds of identity is underpinned by a recognition that not all identity work is undertaken in the family and that young people find other locations.

The overall aim of the Funds of knowledge project, in general, is to disrupt the deficit discourses that prevail which typically attribute educational underachievement to the cultural, economic and linguistic context of the children's lives. Adopting a funds of knowledge approach turns the focus to the knowledge, skills and languages and experiences that children have had as assets and rich resources for creating contextually relevant learning encounters. In this way, children see their lives out of school as having value. The intellectual and educational resources that they possess, potentially rendered invisible by mainstream curriculum and universalised educational practices, is explicitly linked to educational practices and fields of power, social class and ideology, and made more visible. This disruption of established hierarchies of codified knowledge can be viewed as opportunities to democratize knowledge through the public recognition of things families do and how they do them.

The concept of Funds of Identity is a more recent development that contributes to and expands the scope of theorising about the knowledge and skills that children possess that are potentially important resources for developing 'pedagogies of transformation' aimed at achieving educational justice for non-dominant children. The concept expands the scope of Funds of knowledge by recognising the lived experience of children beyond the home and family where they are exposed to and 'take-up' knowledges and resources that contribute to their developing unique-to-them 'funds of identity'. Esteban-Guitart and Moll describe how funds of identity are 'inscribed into artefacts—drawings, documents, images, tasks, etc., and transported throughout the different sites connected to a person's life trajectory [36]. The pedagogical implications are that educators and schools must look beyond families and homes for resources rich with potential for meaningful connection between young peoples' emerging identity and their learning.

In this paper, we use these theoretical frames to guide our analysis of the possible ways young peoples' funds of knowledge and funds of identity were revealed in school and centre based research. We consider the production of artefacts created by young people, and discuss the ways these methods mobilised learning, participation, and family engagement.

## 4. Materials and Methods

### 4.1. Study Context

In this paper, we revisit data from two larger studies conducted in Early Childhood Settings in Chile and Australia. In Australia, more than 21% of the population speak a language other than English at home [37]. In 2019, 51.3% of preschool students in New South Wales Government sites were from a Language Backgrounds Other than English (LBOTE) background. Australian data emerges from an 18-month ethnographic study conducted in schools located in Western Sydney, a socioeconomically, linguistically and culturally diverse region in New South Wales, Australia. This study combined ethnography with design research [38] to engage teachers as co-researchers and students as linguistic ethnographers of their own practices [39]. The study was funded by a state government education grant.

The data presented here emerges from two schools and three classrooms, a K-2 classroom and two Year 1 classes, gathered during 2 years of dedicated fieldwork in each site comprising twice-weekly classroom visits over 2–3 terms each year. Data included observations, field notes, student work samples, and audio-recorded lesson segments, and ongoing informal and informal student, teacher and community interviews. School 1, Urban School (all names are pseudonyms) is situated in a language-rich community, 99% of the students are speakers of languages other than English; over 35 languages are spoken by the school community. The participating K-2 class comprised students aged 5 and 6 and was designated as a reception or new-arrivals classes, created to offer a transitioning of students newly arrived in Australia to mainstream classrooms, the 29 students were classified as English as an additional language/dialect learners, (EAL/D). At school 2 Barra East 83% of the school population came from LBOTE backgrounds, the two, participating Year 1 classes, comprised of 56 students aged 6–7 who together spoke 29 languages and dialects other than English.

Inequity in education has been a persistent issue in Chile despite the increasing wealth of the country due to its rich mineral resources. A new era of resolve to address widespread poverty through enhanced provision of accessible, low cost and high quality early education was a significant element of the government strategy and provided the context in which the Chile based research was first undertaken. The research study wrapped around a 6 year project aimed at strengthening the quality of early childhood education and enhancing educational success for children living in circumstances of economic adversity. The research sites were early childhood education centres and preschools attended by children aged between 6 weeks and 5 years of age. The number of children enrolled at each site varied between 75 and 120. Developing resources and pedagogies that would increase family connection and involvement in their children's learning emerged as a priority. Led by an Australian university in a partnership involving the Chilean government, funding was provided through a private sector foundation.

This study included 20 early childhood centres across a wide geographical area of northern Chile involving more than 180 educators in professional learning and pedagogical support provided by the Australian university. The educators participated in a bespoke learning program of which Funds of Knowledge was a key conceptual element, together with play-based learning, literacy as a social practice, and practitioner research. Educators were encouraged to explore visual and creative methods as they developed pedagogies designed to address the program goals. Data was collected during fieldwork visits at the beginning, midpoint and conclusion of the action research cycles and comprised focus groups (families and educators), interviews (centre directors, centre mentors and supervisors), photographic methods and collection of artefacts. In this paper, we draw on data from 2 focus groups with families taken midway through the project, 3 director interviews also at the midpoint and 2 interviews with supervisors at the project completion. A key focus of the study was engaging families in their children's learning.

#### 4.2. Analysis

In this paper, we have revisited the research data above guided by the following research questions: How were children and communities' funds of knowledge and identity made visible in these projects? How and in what ways did this impact learning, participants' perspectives, and community engagement? Applying contrastive, thematic analysis [40] we looked through the lens of funds of knowledge and funds of identity, to answer the the research questions detailed above. We began by identifying key approaches/methods employed in these studies and applied further analysis to these methods/approaches to identify those that elucidated student and community knowledges. We identified 6 arts-based methods across the studies corpus and examined the ways these arts-based methods took up and used these knowledges. In the remainder of the paper, we present the findings of this analysis, we detail the identified methods with attention to the ways these methods began to facilitate learning, and community engagement and worked to change participants' perspectives.

### 5. Results

Making funds of knowledge and identity visible and impacting learning.

#### 5.1. Children as Researchers

Engaging students as researchers in the Australian research was an approach that aimed to support teachers in learning from and with their students. This began with teachers and students studying themselves and the ways they were talking, listening, reading, writing and viewing, in one or more languages inside and outside of school. In groups of three to seven, children used audio recorders to interview each other, and collect information about their language and literacies practices, when, where, and with whom they were speaking, learning and translating, across settings, in online environments, and while participating in embodied, cultural practices. Support from multilingual others, advanced same language partners, community language teachers, parent volunteers and bilingual teacher's aides enabled this to be undertaken in children's first languages if required. In a series of highly scaffolded lessons, children, compiled their data using simple graphs, tables and wordles on class electronic boards.

Using this arts-based practice, young peoples' full linguistic repertoires were made visible, and these funds of knowledge and evolving funds of identity became the catalyst for a series of contextually relevant learning encounters that involved community others. Conceptual and linguistic knowledges were taken up and extended in instruction across subject areas, this included for example, using the information they collected to generate data displays in math, and to develop vocabulary and comprehension by creating multilingual word walls and bilingual texts. The creation of these bilingual resources involved ongoing community participation and young people continued to reveal to themselves and to their teachers what they knew and could do. This method enabled student knowledges to not only be visible, but centred them in everyday instruction, in this way showcasing some of the resources that students used to construct their identities and define themselves [41].

#### 5.2. Language Mapping

A second identified arts-based method developed in this context was language mapping [39]. This involved students in creating visual representations of their practices and experiences. Using A4 paper and a range of colouring materials or drawing apps, children visually represented their linguistic and communicative life worlds. This offered an alternative form of expression particularly for English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners who could communicate and present to themselves, to each other, and to their teachers, a vast range of complex cultural and linguistic knowledges not easily revealed within school. Analysis revealed the method supported students in illuminating the important funds of knowledge in their lives, for example they included their families, community networks and transnational experiences in maps. Funds of iden-

tity were highlighted in the inclusion of symbols that represented community affiliations and cultural practices such as for example, the inclusion of flags and places of worship, music notes and dance poses. Animals and symbols linked to Aboriginal culture appeared in some maps along with symbols used to represent broader interests, membership and networks, this included for example, sports equipment, technology, friends and family and others in the school community. Illustrations showcased connections between funds of knowledge and developing identities, maps offered creative opportunities for students to define themselves. As Esteban-Guitart and Moll suggest funds of identity are 'inscribed into artefacts—drawings, documents, images, tasks, etc., and transported throughout the different sites connected to a person's life trajectory [41]. Maps helped to reveal the lived experience of children beyond the home and family knowledges and also highlighted resources that contributed to young peoples' developing and unique 'funds of identity'.

Here, too, authentic learning experiences were facilitated, maps prompted engagement in role play, for example roleplaying translating experiences which prompted discussion of communicating and translating for others. Children used iPads to audio record themselves discussing their maps. Teachers used these recordings, as language assessment tasks, recordings in home languages were reviewed with support from bilingual others and used as a prompt for writing tasks. Students revealed information previously unknown to teachers, maps detailed for example, enhanced linguistic capacity, Aboriginality, and high stakes translation experiences. Individual maps and recordings were shared with peers and family members, which led to the addition of more information and the display of maps across each school. Placing linguistic funds of knowledge and identity at the centre of teaching and learning, generated engagement for all participants, as one parent expressed: 'we are excited about this, our children are talking about our language and want to learn more'.

### 5.3. Bilingual Storytelling

Analysis revealed this method continued to make the complex, cultural, and linguistic knowledges of families and communities visible. Parents and/or grandparents, teachers, students, and principals, engaged in dual language book reading [42] in multiple languages (including for example, Italian, Arabic, Hindi, Mandarin, Dari, Farsi, and Russian). This included simultaneously reading page by page, with the teacher reading in English and guest reader in another language. Many parents were willing guest readers, but those unable or reluctant to read in home languages, enlisted older siblings, other family members, community leaders and friends, revealing a strong desire for their funds of knowledge and subsequently identity to be revealed. Parent participation went beyond story reading to include for example learning encounters in history, calligraphy, bread making, dance, music, video production, zoology and gardening. Families co-constructed learning encounters with teachers, validating and integrating their knowledge and experience and building relationships.

Authentic learning experiences continued to evolve, as all participants created bilingual books in several languages that became resources for language learning. Multilingual fairy tales were audio recorded and used to support reading comprehension. Multilingual books and resources were purchased for weekly bilingual reading sessions. Classrooms became sites for negotiation of learning, particularly important in contexts where many families are adjusting to new places and interacting in new spaces. While teachers cannot be expected to master all their students' languages to engage in meaningful learning, this arts-based methods enabled them to identify and draw on the linguistic and social funds of knowledge and identities of students and families and this facilitated affective learning and engagement for all participants.

### 5.4. Chilean Research

In the Chile based research, the initial focus for working with a funds of knowledge approach was on strengthening families' connection to their children's learning in the early learning centres. This reflected strong research evidence showing that when learning is contextualised and draws on and connects to lived realities, children in disadvantaged



circumstances experience improved educational trajectories [43]. All of the research sites were located in disadvantaged communities and safety concerns informed a taken-for-granted practice of locked doors and gates. These practices effectively alienated families from the lived experience of children's learning in the centre, mitigated against an exchange of information between staff and families and resulted in perceptions that parents and families were only welcome/present in the centre 'when there was trouble', as one parent reported in a focus group. Consequently, family knowledges were absent in a curriculum based primarily on the 'authorised knowledges' described in the formal curriculum documentation. Over time, the educators became more confident about their interpretation of what's fundamentally at stake in a funds of knowledge approach and developed innovative pedagogies designed to identify and engage with family and community knowledges, incorporating them in the curriculum. In our analysis, we identified methods that involved technology-enabled travelling media (cameras, recorders and journals), various arts-based technologies for gathering and sharing family information (Families' Literacies Tree) and dialogic community pedagogy such as The Literacy Café.

### 5.5. *Technology-Enabled Travelling Media*

Analysis revealed a method that included using travelling kits equipped with digital cameras, voice recorders and a journal enabled children to document family experiences at home and in their communities and allowed these experiences to be shared with educators and peers, using data projection. In this way, families and children became documenters and narrators of family life and the material produced became resources for curriculum. Educators provided suggestions to families about what they might document. These kits engendered enthusiastic responses amongst both families and the educators, with parents reporting them as a 'highly valued activity'. Educator fears of cameras not being returned weren't realised and this engendered increased trust amongst educators.

A reanalysis of focus group data and curriculum artefacts such as family and teacher made posters showed that this contributed to educators having a better understanding of what mattered to families. With family agreement, photo journals were produced and made available to the early learning community. Additionally, journals depicting children's learning in the centre were also made available for 'travelling' to families. Educators noted that these were provocations for families to start asking more questions and 'showing interest and involvement' in their children's learning. The use of technology enabled documentation of funds of knowledge through sharing family produced images and stories generated in home and community settings and this gave recognition and legitimacy to these knowledges and influenced a changed curriculum infused with images and experiences reflecting the lived experience of the children. Through this work, family roles were repositioned as contributors of curriculum knowledge 'in a process of democratic acknowledgment and redistribution of expertise' [18].

### 5.6. *Sharing Family Information—Families' Literacies Tree*

An identified method focused on sharing family information involved using creative arts-based activities such as painting, drawing and collage. Educators devised ways for families to contribute to community murals, installations and structures that facilitated the sharing of dreams, aspirations, activities, knowledge, resources, values and commitments of families to their children's education amongst the early learning community irrespective of their language and literacy capabilities. These also became powerful 'message-boards' that opened teachers to alternative views of how families valued education and their previously hidden interest in contributing to that learning. These pedagogical innovations created opportunities for parents to realise and proclaim themselves as contributors to children's learning. Many parents spoke of this in the focus groups, commenting how they had not previously thought they had much to contribute to their children's learning, and had not understood how day to day activities they performed in their home positively

contributed to that learning. This parent empowerment engendered their greater support and involvement in the early learning centres.

### 5.7. Literacy Café

A family engagement innovation known as the Literacy Café evolved in the project. These typically took the form of formal invitations to have coffee with the teachers and involved informal conversations about the children's interests and family life. The Literacy Café became ubiquitous amongst the participating research sites and remains a popular practice in various formats. Initially they were developed as a way of engaging family members, typically unused to interacting with educators, in conversations with them. The parents responded enthusiastically to these opportunities: 'fancy-me-? having a coffee with a teacher?', remarked one of the parents. Over time these opportunities for small groups of invited parents to join the educator in conversation grew to more substantive conversations where families shared knowledge and challenges, approximating a community of practice. Families commented on how they liked the opportunity of 'learning from each other'. Some centres reported that families advocated for these to be held more frequently. The encounters were often structured through the use of conversation cards with varying topics and themes and other times were open-ended. Carefully made using children's artwork, these conversation cards, provided a scaffold for the teachers to hear what mattered to families, facilitated parent to parent relationships and built trust. In some instances, educators transformed parents' knowledges and skills learned through these encounters into curriculum resources and activities in which some parents also became involved.

### 5.8. Community Engagement and Changed Perspectives

We found that in both research settings, these methods facilitated relationships with families to become more expansive, with communication more reciprocal and practices and routines changed to reflect a 'more symmetrical relationship' [15]. Families were repositioned as partners in their children's learning equipped 'with ample resources'. Routines that reflected entrenched hierarchical power relationships were dismantled, with families welcomed to enter the centres rather than remain outside the locked gates, and into classrooms to reimagine what counted as valued knowledge. New friendships groups and school networks emerged, in the Australian research many parents reported that children actively resisted speaking or learning home languages, but this began to change. They expressed their appreciation of these approaches as meaningful and valuable, it meant as one parent reported: 'being part of the school, in a way that really meant something'. Despite the reality of varying degrees of proficiency in one or more languages in classrooms, for example community participation and belonging are lost when everyday practices, skills and understandings are seen by teachers and young people as inferior to the practices and literacies valued in school. As one teacher in this study reported: 'They have learned so much but so have I'.

Analysis of both contexts revealed educators found the concept of funds of knowledge initially hard to imagine, yet they welcomed opportunities to gain more information about the children's families that they could use in the children's learning. Teachers expressed increased respect for families and stronger trust in their relationships. Emerging strategies challenged teachers' previous views of the families as having not much to offer their children and their learning. In both projects we found evidence of educators continuing to apply a critical and inquiring lens to their own ongoing practices. We do note that this required educators to become researchers of themselves, but most importantly, researchers of the community context of their students and collaborators with the children in the design of meaningful and contextually relevant learning. Through rescuing and honoring family knowledge gained through photo-documentation at home and in the community, established hierarchies of power and knowledge and the epistemic relationships families had with the early childhood educators were transformed [30].

Arts-based methods supported the development of different kinds of relationships, with educators describing how funds of knowledge had changed how they viewed parents differently, in a more positive way, in Chile they used the Spanish phrase ‘cambiar la mirada’ (changing how they see things) to express this. The literacy café created a dialogic space where established class boundaries and knowledge hierarchies between teachers and vulnerable families were disrupted, and teachers were able to learn about family and community knowledge and values. In both settings educators reported many ways that information shared in dialogic spaces has been used in planning for children’s learning and mobilized parent participation in the curriculum, in which individual funds of knowledge were made visible. Common across the two studies’ findings were educators changed positioning and perceptions of parents and families as an intellectual resource, as educators came to view them as competent people with social, linguistic, cultural, religious, and economic assets.

In the Australian research, interview data revealed that despite their best intentions, teachers’ understandings of student and community home languages and literacies were limited. Local and national policy contexts generated complexities, and tensions that shaped teachers’ and students’ views of students’ linguistic and cultural resources, especially as measured by standardized English assessment; these combined factors led student and community knowledges to be predominantly viewed through a deficit lens. Correspondingly, the Chilean study revealed that strategies intended to gather family funds of knowledge disrupted educators strongly held deficit views of families and opened pathways for multidirectional knowledge flows. The arts-based methods identified in these studies placed student and community knowledges at the centre of learning, in this way facilitating a coming together of funds of knowledge (family and community aspirations and practices) and evolving funds of identity. Identity constructions were facilitated through experiences, relationships and the production of artifacts that enabled young people, families and communities, opportunities to express, define and understand themselves in creative ways, and also offered teachers valuable insights into the lives and identities of their students and their communities. In both research studies, epistemic relationships were transformed [19] children’s identities as competent knowers were affirmed, and educators and the children themselves, realised their assets and resources and incorporated these in ongoing learning activities.

However, we are aware of the limitations of these studies, these include scale in the Australian study, and the inability to engage with educators beyond the 2-year study period to examine the sustainability of arts-based methods in future practice. We also acknowledge that these are classroom-based studies were conducted in specific contexts and as such may not be wholly generalizable across other contexts. Future research directions include ongoing work with teachers, and a further longitudinal study of arts-based methods, with attention to their contribution to culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogies taken up by students, teachers, and administrators across the transition between pre-school and early years schooling.

## **6. Conclusions**

In each study context, the desire for educators to learn about their students, families and communities and to use what was learned to make meaningful connections that would possibly enhance teaching and learning were common aims. While research settings were also distinctive, with one study focussed on early childhood classrooms and communities of linguistic diversity, and the other more focussed on family engagement, in the high poverty context, we found that many similarities between the two existed in our findings. The impact and outcomes for each were aligned, each contributing to greater equity and recognition of cultural knowledge and assets in the learning environment; in each setting, funds of identity were made visible and continued to evolve and evidence suggests student and teacher learning was enhanced. In both study contexts, the use of visual methods and arts-based pedagogies

elucidated 'epistemic divisions' [19], and constructions of families as potential knowers and repositories of important and useful knowledge were rendered visible.

The implications of these findings for early childhood educators are that arts-based methodologies can facilitate explorations of learners' practices and offer new ways to examine the nature of teaching and learning as an inclusive sociocultural activity that involves teachers, students and family and communities. In both studies, we found opportunities were provided for educators to reflect on how meanings were socially and culturally constructed and how they shaped and are shaped by the learning context. Transcripts from educators revealed changed perceptions and evidence of learning that enriched their practice. Rather than devaluing children's existing practices which Compton-Lily [44] suggests challenges children's identity and sense of belonging; in these studies children's identity and sense of belonging were amplified; knowledges, interests, and funds of identity were acknowledged and continued to evolve. Further implications for early childhood educators are that arts-based methods not only offer innovative ways for the knowledge, values and insights of all participants to be revealed but also, offer students' different ways of learning and talking about learning, thereby creating opportunities for increased equity in learning. Arts-based methodologies can put capabilities and 'authorised' knowledge in the background and allow children, families and educators to elevate and celebrate different knowledge and resources. Importantly, these studies reveal that arts-based methods offered educators the opportunity and challenge to move away from unitary identities as knowers and experts to a more complex and dynamic position as researchers of children, families and communities.

In each setting, learning was enhanced as children and community members began to recognize and value their own strengths, for example, their home languages and call on these in-service of classroom learning. We contend that arts-based methods employed in both settings, engaged teachers, students and community in authentic meaning making and identity exploration, processes that are essential and often forgotten aspects of learning. Across both studies, arts-based methods enabled educators, students and community to learn about and with each other. The resulting pedagogical innovations interrupted knowledge hierarchies related to gender, language, class, and power and led to more ambitious classroom projects either led by parents or in which they were collaborators, building stronger connections to their children's learning as identified above.

The centrality of student and community language and cultures in classroom instruction challenged deficit perspectives and were agentive for all participants. As Gonzalez purports, the early versions of the funds of knowledge approach suffered from a certain 'naiveté regarding the burdens under which teachers work' [11] and a lack of recognition of the ways in which young people create their own funds of knowledge and funds of identity in places independently of their family and outside the cultural boundaries of the home. In this paper, we see the nexus between the theoretical frameworks of funds of knowledge and funds of identity realized in educators employ of didactic teaching approaches for engaging with the funds of knowledge of students, their families, and the wider community. A collaborative space for the co-construction of learning was facilitated through the application of arts-based practices. Practices that offered new and innovative ways to validate student and community experiences and identities and continued to provide opportunities for evolving identities to be developed and revealed. In these studies, these two frameworks come together, as arts-based practices placed funds of knowledge at the centre of children's evolving identity construction and also continued to extend learner identities in each context.

As Moll & Gonzalez [45] suggest, when teachers and schools learn about families and communities change happens, and deficit perspectives can shift. In these studies, relationships were strengthened and the ways of being, belonging, and becoming were facilitated for children and families. We learnt that across the two studies, these multi-dimensional arts-based activities were strong enablers of making hitherto hidden knowledges and cultural assists visible and engendered further innovative educator practices that supported

young learners from diverse backgrounds. In using arts-based methodologies, children's and families capabilities and assets are reified and celebrated, and capacities or their lack in dominant languages and literacies become less obvious and important. This, in turn, contributes to establishing more equitable and democratic learning environments.

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Article

# Being with a Puppet: Literacy through Experiencing Puppetry and Drama with Young Children

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**Abstract:** Puppets have a long association with early childhood education and have played a much-loved role in children's learning and development. This paper tells the research story that investigated how the magical creature of a puppet facilitated connection, play, communication, and engagement with children who experience disability. We discovered how puppets can be combined with drama approaches and utilized in group activities for enabling literacy development by early childhood educators. In being with a puppet, adults found new 'ways' of supporting all children's interest, meaning making, and contribution to group learning experiences. Puppets were found to invite children into conversations, to encourage their expression and creativity, in a way that was uniquely their own. Educators found that being with a puppet supported their relationship with the children to one that was more playful and positive as it altered their perception of the children and their ability to recognize their non-verbal communication.

**Keywords:** puppetry; inclusion; early childhood; literacy

## 1. Introduction and Background

Puppets can play a special role in the lives of young children. Just like a favorite toy or doll, a puppet can take on any form (human, animal, or other creature) and be used to play, comfort, and make or express meaning [1]. A puppet is simply defined as an object, that can be brought to life through movement and voice by the puppeteer. Examples include marionettes, finger puppets, hand puppets, and puppets made from paper, cloth, or other found materials. In early childhood education, the focus of this study, puppets have been used to for children's play, social and emotional development, language, creativity, early literacy development [2–5], and to support inclusive practice and a sense of belonging [2].

Belonging was seen to be developed through the three-way relationship between educators, children, and the puppet [2,4]. In this relationship, the power dynamics and quality of communication were seen to change. Educators utilizing a puppet became more playful, less threatening, and able to easily form connections with the children. In puppet play, the children were more willing to share their interests and strengths, aspects of themselves that may otherwise not have been revealed. Educators faced with the tension between play-based learning that is co-constructed with children and the pressure of school readiness may find the puppet invaluable in planning for curriculum that meets the obligations of standardized learning outcomes and the uniqueness of every child [6,7]. One such curriculum area is literacy.

The definition of literacy in this study is consistent with the Early Years Learning Framework [8] (EYLF) (2000) and one that views literacy as the "capacity to use language in all its forms" ([8] p. 41) [9,10]. Forms of language include a vast range of texts or modalities including books, songs, music, movement, drama, improvisations, sound, dance, puppetry, and other artforms. This complex or expansive view of literacy is described by Eisner ([11] p. 5) as "a way to be in the world, another way to form experience, another way to recover and express meaning". His interpretation moves beyond the simple or traditional view

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of literacy as being about reading books and to one of being able to form meaning from a range of objects and experiences, including the creative arts. Marie Clay's work adds to this understanding of early literacy that evolves differently for each and every child [12]. Educators of children in the early years play a central role in supporting children to become literate through understanding their unique literacy development, by their pedagogical choices, conversations with children, relationships, and provision and selection of texts [12].

Puppets have been used as a text in several studies that have employed a more traditional approach to literacy [13,14], as well as in research that considered literacy more broadly [1,15,16]. Remer and Tzuriel [16] described how the puppet was shown to support the quality of the interactions between children and adults, bringing about a change in their tone and quality, allowing both participants to reveal new parts of themselves and to learn more about one another. Alchrona [4] attributes these changes to the three-way relationships that result from the presence of the puppet and the perception by the children of the puppet as real. In her study, this investment in the emotional life of the puppet supported the children's engagement. For example, the preschool aged children developed the character of Hedvig, her puppet, through asking questions about her favorite song or birthday celebration ([4] p. 176).

Playing with puppets develops children language and literacy skills beyond direct instruction [17]. For example, children may use finger puppets or small hand puppets to act out situations and play with words and sounds; in doing so, they are expanding their vocabulary and pragmatic language use [17]. Educators can use puppets as props in a range of dramatic play situations that help them to construct knowledge of the meaning of words. In addition to expanding vocabulary, puppets support children's comprehension and active listening [16,17] by retelling aspects of the story to a puppet or taking on roles of the characters to create alternative endings and inhabit the text. In translating or interpreting the text, relationships between the children and their teachers are nurtured, adding to the wellbeing of all participants [16].

In my own research and practice [2] my first intention was to build the relationship between the children and the puppet. For example, the children were often involved in the naming of the visiting puppets and in building its personal story, qualities, and interests. They would ask questions about puppets that had visited them on other occasions, draw them pictures and ask to know their favorite game or share their favorite picture book, all of which we would weave into our next session. The children and the puppet were building a group in which they all had equal membership [12]. For educators, a puppet was seen as invaluable for bringing all the children into whole group learning experiences and to foster the conversations essential for literacy [10], for learning about the children's prior knowledge [6], and supporting ALL children to develop their capacity to express themselves and contribute to their community [12,17].

My emphasis on the word ALL is intentional, as it refers to every child, including those who experience disability, children learning English as an additional language or dialect, and children from diverse cultural or family backgrounds. Just like the concept of literacy, there are many ways of describing or talking about the notion of disability, all of which reflect our views and values. Our idea of disability is one that is shaped by a myriad of beliefs and for the most part, a perception of disability as being different and different in a way that was inferior to or outside the 'norm' [18]. This view is related to the medical model of disability [19] and founded on a view of disability as an ailment or impairment, one that is based on a biological condition that has damaged the individual. From this perspective, individuals with disability are seen as 'less' than those that do not experience disability, with problems that need to be solved or needs that require the attention and intervention of others [19,20]. In education, such labels can lead to segregation of some students into special classes, units, or learning groups, to be defined by their disability and subject to learning expectations that are less than others [18].

The social model of disability considers disability differently and looks beyond the individual with as disability as a 'problem'. Rather, it considers the problems that individuals

with disability have imposed on them by social attitudes or physical barriers [19]. Examples of this may include a lack of access to buildings or public spaces, unwelcoming educational settings, assumptions of competence, and social exclusion. Barriers to literacy learning may be an over reliance on spoken language, assumptions about children's ability, environments in which young children do not experience a sense of belonging, or because of limitations to act with agency and autonomy [19,20]. These barriers can be reduced through a design of literacy experiences that appeal to a range of interests and offer multiple possibilities of expression [18].

This article will introduce the possibilities of puppets in early literacy development and describe their potential to support children to share their voice and make meaning through verbal, nonverbal, and relational communicative acts [4]. It draws on a study [2] that led educators to change the way they viewed, interacted, planned for, and valued the contribution of every child and supported their literacy in the richest sense [9].

## 2. Materials and Methods

I chose portraiture as the research methodology, an approach that includes the following "dimensions—centering relationships, seeking goodness, and attending to the aesthetics of storytelling" [21,22]. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis [21] define goodness as the focus on the positive and to "resist this tradition-laden effort to document failure" (p. 50). Their sentiment appealed to me as I wanted to resist a tradition, that is the tradition of depicting disability as a deficit and to capture the strength and potential of every child. The dimensions that underpinned portraiture were aligned with the overarching aim of my study to share stories of how drama and puppetry can support the communication and self-expression of every child [20]. The methodology, created as part of Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's [21] investigation of high schools in the United States, and used widely to explore other educational settings, allows the researcher to observe the subjects of the study with the detail of a scientist and explore the multiple perspectives present in every situation [21,22]. The methodology also focuses attention to what the participants perceive as "good", and to contrast what the children see as "good" in their day-to-day experience and to compare that with the adults and across the three different research settings [22]. Portraiture has been used as a research methodology to answer a range of research questions, including the strengths of young adult literacy learners [23]. It is a strength- and place-based approach that seeks to understand those involved in their study and honor their experience [23]. To translate the portraits to an article this size, I have selected vignettes or moments from the 'portraits' in my original study to capture an example of a reoccurring finding or highlight a common theme [24].

The study received ethics approval from the University of Sydney and written consent obtained from educators, parents, and caregivers prior to the data collection. Opportunities for children to give their assent was ongoing and all children were invited to participate in the research activities and express their agreement through actions or words. It should be noted that on some occasions, a puppet was utilized to make the request. All participant names and other identifiable information were changed to protect the identity of those involved in the study.

My study involved over 60 children, between the ages four and five, and nine educators (eight female and one male) at three different preschools located in urban areas of Sydney. I had a relationship with two of the three preschools in my role as a Tertiary Mentor at the University of Sydney and approached the centers as I was aware that the programs included children with disabilities. The third center was managed by the local council and provided me with three different types of preschools, private, government, and not for profit. The center director then invited room leaders to take part in the study and all expressed an interest in the possibility of learning more about children with disabilities in their care. My role is best described as teacher/researcher implementing the research activities at each of the preschools. The research activities were co-designed with the educators, and different drama strategies were discussed and then selected to 'answer' the

research question of “Do drama processes act as facilitators to include all in early childhood settings? If so, how?”.

To research “how” drama and puppetry can support the communication and self-expression of every child this with accuracy and insight, I needed to immerse myself in the life of each of the preschools. So, I became a weekly visitor, observing the children, meeting with their teachers and the center director, and being with the children in a range of learning experiences, along with a puppet of course. The research period was for 10 weeks at each setting and involved a ninety-minute visit at each program. This time allowed for observation, puppet and drama activities, and interviews with the participants.

Data from participant educators were obtained through a variety of methods that included semi-structured interviews conducted after the drama workshops, written reflections, images, children’s drawings, and informal conversations recorded in the researcher’s journal. At the end of the research period and drama intervention, all educators were asked to respond to a series of questions in person and via email to describe their perception of the children’s engagement and participation in response to the drama experiences. The questions were the same for every preschool and included:

1. Which forms of drama, if any, engaged all the children in a group learning experience?
2. Have you observed any changes in the children as a result of participating in drama?
3. Will you use include any of the drama experiences in your curriculum? If so, which ones?
4. Did you feel that collaboration and co-teaching was helpful to your teaching practice? If so, what was the most valuable aspect of this partnership?
5. Describe any changes you may have felt in your understanding about drama as a way of teaching from participating in the research.

This information was used for analysis alongside my own research journal. The views of the children were elicited through open-ended questions and drawings; for example, children were invited to “draw” a picture about the part of the drama they liked best (Qu.1) or shown an image of them with the puppet and asked to “Tell me about this picture” (Qu.2) or shown a picture and asked to describe their feelings (Qu.1). Once this information was gathered it was coded using In Vivo Coding and then Dramaturgical Coding [25]. The codes were then formed into themes to capture the main findings or research topics, with puppets appearing frequently in the analysis. Other themes to emerge were engagement, motivation, and communication. Their relevance for development of emergent literacy is discussed below.

### 3. Being with a Puppet

The Early Years Learning framework ([8] p. 13) tells us “there are many ways of living, being and knowing”. In this study, a puppet was shown to be one of those ways enabling educators with a tool to support relationships, participation in group learning experiences and to engage in literacy and imaginative experiences. The puppet allowed the child and the adult to shift from doing to being through the depth of the encounter and the combination of the real context and the imagined or fictional context created with the puppets. In these interactions, the children were able to learn more about one another in a space that communicated difference as positive and natural. The interactions with the puppet supported the children, and in some instances the adults, to explore and appreciate differences. The encounters with the puppet were also valuable in challenging some perceived or developing ideas about some of the children, their capabilities, their competence, or their development. One such research vignette is the story of Ben and his role, with the rest of the children in a literacy rich experience as portrayed below. I chose this vignette to highlight the “miniature of a more significant picture” of what small acts can tell us about a child [23,24], the miniature in this case being the value of the creative arts.

Literacy was a very important area of focus at this center and an area that the teachers felt not all the children were enjoying or interested in. The teachers requested to continue an exploration of books through drama and puppetry. Rather than working on a familiar

book, I thought it might be worth introducing a new story, one that shared the name of one of the children in the title. My hope was this may entice Ben, a very quiet boy who often withdrew from group experiences to wander towards the walls of the classroom, his fingers tracing the bricks on the fireplace as he skirted around the room. Clay's theory was illuminating, as at in our initial few sessions, I asked nothing of Ben and interpret his actions as "roaming" [12]. I valued the chance to observe his familiar habits, that allowed us both the space to know one other. This was of particular importance as all three teachers had expressed their concerns about his behaviour. When he was playing outside, Ben looked uncertain, he would play chase only if the boys ran after him, then stop and lean on a pole, sucking his thumb and watching as the boys ran around him. At other times, he would sit on a step by his teacher and stare into space. I wondered what he was thinking. The snapshot below was one piece of information used to "see" Ben without too much attention to the deficits described [23,24] and speak to both "the head and the heart" [23].

### 3.1. Vignette 1

It was a cool day and I sat in a sunny spot on the patio steps. Lyndall, a very chatty four-year-old ran over the moment she saw me to check that I had Mabel. Joel drove by in a red car and gave me a big smile. After a five-minute warning, Miss Jola called the children inside and the little folk bounced to the mat. Making a circle was much easier this time and Miss Jola, the room leader started the day with Welcome to Country. As she told the children that I have come to visit them, she was interrupted by Lyndall, who called out, "Mabel too". I moved down to the floor and gesture to Joel to sit next to me. Without hesitation he came right over. I then say:

*Olivia: Hello beautiful ones, I am so happy to see you again today. I wanted to ask you...I am having a teensy bit of a problem waking Mabel up today. (I gesture towards Mabel, sleeping in the basket and get her out, cradling her in my arms) Mabel, wake up..." (Mabel continues to snore) I think we might need a magic word. Does anyone know a magic word?*

*Henry: (one of the taller boys in the group who loves ninja turtles offers) Abracadabra*

*Olivia: Ok, Henry, thank-you... everyone let's try it"*

*(All the children say "Abracadabra" or a word close to it. Jack smiles and moves his feet together as Mabel snores)*

*Olivia: Mmm... I think we might need another word. (At that very moment Jack makes a vocalisation that sounds like, "thee")*

*Olivia: Oh, thank you Jack, let's try that word...everyone...thee. Some of the children jumped in and repeat "thee". I noticed a few of the older children looked a little dubious. This is quite natural as it does not sound like a typical 'word', even the teachers needed a minute to catch on, with one of them repeating quizzically, "Three"? I quickly hopped in and said how much I liked the word. Jack smiles and bangs his feet together again as Mabel woke up...*

*Olivia: Thanks Jack...Good morning, Mabel, did you sleep well? (Mabel nods). Look where we are...*

*Mabel: Oh...Hi everyone...it is so good to be here Olivia, I am so happy... (Mabel jumped up and down, very, very excitedly) Her jumping created a stir, the children replied by saying, hello or with a wave or a giggle. All eyes were watching Mabel and a lot of children moved forward on their knees to be closer to her. Another teacher needed to remind the children to stay on their bottoms so that, "all the friends can see".*

*Olivia: (to the children) Do you remember Mabel's favorite game? I think she is going to want to play it again today'.*

*Mabel: I do, I do... (She is so excited to see the children). I reminded the children that we needed to be in a circle, as the excitement of Mabel has brought us all forward in a group.*

*With a bit of help from the other teachers, our circle forms again and we pass a 'hello' around the group. I noticed Jack looked at the boy next to him with a huge grin and Joel was following all of the actions, including making a silly face. He turned his body slightly away from the child to his left, his teacher walked over to him about to adjust his body. I was too quick and gave my head a tiny shake and mouth, "He is ok". I suspected this was his way of managing all stimuli that was going on around him. It made perfect sense to me as it seemed he was reducing some of the sensory information in his environment. His teacher moved back to the computer and I also suspect that I have offended her...*

*But we move on and pass a squeeze. It was fun to see how the children waited to receive a squeeze from their friend before they squeezed the person next to them. A few children needed a reminder to squeeze, and a few random squeezes started up, I decided it was time to move on to the next activity and moved back to the sofa from the circle as Mabel asked me to read her favorite book, Ben and the Beast.*

*Hearing his name in the title caused the exact response that I had hoped for, Ben, after recognizing his name, hopped up and sat right at my feet. Some of the other children smiled as they too recognized his name. The story was so easy to bring to life with actions. A tale of the simple quest of a young girl. Along with the heroine and Mabel, we walked through the forest, scrunching the leaves under our feet. We shivered in the dark woods and took on different characters as they entered the story, a rabbit, a mouse, and a snake. We stopped to eat the donuts that Ben, our hero, stashed in her hair and made soup with the beast before defeating him and sending him rolling down the hill. The book was quite long, and I was thrilled that all the children stayed for the entire shared reading expressed their understanding through role play and movement. Ben's response was described by Miss Belinda in the email below:*

*Jola and I thought it went really well! That was a long book, and the children showed great interest. Ben enjoyed the interactions throughout the book, and it was very interesting to see how the children attached to different characters. I look forward to our afternoon session!*

*I also sat the children in a circle following our activities, and as Jack is very into incy wincy, we all sang it together and passed the spider to each other. Jack was interacting so well in this experience.*

### 3.2. Puppets and a Space for Being

The description above illustrates three ways that puppets and drama can contribute to children's membership in early literacy practices. The first of these is the power of the puppet to engage children in language rich experiences. Research shows the value of talking and listening to children for both the development of spoken language and to provide a foundation for literacy [10,26,27]. Flynn [28] describes the value of routine conversations to provide children with regular and informal opportunities to participate in conversations. The weekly visits from a puppet created this routine for the children as our workshop began with the introduction of a puppet 'friend'. The puppet was selected with intention and to frame our conversation. For example, the puppet play with Mabel was designed to motivate the children to participate in the literacy experiences and be part of exploring a new text. The children were involved in group discussions and encouraged to have individual conversations, ask questions, and participate in drama with spoken and non-spoken language. They were introduced to new vocabulary, practiced listening to one another, and pragmatic language skills in improvisation, movement, and drama games—all with the scaffolding provided by the puppet [12]. These creative experiences elicited the children's self-expression and supported them to make meaning of their world and the world of others as they were motivated by the presence and the act of being with the puppet [3,4].

The initial interaction with Mabel guided or modeled for the children how to communicate and be with others. In the outline above, the children were seen to connect what

they knew about the situations in the story and build on each other's knowledge. They were developing their ability to make meaning of the world around them and to have their contributions valued. In helping Mabel, the children were able to act on her behalf and expand their understanding of feelings and the feelings of others. The puppet added to the benefits of drama, that "can evoke thoughts and feelings that invite us to wonder, to move across the boundaries between what we know and what we might yet know, and to change our actions [29]. When they connect our hearts, souls, and minds to those of others, and allow our lives to interact in all their wholeness, they can be transformative" (p. 258).

In this study [2], puppets were transformative in two distinct ways; they led to the transformation of the actions of the children, such as Ben's sense of belonging, and the transformation of the educator attitudes about the children. One participant educator observed:

"The use of puppets really gets the children's attention and then asking them to emulate a specific character/animal enables the children to all engage in their own way. It was amazing to see increased engagement in many of the children and even more amazing to see how each one of them reacted/acted differently. I cannot wait to start incorporating these into my wrap up group times and think the puppets would help enhance the experience for all the children in our room" (Kitty personal correspondence 4/12/2019).

The puppet gave the educators insight about the children, another perspective from which to view them respond to novel situations., situations in which they were emotionally engaged and motivated to act with agency and intention. The puppet gave the children the impetus to try new ways of being and for the educators to explore new ways of being with the children. The puppet granted them permission.

#### 4. Puppets for Being with the Children

*"He is all over the place—socially and emotionally. I worry about his language, poor eye contact, very poor ability to concentrate and his body coordination is not that great either. The gap between his peers is widening every week" (personal communication, 5/5/2019)*

The puppet, through changing the interactions between adults and children, created the conditions to be in the present, for being and "engaging with life's joys and complexities, and meeting challenges in everyday life" ([8] p. 7). Puppets changed the quality of interactions in several ways and created a relaxed environment as the puppet was playful and non-threatening. As seen in other studies [4,16,17,30,31], the traditional power dynamic between adult and child altered with a puppet as the adults were given an opportunity to play with the children when co-developing the puppet character. This changed the nature of the learning experiences as meaning was constructed jointly and not provided solely by the adult. The role of the adult was much more of a co-player in the construction of the puppet's identity and the puppet story or play. Through dramatic experiences with a puppet, the children were more engaged in group learning experiences and played with language and sounds in the creation of the puppet's identity [4].

In learning about the puppet, children were able to share their own stories, their interests, and ideas. The puppet gave the children new ways to be together and express their thoughts through words, movements, and play. In observing the puppet play, the educators gained insight and another way to connect to the children, to see what they were able to do, and appreciate their individual and authentic responses. The focus was less on what the children were unable to communicate, as these expectations were removed, and the children were given a place to be themselves and respond to the sensory creature of a puppet. The quote above is worthy of analysis as it provides an example of how one educator viewed a child prior to the research. Her focus was on the assumed deficits, the ways in which this child was a 'lesser' version of the other children, because he was not meeting certain milestones or learning in the same way as she expected. Something shifted after she observed Ben interact with the puppet, for she could see that in the right or different circumstances, he could speak, follow the play, and respond with thoughtfulness and a recognition of the feelings of other children. All of these actions were surprising for

the educators, surprising in a good way as it prompted their thinking about the many ways children are literate. Ben needed more confidence in participating and that was brought about by the object of the puppet, it motivated Ben to join the group and anchored his attention. We wondered if he would be able to understand the activity because of the visual tool of the puppet? Was it the calming effect of having the chance to meet the puppet individually? Would he benefit from being in a smaller group? The puppet allowed us a way to see more of Ben and the other children strengths and for teachers to consider how to adjust the learning environment and support learning and wellbeing through drama and puppetry. As one educator wrote:

*“I loved how you’ve used our concerns over the last week (children’s emotional regulation and challenging behaviour) to guide the puppets interactions with the children. The cuddles, the gentle hands and the feelings chair were all wonderful ways for children to revisit these issues away from literature and discussions. Providing them with an outlet and encouraging them to use this safe space enables their sense of belonging and wellbeing within the room.” (Personal correspondence, 5/17/2019).*

## 5. Conclusions: Puppets to See “Goodness”

Puppets were shown to promote and sustain engagement in small and large group early literacy learning experiences in all three groups [31]. The puppets were also seen to promote the children’s communication and confidence in all preschools and support the conversations between children and adults. Consistently, the puppets acted as a text and just like a book, provided children with a starting place to explore story and play. The puppet, in its presence alone was seen to support children to communicate and make meaning of their world without preferencing spoken language and in this way, played a key role in bringing about the participation of all children in this research that respected their linguistic diversity and unique selves. The puppet was accessible as the children could make meaning through the sense of sight, touch, and sound; this helped the children connect to the puppeteer and brought about relationships and a sense of belonging. Children were able to express their ideas in group situations with the puppet that were both exciting, safe, and shifted the perception of the children in the eyes of the adults. By being with a puppet, children and adults celebrated one another and most importantly, the gifts of every child. The puppets evoked the “goodness” [22,23], illuminating the strengths and prior knowledge, intentions, and emerging literacy of the children. Drama processes when combined with puppets were powerful in facilitating the inclusion of all children in these early childhood settings for scaffolding purposes and as an ideal support “for roaming around the unknown” [12]. This study contributes to our understanding of how these magical creatures support our learning and enrich the relationships and play so essential to early literacy development. Through puppets, we can reframe our thinking and evaluate our assumptions. The puppet is the perfect primer for early literacy development that encompasses the whole child [30,31]

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Article

# Pretend Play: Children in Control of a Shifting Narrative

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**Abstract:** Imaginative play is an important part of childhood that provides insight not only into a child's ability to use language, but ultimately into their understandings of the world more broadly. Through play, children control the story as they shape an emerging narrative through words, gestures, movement, and use of play spaces. In this paper we deconstruct a single instance of imaginative play captured in the home corner of a preschool classroom. The unscripted play dialogue creates a shared and compelling narrative evident in the texts the children created and their ongoing and complex interactions. Microanalysis of this narrative provides a novel insight into the play scenarios children create, the resources they select for developing the play, and the ways they communicate. We focus on discourse, subjectivity, and power to analyse the scenario. The cultural and linguistic resources demonstrated by this group of four-year-old children through their play provides insight not only into their understanding and interpretation of activities conducive to the home corner but also into their emerging social identities.

**Keywords:** play; early childhood; imaginative play; language and literacy

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of play is well understood. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [1] asserts that children have a right to engage and participate freely in play. Play, however, is complex. And there is no universal definition. In 1966, Vygotsky [2] identified play as a 'leading activity', that is, the predominant activity of a young child. Furthermore, Elkonin [3] observed that children in the preschool years not only *want* to play, but that play is also critical for development. There are many types of play, all of which offer opportunities for learning and growth as moments of serious intent, of playfulness, and of emerging literacy knowledge come together [4,5]. This paper adopts a post structuralist frame to examine the nature of imaginative play through Brooker and Ha's [6] lens of discourse, subjectivity, and power. Examined in this paper is a play scenario involving four children aged four years in a prior-to-school setting. We focus on the ways play afforded the development of a narrative that shifted in response to the actions and reactions of the children involved. The paper concludes with an invitation for educators to reflect on the design, facilitation, and time afforded for imaginative play in their own settings.

## 2. Review of Literature

While all types of play are understood to be powerful for children's learning and development, imaginative play is particularly acknowledged theoretically as a major influence for students' cognitive growth [4]. Indeed, Piaget [7] described imaginative play as one of the purest forms of symbolic thought for a child, and Vygotsky [8] argued that not only does children's imaginative play afford the inclusion of real-life experiences in that play, but that it is this movement between reality and imagination that sees them working at their highest cognitive capacity. Imaginative play frees children from the constraints

of reality, it gives them time to experiment and explore new possibilities, and it affords creative reconstructions of their lived experiences [8].

Children need time to play. Canning [9] promotes extended time for play as an important opportunity for children to “... explore, try out new things, and voice their opinions ... a vehicle for nurturing their interest and ... a platform for exploring curiosity and creativity” (p. 556). Indeed, it is those ‘new things’ that develop children’s awareness about the lives and experiences of others, presenting new ways to understand one’s own life and experiences to date. Play is present in every civilisation. It is diverse in nature, intrinsically driven and inextricably connected to human experience [10]. With extended time in imaginative play, children’s existing understandings are positioned alongside their peers’, and so, through imaginative play, they can explore the nature of their own worlds and the alignments and misalignments that exist. It is here, in imaginative play, that children can come to new ways of understanding the world that extend into the lives and experiences of those beyond their immediate home and community contexts.

Critical to play are the environments children encounter. Rich learning environments offer opportunities for extended interactions with artefacts and people, as well as time to explore and demonstrate their understandings and interpretations of their worlds. Storli and Hansen Sandseter [11] found the nature of play environments to be critical because they provide children with meaningful contexts, diversity of choices, and opportunities to follow their interests. In a play environment, children’s own lived experiences meet with the experiences and artefacts on offer, which impacts their ability to participate in play [5]. Given that the actual features of the environment for play are important for participation and also linked with concepts of wellbeing and inclusion [12], issues of access and equity emerge when a learning environment does or does not resonate with the existing experiences, knowledge, and practices a child brings to the space.

Children bring to their play their knowledge and understanding of experiences from home, their family, and their community [13]. Imaginative or pretend play typically emerges from children’s life experiences, making it meaningful in that the emerging narratives connect with their own lives [14]. However, the development of narratives is significant not only within the immediate settings of the play. Suggate, Schaughency, McAnally and Reese [15] found that imaginative play narratives develop early language and literacy skills, including comprehension, vocabulary, and language structures, hence supporting successful literacy trajectories well into the first years of formal school. In this paper we look to play as the creation of an imaginary situation where children take real experiences and use them as a stimulus for playful narratives [16]. We examine children’s play within the context of their peers and within a planned environment, and we consider the ways a narrative shifts and is shaped by the people, artefacts, and environment within which it occurs.

### 3. Theoretical Frame

A play scenario is a socially complex communicative act as children experiment with objects, interactions with others, and the ways they use their voices and bodies [17]. Essential to the play scenario is the cultural context within which the play takes place [14]. Play is supported in an environment offering diversity of choices while also connecting to children’s interests [11]. Post-structuralist theorists identify three main concepts to explain children’s acquisition of beliefs and behaviours: discourse, subjectivity, and power [6]. The concepts of discourse, subjectivity, and power are examined within a play context in this paper in an effort to understand the ways children’s stories shape and are shaped by the stories of others, by the resources on offer, and through the interactions that occur during the play scenario.

**Discourse** becomes visible when ways of speaking, producing, and interacting are realised in texts [18]. We take the view that ‘discourse’ encapsulates verbal language and other symbolic forms, such as gestures, sounds and the use of space, and the inclusion of artefacts either existing or created by the participants for specific purposes related to an

interaction. As such, we consider playful interaction as a text. Examining the discourses used during play provides a way to understand how children use language to interact and in ways that are influenced by family and extended social communities. Through the actions of talking and acting, these words and behaviours can be interpreted within a context of meaning [19]. Imaginative or pretend play scenarios are powerful contexts for literacy learning [20]. Through play, children develop rich knowledge and understanding of the ways language is used for dialogue and to develop story plots and build characters within the narrative that continue to impact literacy development into formal school settings [15].

While engaging in play contexts, children can use imagery and communication seamlessly [14]. While the play may emerge from particularly personal and cultural contexts and knowledge, children move in and out of the play frame as they explore meanings and symbols and their understandings of associated behaviours. Vygotsky [8] identifies that there is a “pivot” that enables a shift both into and within a playframe. This pivot is a mediating or symbolic device that prompts the play, which is shaped not only by the child’s personal explorations of their concept of the world but also by their interactions with people, artefacts, and the environment within which the play occurs. Multiple pivots may occur within a play interaction as children negotiate their stories in response to the stories and interactions of the others in the play.

Play leads to meaning making. Through dynamic processes play can change and unfold differently in different settings and with different children. Children can “play alone, with others and with their imaginations” [14] (p. 10) as they engage with solitary and social play contexts, with and without artefacts, and with and without others. There can be insiders and outsiders to the play, which encapsulates the rules of the play while at the same time serving to control the play [21]. Through ‘special forms of communication’ during play [22] children can change their role, the meanings attached to artefacts, and the overall meanings and purpose of the play itself. Through play, children create and manipulate actions, discourse, and artefacts to represent their experience of the world as it stands in that moment and as it changes in response to that play.

**Subjectivity** relates to the ways individuals make meaning in social contexts. For children, this meaning is generated as they experiment with different language structures and ways of being. A lens of subjectivity, then, affords an examination of a child’s ability to participate in a context through their use of “words, acts, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes” [23] (p. 42). Singer and Singer [24] argue that internal imagery, made possible through imaginative play, opens children to experiences that foster curiosity as they explore alternative situations and ways of being for themselves. During pretend play, children use language, gestures, and movement within a space to draw others into the play, to organise and demonstrate the use of artefacts, and to solve problems as the scenario unfolds.

Play is embodied as children use their bodies, as they manipulate materials to express themselves, and as they develop and redevelop characters and stories verbally and non-verbally across the play. Children act in roles during imaginative play. Their choice of artefacts to support a playful interaction (e.g., dress up costume, accessories) and their choices about language and movement are an expression of their knowledge about society’s rules for that role (e.g., a mum, the teacher) that guides the way the play unfolds. Play is a unique form of activity where the sequence of actions emerge from “an imagined template cast over the everyday” [19] (p. 141).

These everyday contexts, or ‘figured worlds’, are the “processes or traditions . . . [that] give us form” [19] (p. 41). Figured worlds are social encounters bound by time and space and one’s standing within the situation. They are socially organised and represent the expression of an individual’s identity. An individual’s figured world becomes visible through the actions and artefacts they take up. As such, they challenge humans as producers but also as social products themselves. Along with this challenge are connections to the gendered subjectivities of commercial markets [25]. The act of expressing one’s everyday

context through play offers a form of knowledge that may or may not be taken up by others, and that may lead to the development of new understandings and new meanings.

**Power** comes from control over language and the conventions of literacy as well as an understanding of the social contexts within which we participate. For children, linguistic and social proficiency affords power to be “critical and creative, problem posers and problem solvers, social analysts and social agents” now and into their futures [18] (p. 23). In a play environment, linguistic and social power influences the process and content of the play, and, depending on the power balance, the ways others can participate.

A focus on power offers a useful lens for identifying and explicating the ways children generate play narratives and privilege certain literacy practices over others. Imaginative play that utilises toys, props, and other materials will stimulate talk, interactions, and the development of play narratives between and among children [26]. It is important, then, to note that the set-up of a play space and the resources made available will influence that play in particular ways, and therefore to acknowledge the motivation, experiences, beliefs, and intentions of those that create the spaces for children to play as powerful influencers on the play that can occur. For example, literacy materials may encourage children to read or produce texts, props may generate re-enactments of familiar stories or experiences, and the size of a space may invite certain movements or actions over others. A home corner may encourage particular kinds of play that replicates particular roles and activities present in some homes and communities. But perhaps not all. Gender construction is complex, and therefore play scenarios that adopt normative gendered positions warrant attention [25].

While planning for play and negotiating specific roles can support the development and nature of the play, this planning and negotiation is less important than the time when children are actually playing. Play is orchestrated and it develops as children make their play ‘rules’ explicit by giving directions (e.g., ‘you be the teacher’) or reframing to guide the story along a preferred track (e.g., No, you’re not the teacher, you’re the dad). Children respond to each other through the play with gestures, facial expressions, and the speed at which they act during the play [14]. The play progresses through the sharing of unwritten scripts, which are often developed together, reviewed, and modified as the play unfolds. The ever-changing activity of the play and the ways children interact within a space are more important than the play being marked by a beginning, middle, or end.

#### 4. Methods

The paper draws on a data set collected within an Australian longitudinal multiple-method study of the literacy experiences of 150–200 students and their teachers and educators across educational settings [27]. The purpose of the broader study was to develop understandings about the ways educators and students experienced teaching and learning at particular points within and across school years. That is, the study was designed to generate findings about the nature of literacy learning across a single calendar year and across the years of school, and across educational settings (for example, transition from prior-to-school setting ‘preschool’, to the first year of formal schooling ‘Kindergarten’ [28,29]).

To address the complexity of the study, three geographical clusters representing social and cultural diversity within a single metropolitan area in NSW Australia were identified and labelled to reflect their locations: *Innecity Cluster*, *Beachside Cluster*, and *Portside Cluster*. Within each cluster, three educational settings were selected as research sites where it was known that learners tended to transition from one setting to the next across their schooling years. As such, each cluster comprised a prior-to-school setting, a primary/elementary school, and a secondary school. Following ethics approval (university and within pre/school systems), child, adolescent, and adult participants were recruited at each site, and members of the research team worked within and across the sites to develop important relationships that could lead to the gathering of rich data.

Data sources comprised documents related to policies and syllabus, observation of teaching and learning across the educational settings, semi structured interviews with teachers, educators, children and adolescents, and artefacts generated through the experi-

ences on offer. Consistency of data collection across clusters was ensured through initial analysis of documents key to the education field that afforded an understanding of the outcomes and content towards which teachers were mandated to work. In the case of this research, these documents comprised the Early Years Learning Framework [30], Australian Curriculum English F-10 [31], and the NSW Kindergarten to Year 10 English Syllabus [32]. From these understandings, common protocols for observations, gathering of artefacts, and semi structured interview questions were designed to guide data collection at each site.

While the broader project examined the nature of teaching and learning from early childhood to mid-adolescence and transition points within, this paper takes a close focus on a prior-to-school setting (referred to herein as ‘preschool’) within the *Innecity cluster*, the Central Business District of a regional city. Within this preschool site, the paper reports on an in depth analysis of a single play instance collected during free play.

The preschool was open from 7am to 6 pm and attended mainly by children whose parents lived in the suburbs but worked in the Central Business District, and so many children spent extended hours in the space. The preschool accepted children from 6 weeks to 5 years of age, with two rooms (the ‘baby room’ for those aged 6 weeks to 3 years and the ‘preschool room’ for those aged 4–5 years) and a shared outdoor space. Research was conducted in the ‘preschool room’ because these children were in transition into their first year of formal school, and hence fit with the focus of the broader study. Table 1 provides an overview of data collected in this setting.

**Table 1.** Data collected at the Innecity preschool setting.

| Setting                 | Total Observations               | Average Observations | Educator Interviews | Number and Age of Children | No. of Educators in the Room |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>Innecity cluster</b> |                                  |                      |                     |                            |                              |
| Innecity preschool      | 5 (artefacts were gathered here) | 90 min               | 2                   | Up to 25 (3–5 years)       | 4–5                          |

Specifically explored in this paper are the ways children in this setting were invited to play and the ways they creatively and imaginatively utilised the resources on offer to express their existing social identities as they developed new understandings about themselves and the world through their play. To do this, we draw upon a single instance of video-recorded play captured during the morning free play session. Free play is a carefully programmed period of 40 min where the children can move independently between inside and outside spaces and choose from a range of experiences (including on this day, sand play and bikes outside, the home corner, a drawing table, puzzles, block play, and cars with tracks inside). We draw from our video data to examine a single play scenario between four children in the home corner who have spontaneously gathered in the space. Focusing on a single instance in this way affords a micro level of analysis of the moment-to-moment interactions between and among the children, artefacts, and spaces within which they occurred [33,34]. Examined within the theoretical frame of discourse, subjectivity and power, microanalysis can offer opportunities to understand children’s actions and behaviours, and the ways, in this case, the preschool setting enables and/or constrains their emerging social identities.

For the purposes of this paper, an extended iterative microanalysis was used to understand this single instance of play. As a multimodal text, the play scenario was initially considered as a whole, that is, words and moving images combined as a single entity. Each mode was then separated for closer moment-by-moment [33] analysis so the linguistic interactions could be analysed in terms of the meanings made, and the moving images in terms of processes and interactions between and among the participants themselves and the physical resources in the space [33]. Analysis of the moving images also afforded a closer view of the gestural and spatial elements of the interactions as the clip was slowed down for closer viewing. The first iteration of analysis was inductive in an effort to ensure findings

were grounded in the data. Codes and categories identified through the inductive lens (e.g., asserting a place in the playspace, using resources to direct a preferred play scenario, and negotiating the lead) were then analysed deductively through the theoretical lens of the study. That is, the inductively emergent categories were considered in connection with the elements of *power*, *subjectivity*, and *discourse*.

### 5. Findings: An Illustrative Case

*Context for the play:* The Innercity preschool has a ‘home corner’. Set up in the corner of the preschool room’s inside space, it is defined on two sides by the internal walls of the building. A third ‘wall’ is created using a low shelving unit and bamboo screen, and the structure defining the fourth side is a taller shelving unit extending partway, leaving an opening for access to the home corner. The internal floor is covered by a mat. A dining setting comprising a round table and four chairs and large plastic cubby house are prominent in the space. Stored on the low shelves are disposable cups, plates, cutlery, bowls, and so on for use at a table, while the higher shelves offer props and resources for play, e.g., dolls and hats. Dress-up costumes displayed on a short hat stand at the opening to the space include make-believe costumes such as fairy dresses, tutus, and pirate gear, as well as fashion accessories such as handbags and sunglasses.

*Preparing for a party:* Lee (all names are pseudonyms) stands at the entrance of the home corner wearing a red and gold princess dress pulled over the top of her clothes. She is holding a folded piece of paper and scissors, adding another fold to the paper and carefully cutting it in half. Lee has made two important ‘tickets’ that will be required from those wanting to enter the space. Figure 1 depicts Lee standing alone at the entrance to the home corner in the process of making the tickets. The home corner is empty, and Lee prepares to take up her planned play scenario in the space.



**Figure 1.** Lee makes tickets for the party.

As the play progresses, a second child (Alex) moves alongside wearing adult sunglasses and a large handbag over her shoulder. Taking her ticket, she pauses at the entrance, raises her fist, and mimes a knocking movement on a pretend door, calling loudly, ‘Ding!’

Ding! Knock! Knock!". A third child (Taylor) quickly enters the space and declares she is "Not ready yet." She adds fairy wings to her costume, crosses the space, and enters the cubby house. Responding to Alex's second "Ding! Ding! Knock! Knock!" Lee crosses the space and opens the door. However, Alex declines Lee's gesture. She points to a space closer to herself, stating, "This is the door". Lee obliges and opens the correct door, Alex crosses the threshold into the space, and Lee closes the 'door' behind her.

*Looking after babies:* Taylor emerges from the house, spinning around in the long pink fairy dress with large wings, and invites Alex to "play mums". Reaching up to take a doll from the shelf, Taylor declares, "This is my baby." Alex watches on, and then replicates her action. Lee, choosing not to participate, moves away from this play interaction. Together, Alex and Taylor are observed in role play, exchanging information about their babies, cuddling, rocking, and even burping them as part of the play. Perhaps they are mums, dads, grandparents, or babysitters taking up this caring role.

*An intruder to the play:* Without knocking, a fourth child (Drew) enters the space carrying some dress up sunglasses. Walking behind the unfolding scene, Drew approaches the table, picking up a hat from a pirate costume. Lee quickly moves to challenge this intruder. While no dialogue is exchanged, extended eye contact and a brief tussle for the pirate hat ensues. Despite the absence of words, Drew's resolve is clear in his actions. He holds both his ground and the hat, and Lee eventually retreats. Figure 2 captures two narratives. On the left is the play between Alex, Taylor and their babies at the entrance to the cubby house. Captured on the right is the power tussle between Lee and Drew as they negotiate their places in the space and perhaps their roles in the play scenario.



**Figure 2.** Lee, Drew, and the pirate hat.

*A superhero moment:* Meanwhile, Taylor has put the baby to sleep in the house. Lee approaches the girls, standing close and drawing them in through talk. Table 2 is an excerpt from an exchange between Lee and Taylor while Alex and Drew watch on. Evident in the exchange in Table 2 (see also Figure 3 for a visual depiction) is the use of declarative language that appears to stake a claim to superiority (i.e., the possession of magical powers). Amplifying these claims are exaggerated hand and arm gestures, serious faces, and a leaning in that closes the space between the two girls.



**Table 2.** Exchange between Lee and Taylor. \* Uppercase indicates emphasis in the talk.

| Child   | Statement   | Gesture and Use of Space  |
|---------|---|---|
| Lee:    | I've got powers.  | Hands on hips, looking at both girls.   |
| Taylor: | (steps forward between Lee and Alex) I* have powers.                                    | Right arm lifted and hand splayed out at "I".   |
| Lee:    | I've got LOTS of powers.  | Hands on hips, moves head in large arc left to right and extending the word "lots".   |
| Taylor: | ME TOO! (emphatic)  | Chin juttled towards Lee, and two larger arm gestures, emphasising each word.   |
| Lee:    | I've got THOUSANDS of powers.   | Hands remain on hips, a head nod amplifying each word, "thousands" and "powers".  |
| Taylor: | ME TOO!   | Stamps a foot for each word.  |
| Lee:    | YOU have tiny powers.   | Swings arms back and then forward, holding close to Taylor's face a narrowed thumb and forefinger on each hand to indicate a small amount.  |
| Taylor: | I have HEAPS and HEAPS of fairy dust and powers.  | Right arm repeatedly waving to demonstrate the volume of fairy dust, face moved closer to Lee, eyes wide (See Figure 3).                    |
| Alex:   | (intervening, steps up to Lee) Waa! Waa! [mimics a baby crying] My baby needs a cuddle. | Steps close to Lee, holds the doll facing outwards with arms stretched out and moves it close to Lee's body. Lee takes and cuddles the doll |

**Figure 3.** Display of fairy dust powers (note Drew and Alex, the onlookers).

*Return to looking after the babies:* Alex's interjection between the escalating dialogue appears to offer a resolution to the tussle, and Lee responds by cuddling the baby. Taylor also responds by retrieving her baby, but Lee declines the offer of a cuddle with this doll and takes a step away from the interaction. Alex and Taylor engage through individual and cooperative play to explore, imitate, and pretend as they act out familiar caring roles. Taylor declares, "My baby's name is called Lexi!"; coincidentally, Alex declares that hers is too. The interaction comes to a close, however, when Alex has her baby reach over to "smack" Taylor's, who responds with baby crying noises and she retreats to the cubby house. All the while, Drew watches on.

*Return to a party:* The play continues as Lee leaves the baby play, once again returning to her original party narrative. She retrieves a pile of cups from the shelves and begins to arrange them around the edge of the table. She moves slightly away from the table and into the view of Alex and Taylor. She appears to be trying to attract their attention, looking towards them and using large sweeping arm movements to draw each cup from its stack and place it on the table. Alex and Taylor do not appear to notice, so she motions to Drew, asking if he would like one. Again without words, Drew nods, and while Lee continues with the cups, Drew joins the play by adding cutlery to the table.

*A birthday party:* Again, it is Alex who brings the narratives, and indeed these children, together. She initiates a new play scenario as seen in the exchange captured in Table 3 that combines the previously disparate narratives.

**Table 3.** A new play scenario.

| Child   | Language   | Gestures and Use of Space  |
|---------|--|--|
| Alex:   | (approaches Lee and Drew) It's my baby's birthday today! Are you celebrating my baby's birthday? | Holds the doll high and close for Lee to notice.   |
| Lee:    | (a pause, nods) Yes  | Looks at Alex and the doll, briefly smiles and nods.   |
| Alex:   | Wow!! (turns to Taylor) It's my baby's birthday today.   | Turns the doll back towards her face, smiling and jiggling it, and then turning it for Taylor to see.  |
| Taylor: | Mine too! Mine too!  | Taylor (with her baby retrieved from the house) replicates Alex's movement with her own and they move into the dining space ready for the party. |

Drew and Lee continue to set the table. In this space, the children together now reenact events they may have experienced or heard about—getting dressed up to go out, caring for babies, organising gatherings, and sharing meals.

*Unintended ending to the play:* The play is drawn to a close with an invitation from an educator to the group of four to move outside to have morning tea. The play ends due to the available time, not due to the play narrative ending.

## 6. Discussion

Microanalysis of the illustrative example shared in this paper offers insights into the ways imaginative play offered these children opportunities to experiment with a familiar context, and at the same time explore complex concepts and relationships by drawing on their linguistic resources [15,23]. These children wanted to play [3] and they controlled the shifting narrative unmediated by any adult intervention. We return to the concepts of discourse, subjectivity, and power to explicate these children's actions and behaviours as an examination of the play scenario, and to identify new insights into the ways literacy shaped and was shaped by the play.

The children's independent and imaginative play in the home corner afforded opportunities for understanding social interactions and the development of important literacy skills through talk, gesture, movement, and use of the space [11]. To participate in the play context, these children activated the full extent of discourse including words, action, attitudes, gestures, glances, and body positions [5,23]. The play began as a seemingly straightforward verbal interaction [11] where Alex's announcement of her arrival at the home of a friend demonstrated her understanding of social boundaries. That is, she undertook the process of securing an invitation prior to entry and hence used the accepted etiquette of announcing herself before entering a space occupied by someone else. Lee's response also indicated her own understanding of these conventions as she welcomed Alex into the home corner. The children were in control of the imaginary situations and the language required in that situation, potentially informed by their own real life experiences [14,16].

However, the unscripted nature of the subsequent play, the volume of people in the space, their preferred narratives and ways of communicating, along with the diversity of resources on offer generated more complex and more demanding interactions. Making

meaning on the run, responding to and actively driving the subsequent discourse required considerably greater command of the language of negotiation and more sophisticated understanding about social interactions [11,17] as competing agendas emerged. These negotiations included listening to talk and inferring peers' meanings and intentions, reflecting on those inferences in connection with their own ways of talking and their preferred narratives for *this* time in *this* space. The shifts in play were quick and fluid—tickets and dressing up for an intended gathering was quickly altered to a scenario where babies needed care, and then the narrative shifted again when the table was set because the main players in the space pursued their own subjective views. These reframings in the play narrative were unscripted and developed as the play unfolded [14] due to the power shifting between and among different children. It was clear that different children used and developed [26] considerable linguistic resources to initiate changes at key points and to take the lead in the play. They were observed to deliberately and independently opt in and out as the play narrative changed. And further, they continued to promote their own subjectivities through redirections (sometimes verbal, but at other times gestural or through movement) designed to promote their preferred narratives.

Unmediated opportunities to learn about complex social and linguistic interactions [23] through play became evident as Taylor and Alex took up the dolls. Their talk and actions turned the narrative away from Lee and her preferred focus on tickets and parties, to parenting and care. This move disrupted Lee's control of the play and amplified Taylor and Alex's own connections and power [9]. However, Lee's efforts to challenge this new order by reentering the play prompted a new and more precarious interaction. Both dressed in fantasy costumes, Lee and Taylor's claims to the possession of increasingly strong and voluminous magical powers created something of a confrontation unseen in the previous narratives. Their unwritten script offers insights into their capacity to articulate and promote their view in different ways in a new kind of discourse [23] (see Table 2). For example, Lee's use of verbal intensifiers—'lots of' and 'thousands of' powers were countered by Taylor's grand and somewhat sharp gestures, verbal retorts, and prolonged stare, raising the stakes in this narrative. As the interaction escalated, Lee refocused her line of argument and instead of continuing to promote her own powers, diminished Taylor's as "tiny". Lee's switch in the nature of the discourse [23,26] was an apparent breach of the 'rules' of the interaction [14], and it appeared to provoke Alex into acting as a mediator to redirect the play. Her sophisticated move (pushing the doll into the space between Lee and Taylor, voicing her baby's distress through a crying sound, observing as the 'mother' that her baby needed Lee's attention) diverted Lee's attention from this competitive and increasingly adversarial interaction and invited her to return to the previous baby narrative. Her redirection brought the three girls together without anyone losing face, and it allowed the play to continue.

While these instances of talk give us insight into the play, so too do their movements and gestures, reminding us of the embodied nature of the experience. The children used their bodies and the resources available to develop characters and stories, and to direct the play. Lee's non verbal exchange with Drew offers an important example for thinking about gestural and spatial literacies as powerful ways to communicate and propel the agenda. Through their play, the children gave insights into their subjective knowledge, their understanding of the social context, and their linguistic capacities to respond to the situation [5,15] as they enacted creative responses, solved problems, and shifted the direction of the play [18] independently of any adult facilitation.

Play can provide a way for children to appropriate, objectify, communicate, and develop their understanding of cultural practices within a social setting. The ways each child moved and engaged within the space demonstrated something of their internal imagery [24] about the nature of their participation in the home corner narrative on this day. Dressed in their preferred costumes and with selected props (albeit from the resources made available by their educators [16,28]), the children were seen to develop parallel narratives connected to the home corner context and aligned with their own imaginations

and preferences for play topics—the possession of magic powers, caring for babies, planning for parties. Bringing the narratives together was complex and required considerable problem solving and careful use of language and other communicative skills for resolutions to be achieved. The children independently created their own imagined and quite complex scenarios within the home corner, an everyday space [19].

The observed play scene was an example of a ‘figured world’ [19]. As the first child in the space, Lee had set her own scene. In solitary play, she appeared confident and comfortable in her princess costume, spinning and prancing around, flattening the dress across her body, and paying close attention to the decorative details (lace, gold trim). The tickets she created aligned with her plan for a party, and the arrival of a friend presented the opportunity to enact the admission process. Lee drew upon the regularities she knew from everyday life and developed a sequence of known expectations (e.g., dress and tickets) as to how these may play out in her scenario [5,19]. However, the multiple episodes that unfolded throughout the play were not intended for everyone [18].

Taylor appeared similarly committed to her character. As a fairy and then as a parent, her interactions with the doll drew out her understandings about what it is to care for a baby as she took on the talk of a carer and the voice of her baby [15]. For Taylor’s story, the plastic cubby house represented an important prop. For example, she retreated to the house and reappeared with the intention of welcoming a new guest. In her caring role, she put the baby to bed in the house and retrieved it for specific purposes, such as giving cuddles and attending a party. The house appeared to offer new perspectives in play where absence is part of the narrative. Taylor usually controlled her presence in the space through verbal announcements of her intentions. Potentially, this voluntary removal of herself from the immediate context also provided space to reframe the play when she observed it taking a direction misaligned with her preferences, for example, leaving when Lee went to set the table. Evident in the play are examples of independent and intricate forms of verbal and non verbal communication [22] that enable children to explicate their role, empower artefacts, and then direct the play.

Alex and Drew appeared more fluid in their intentions. Rather than driving specific episodes and interactions, they were observed to respond to the unfolding episodes within the play narrative. However, the ways they each interacted in the space were quite different. Alex’s use of the doll provided her with access to the play and an opportunity to introduce her own interpretation of ‘home’ through words, actions, and movement in the space (for example, baby’s birthday, see Table 3). As Lee and Taylor’s exchange about power escalated, Alex spontaneously resolved the potential conflict by redirecting and inviting Lee into the baby narrative. Conversely, Drew, an observer to much of the play, appeared unable to access the narrative. He did not follow the unwritten (yet understood by the other three players) conventions for entering the space, e.g., miming knocking on the door or taking up the party of play narratives. Moreover, his choice of costume disrupted the narrative already underway when he entered the scene. Drew played a passive role throughout the changing narrative until Lee invited him to help set the table, a return to the party theme. Potentially, Lee’s invitation to Drew stemmed from the apparent lack of interest from Taylor and Alex, leaving her with few options. Either way, there are insiders and outsiders to the play [21]. The insiders, in this case, Lee, Alex, and Taylor, independently determine the rules and control the play [18], while those on the outside must seek an entry point or wait to be included. For those with limited or misaligned social, cultural, and linguistic resources, achieving inclusion can be precarious, as was observed in Drew’s choice of costume and subsequent behaviours.

The children had high levels of control over the nature of the play in the space, but little influence over its design as a ‘home corner’ [16]. The home corner—a ubiquitous feature of prior-to-school settings—was planned and established in this case by the educators. Traditionally, home corners are designed with the intent of replicating a familiar context within which children may engage in imaginative play. In the play scenario reported here, the children’s decisions about what to use, what to change, and what to create for their

play enabled the generation of their own meanings and interpretations of 'home' [16,21]. For example, Lee's creation of written tickets was an important design feature of the play. As artefacts, they presented particular possibilities for the play, but they were also demonstrations of her cultural understandings and literacy practices [18]. Associations such as the ones observed in this play scene and across different spaces and activities within their environment more broadly represent their unique social positions and dispositions [19], thereby offering opportunities for educators to frame spaces in ways that can respond to individual children's linguistic and social needs, interests, and strengths.

The very naming of a space the 'home corner' positions it and the artefacts within as a representation of life at home. But whose home? The space itself, and the artefacts or resources within, invite (and potentially exclude) specific kinds of narratives [21,26] and even people. Whether the space indeed reflected these children's home lives is, of course, unknown. Also unknown is any specific rationale informing the educators' development of the space and their intentions for its use [16]. Nonetheless, these children subjectively took up the available toys, props, and other artefacts. Individually and together, they negotiated the moment-to-moment [34] transactions between their own experiences and practices of home and the offerings within the space. Also informing these transactions could be observed representations of home, perhaps seen on television, in the media, or in stories shared, or configured constructions of gender [25]. Regardless of their origins, these negotiations stimulated talk and interaction between and among children, which, in the absence of adult intervention, led to powerful and complex episodes within the play narrative.

It cannot be assumed that the cultural makeup of a community will remain static over time, nor that the lives, language, and experiences of the children will be aligned with the lives, languages, and experiences of their educators [5,6]. It is important, therefore, that educators review what they know about the children attending their settings and reflect not only on their 'home corner' but on all experiences on offer. We encourage educators to examine their own beliefs about language and learning through play [5], the ways these beliefs are reflected in the experiences they design, and whether there is more to do in terms of meeting the needs of *these* children at *this* time. Questions to guide this review could include: What are the social and cultural backgrounds of the children in our setting? What have we observed about the ways our learners interact with their families and peers? How might the design of our spaces reflect what we have learned?

The instance of imaginative play shared here demonstrates children's capacities to access (or not) the opportunities on offer, and the ways those capacities led to being empowered (or not) in a space [9,18]. Having access to a space involves more than physical entry [18,19]. It is about understanding the particular subjectivities of the context and the ways of connecting through language, movement, and gesture. It is about having proficiency in the unique discourses for participation, and it is through this knowledge that opportunities are presented for play—for directing and participating, for setting and following 'rules', and for developing important knowledge about being part of society. Since all children have the right to participate in play [1], we encourage educators to invite children as co-designers of play spaces: What are the spaces children want as part of their experience? Where would they be located and how would they work? What resources and materials would they choose or reject? What can we learn from how they play in the space?

## 7. Conclusions

Play is the leading activity of the child [2], and opportunities for children to direct their own imaginative play narratives are vital in preschool settings and for supporting their development in the years subsequent. However, the environments within which children play are key for exploring the nature of their own worlds [13,14], for developing a sense of inclusion [12], and to make discoveries about the worlds of others [11]. New in this paper is the deconstruction and microanalysis of an imaginative play scenario according to concepts of discourse, subjectivity, and power to understand the nature of

the play itself. The discourse evident in this piece of data demonstrates a range of ways language (spoken, gestural, and spatial) [5] is used to achieve different and often complex purposes. Also evident are the different understandings and motivations of the children as stories unfolded within the space through the utilisation of props, gestures, vocabulary, and language structures (alongside complex relationships) to direct and engage in the play [14]. Furthermore, aspects of power and the shifting of power [18] emerged as the children negotiated a space, props, and each other to achieve their aims and shift the play in different ways. The children each used cultural and linguistic resources to demonstrate their emerging social identities.

Observations of play reported in the literature and shared in this paper reveal much about the subjective nature of play and issues of access and power evidenced through language [15,20] and other semiotic systems (movement, gestures, and so on). While it is clear that children continue to develop language and literacy proficiencies during independent imaginative play [8], the need is also clear for planned and intentional teaching through more structured play scenarios. Educators are uniquely positioned to support children to develop the meaning-making skills and strategies that increase a child's repertoires for accessing social settings in their immediate lives and into their futures [18,28]. This paper presents important considerations for educators as they examine and reflect upon their knowledge of play in connection with their understanding of the children they work with to design, facilitate, and provide time for imaginative play that generates rich interactions in their own settings.

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Article

# Picture Books, Imagination and Play: Pathways to Positive Reading Identities for Young Children

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**Abstract:** Picture books are part of many young children’s lives, whether at home or in early childhood or school settings. Their unique creative combinations of words and visual images can engage children’s attention, stimulate their imagination, and support their development as meaning-makers. Nurturing a love of books in young children can foster the development not only of early literacy skills, but also positive reading identities. Early childhood educators therefore have key roles to play as selectors, analysts and mediators of picture books. This article aims to build educators’ awareness of these roles through the analytical discussion of a small group of picture books selected for their focus on children’s imaginative worlds. Children need to see themselves in books, and given that play and imagination are central to young children’s ways of being and learning, picture books about children engaged in imagination and play can be important resources for nurturing a love of reading and fostering positive reading identities in young children. This pedagogical position paper explores a small sample of such books and discusses their value as part of early literacy curriculum.

**Keywords:** picture books; reading identities; play; imagination

## 1. Introduction—Play, Picture Books and Young Children’s Development

Play and imagination are important features of childhood—children need and love to play. Indeed, play, especially imaginative play, is generally acknowledged as being essential for children’s healthy development and overall wellbeing. This is shown in Article 31 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child [1]: “Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills” [2] Early childhood policy and curriculum across the world recognise play as a vehicle for early learning (e.g., [3–5]). It supports children’s development in areas such as language, motor skills, emotional and social skills, and cognition, which includes literacy and numeracy concepts. It involves curiosity, exploration and creativity, as well as interactions and communication with others; thus, play contexts are rich with possibilities for imagination and for language and literacy development [6,7].

Picture books also provide contexts that support children’s language and literacy development. This is not just because they usually contain verbal texts as well as images, but also because they engage children as active meaning-makers, stimulating conversations and the use of imagination. When read aloud, picture books become the focus of shared attention and interaction between a child (or children) and the adult (or older child) who is reading to them. Furthermore, being read to by an adult involves a particular relational context for interaction, communication and imagination that is different from the other relational contexts that are typically part of children’s lives, such as mealtimes, getting ready for the day or other daily routines. The language used in picture books, and the thinking stimulated, as well as the experience of their multimodal features, make them valuable contributors to young children’s language and early literacy development [8,9].

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## 2. Picture Books and Early Literacy

While oral language is central to children's experiences of picture books during shared read aloud interactions in the early years, they are also encountering written language, and are gleaning information visually through illustrations and aurally through the reader's use of voice. Through such multimodal experiences, and the conversations about the books that ensue during shared reading, children actively engage in a form of 'reading' as they engage with and make meaning from picture books. Shared reading is thus valuable for supporting the development of early literacy concepts and skills such as phonemic awareness, concepts of print, reading of visual symbols and knowledge of how books work [9]. However, equally valuable in supporting children's literacy development is the role that picture books can play in fostering positive identities for children as readers [10]. As children grow, and move on from early childhood education to school, those who enjoy picture books and being read to are more likely to become children who want to read, and who feel that the world of reading is available to and possible for them. Adults who foster such positive dispositions towards books and reading are laying crucial foundations on which young children's literacy skills and reading identities can be built.

## 3. Play, Imagination and Identity in Early Childhood Curriculum and Pedagogy

The relationship between identity and learning is increasingly acknowledged in education policy and curriculum development [3,11,12]. Early childhood curricula in many parts of the world highlight the need to nurture positive dispositions and a strong sense of identity in every child, recognising these as being essential foundations for learning and development. As my research and teaching are based in the Australian context, this article focuses on a selection of Australian picture books, and the Australian early childhood curriculum, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) [3], and its understandings of identity inform the discussion of the use of play and imagination in the chosen books. It is important, however, to acknowledge that while only relevant information and extracts from the Australian early childhood curriculum will be cited, readers in other parts of the world will be able draw connections between the exploration of imagination and play in picture books and the framing of positive learner identities and dispositions, and the early childhood curriculum in their part of the world.

The notion of belonging and the way identity develops in the context of the relationships children have with others is central to the EYLF [3]. Identity and belonging are central to its underpinning philosophy, pedagogical principles and practices, and its five learning outcomes. With regard to children's relationships and identity development, the document states: "This includes their relationships with people, places and things, and the actions and responses of others. Identity is not fixed and changes over time, shaped by experiences" (p. 30). The framework's central focus on identity is the focus of Learning Outcome 1: "Children have a strong sense of identity" (p. 30). One key indicator of Outcome 1 is that every child will "show curiosity and growing confidence in their identity as a learner" (p. 34).

In many sections of the EYLF, a strong sense of identity is linked with positive dispositions for learning, such as those of curiosity and confidence which are mentioned in the previous quote from Outcome 1. Within Outcome 4, which is "Children are confident and involved learners" (p. 50), one key indicator of this is that "Children develop a growth mindset and learning dispositions such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity" (p. 51). Play, especially imaginative play, provides children with the ideal context for developing such a mindset and learning dispositions. Significantly also, the EYLF refers to the need for educators to intentionally select books with the potential for supporting children's experiences of belonging, their sense of identity and the development of positive learning dispositions (see Outcome 1, p. 34; Outcome 5, p. 60).

#### 4. Early Years Educators and Picture Books

There are many facets to early childhood educators' roles as nurturers of positive reading identities in young children, which can be guided by the principles and practices of the EYLF [3]. One facet is the need to be intentional and knowledgeable in selecting picture books and understanding their meaning, making features and possibilities in relation to children's identities. Educators therefore play the roles of selectors, analysts and mediators of the texts they share with children. The importance of educators of mediators of young children's development and learning arises from Vygotsky's theory of learning as social and interactive, with educators mediating helping to guide children through a Zone of Proximal Development [13]. In relation to early literacy learning, I argue that this mediation is a holistic role that is responsive to children's backgrounds, contexts and developing identities—it aims to support children's dispositions for learning as well as conceptual awareness and skill development. This facet of educators' roles as nurturers of children's positive reading identities is the rationale for the focus of this article. Through analytical discussion of a small sub-set of picture books that feature children's use of imagination and play, my aim is to explore their particular and unique potential for engaging children's interest in ways that can support them in developing a love of books and a positive identity as a reader.

#### 5. Children's Imagination and Picture Books

The picture books explored later in this article are Australian, as already explained. They have children as their main characters, and those children's use of imagination is central to their narrative. Given the potential of picture books for engaging children's interest and sparking their imagination, and in recognition of young children's active imaginations, some children's authors and illustrators have created texts in which child protagonists use imagination and play to deal with life's events, solve problems or overcome challenges. An especially notable example of this is the internationally beloved classic *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak [14], in which Max uses his imagination when he is sent to bed without supper, to escape from his bedroom and become King of the Wild Things. Max's imagination takes him "in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are" [14]. The adventures Max experiences embody the key ideas that inform the analytical discussion of picture books in this article—the empowering and creative nature of play and imagination, and the ways in which children use them to connect and build relationships with others. Max, confined to his room as a punishment, feels small and powerless. However, he uses his imagination to escape this reality and experiences power as he becomes King of the Wild Things and joins them in play. Eventually, enriched and perhaps emotionally healed by playing, Max uses his agency to relinquish his imagined power and return to everyday reality, in which his sense of belonging to home and family is re-established through finding "his supper waiting for him and it was still hot" [14].

As it was for Sendak's Max, imaginative, pretend play is an important part of life for young children. In relation to literacy development, the development of vocabulary [15], narrative skills [16] and creative thinking [17] are often associated with pretend play, also referred to as dramatic or socio-dramatic play.

Children regularly live in the imaginary worlds they create—perhaps fantasy worlds of monsters, fairies or super-heroes, or alternative versions of the real world, which they may inhabit as dinosaurs, lions, parents caring for babies, astronauts or fire fighters, to name just a few possibilities. Many children's authors recognise the centrality of play and imagination to children's lives, and thus, imaginative play is a focus of many much-loved picture books.

In the imagined worlds of their play, children may work through different emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, anxiety or excitement [18]. During imaginary play, children are able to control themselves and their world, in contrast to their usual experiences of relative powerlessness in the rest of their lives. In picture books, children vicariously experience the play and emotional journeys of a book's characters, and may identify with aspects

that relate to their own lives. Thus, for young children, imagination and pretend play—in books as well as other parts of life—can support both emotional and literacy development. For these reasons, in this article, I have chosen to explore picture books which spotlight the imagination and imaginative play of child protagonists, and the ways they use these within the narrative to understand and navigate life situations. The purpose of this is to show the potential contributions such books can make to the emotional, creative and dispositional dimensions of early literacy development, alongside building early literacy concepts and skills.

### 5.1. Young Children's Imagination

Imagination, the ability to think about or visualise that which is not immediately present, is a unique and important human trait, and a central aspect of childhood. “With our imaginations, we transcend time, place, and/or circumstance to think about what might have been, plan and anticipate the future, create fictional worlds, and consider alternatives to the actual experiences of our lives” [19]. Children use imagination as they make meaning of their world, using their curiosity and sense of wonder to explore and discover. Imagination can be a way of understanding the new and unfamiliar, or of creatively envisioning alternative realities or fantasies. Imagination is often part of children’s play and the stories they create and tell. Within the realm of their imagination, children have freedom to see the world in whatever way they wish. Therefore, imagination can be very empowering for children—they can use it to make meaning, creatively solve problems or exercise agency. The value of play and imagination in psychotherapy and counselling for young children experiencing trauma or other emotional challenges has been widely researched and written about, arising from the psychodynamic theories of Freud and others. The discipline of play therapy has been one important outcome of this work. In-depth discussion of psychodynamic theory is beyond the scope of this article; however, it is important to acknowledge the contribution of psychodynamic understandings of children’s play and imagination to the field of early childhood development and education. Within this theoretical paradigm, research and clinical work with children experiencing emotional difficulties by Bruno Bettelheim included in depth exploration of the role of fairy tales in allowing children to work through existential issues. Bettelheim’s book *The Uses of Enchantment* [20] has been a highly influential text in the study of children’s literature and recognition of the emotional and therapeutic role of books and stories for children and adults. Psychodynamic perspectives have shown the importance of imagination for wellbeing, and its value in helping children deal with life’s challenges. Perhaps this is because every child’s imagination is arguably connected to their identity. Making use of imagination, including in play, may therefore support the development of a positive sense of identity. Perhaps because imagination and play are central to children’s identity development journeys, they are often drawn to stories and picture books where children like them play and imagine.

#### Exploring Picture Book Portrayals of Children’s Imagination

In this section, I explore four Australian picture books that feature children’s use of imagination and play in their narratives—two by Stephen Michael King and two by author Libby Gleeson. The books that are discussed below are *Big Dog* [21], *Clancy and Millie and the Very Fine House* [22], *My Dad is a Giraffe* [23] and *Patricia* [24]. Author Libby Gleeson, author/illustrator Stephen Michael King, and illustrators Freya Blackwood and Armin Greder have all made significant contributions to contemporary Australian children’s literature. Their books have won many awards and are much loved by several generations of children. Each of the books selected for discussion in this article contains child characters who use their imaginations in different ways, for a variety of purposes.

The analytical discussion of these books draws on qualitative content analysis [25], combined with some aspects of multimodal analysis [26]. Multimodal analysis can support educators to “identify the verbal and visual strategies used by writers and illustrators. . .

to convey a representation of reality, to create interaction with child-readers and to form coherent wholes of communication" [26]. The content analysis of the four books was underpinned by a socio-cultural theoretical framework, as this reflects the theoretical underpinnings of the Australian early childhood curriculum [3], particularly its image of children as capable and agentic learners, and its emphasis of a strong sense of identity and positive learning dispositions. This framework supports the understanding of early literacy pedagogy and the centrality of engaging children with picture books that inspired this article. The four books chosen each in their own way portrays the child characters as capable of tackling challenging life situations and expressing or working through their feelings. In the light of these portrayals, and the theoretical perspectives of this article, the analysis undertaken revealed several key themes related to the role of imagination and play in children's development that these books embody—themes of empowerment, connection, creativity and resilience.

### 5.2. Play, Imagination and Empowerment

Children often feel small and/or powerless in their daily lives. Play and imagination allow them to feel larger, more powerful and more agentic than in other life situations. As Vygotsky stated about children while playing: "in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" [13] (1967/2002). The feeling of being small, powerless and overwhelmed as a child in a world run by adults is very much part of the experience of Clancy [22] and Patricia [24] (King, 2006). The two children's feelings are conveyed differently in each book; however, there are some common visual features used to symbolise powerlessness—in particular, size and vectors that convey the child's point of view. In *Clancy and Millie and the Very Fine House* [22], Clancy has just moved house, and is feeling out of place in the new house and neighbourhood. In early illustrations, Clancy is very small, looking up at the houses in his new street that tower over him. This perspective, a small child visually overpowered by his surroundings, including inside the new house, is the dominant impression conveyed visually by Blackwood in the early part of the book. It is these illustrations that provide most of the information about how Clancy is feeling. The verbal text accompanying the illustrations portrays an opposing point of view, which seems to strengthen readers' possibilities to empathise with Clancy. Children hear or read his mother's words as she enthuses about the good things in the new house ("this lovely lounge room, it's much better than the old one"), while we see Clancy's memories of similar aspects of the old house ("Clancy remembers the fire in the fireplace"). The verbal text (his mother's point of view) is simple, while in contrast the illustrations (Clancy's point of view) use dark, drab colours and show the small child overpowered by huge surroundings, feeling nostalgia for what was familiar but is now in the past.

King's character Patricia, in the book of the same name [24] (1997), like Clancy [22], often feels small and powerless in her home, and King also conveys this visually through size contrasts. When Patricia is trying to find someone in the family to share her "wonderful, amazing thoughts" with, and her parents are not paying attention, we see her as tiny in comparison—only as tall as her mother's knees. King also uses size to show the power that her imagination brings Patricia. When Patricia can wait no longer and lets all those "wonderful, amazing thoughts . . ." "come tumbling out" of her imagination into the outer world, there are two double-page spreads where we see what Patricia has been thinking about, with Patricia herself riding high on the head of a giraffe, feeling tall and powerful. A child's view of size relating to powerlessness or power is similarly visually conveyed in *My Dad is a Giraffe* [23], in which we also see moments where the child imagines himself sitting on the giraffe's head and towering above everyone else around.

In *Clancy and Millie and the Very Fine House* [22], Clancy and Millie, whom he meets in the new neighbourhood, eventually take power over the situation of moving house by playing together and building very large structures with all the packing boxes. Through the processes of playing and imagining together, a friendship is formed, and Clancy starts to feel a sense of belonging in the new house. Blackwood's illustrations again use size and the

children’s perspective to convey Clancy’s transition from feeling powerless and unhappy to taking power through creative play and connection with a new friend. At first, the boxes are a looming tower over the children, but then, we see the children climbing on the boxes, so that both the characters and readers see the boxes from a different perspective—one that is less overwhelming and much more fun. This transformation in Clancy’s emotions that happen through play and imagination with his new friend Millie is portrayed through a combination of verbal text that describes the children’s actions during play (such as being the big, bad wolf who huffs and puffs the box houses down), while the illustrations, as well as showing these scenes, presents a much lighter, brighter colour palette that seems to convey how the children are feeling while using their imaginations to create as they play.

*Big Dog* [21] is also about a small child, Jen, feeling powerless, through being scared of a big dog in the neighbourhood. In this book, the child’s fear, though portrayed visually through her body language in the illustrations, is explained also in the verbal text, which is a narrative told by an older sibling who is concerned for his/her little sister. While the verbal text includes conversations in which solutions are offered by the children’s parents, the children themselves (the older sibling and a neighbourhood friend) take power over the problem and find a way, through their creative play, to solve the problem themselves. As they are making a lion for Lunar New Year, the children decide to use it to scare the dog. The narrative of this book shows children who are resilient, seeking to take power in a scary situation, and find a way to, in this case, overcome their fear.

The relationship between empowerment and resilience, which is something many children identify with in *Big Dog* [21], is evident in a different way in *Patricia* [24]. While Gleeson’s and Greder’s Jen and her older sibling show resilience as they find a way through imaginative play to overcome a fear, Patricia shows resilience through using her imagination to solve the problem of finding someone to share her “wonderful, amazing thoughts” with. Clancy too shows resilience as he and Millie engage in creative play with the moving boxes, so that Clancy overcomes his sadness and loneliness after moving to a new home.

### 5.3. Play, Imagination and Relationships

In *My Dad is a Giraffe* [23], the child who narrates the verbal text uses his imagination to portray metaphorically his love and admiration for his dad. These feelings are actually stated in the verbal text, but the illustrations add many layers of meaning and links to imagination for children exploring this book to identify with and to stimulate their own imaginative thinking about their dads or other close family members. Through the illustrations, readers gain the impression that the child sees his dad as powerful, with King using very clear visual contrasts in size between the small child and the giraffe (his dad). The child’s imagination drives the narrative, conveyed visually and verbally as he creates in his mind all the ways he imagines playing with his giraffe dad. For example, “I can climb up his legs, slide down his neck and ride on his back”. The child’s creative thinking is also portrayed through humour, for example imagining himself sitting on his giraffe dad’s head at the movies, able to see everything on the screen, or imagining his giraffe dad sitting in an armchair drinking a cup of tea. It is only on the final page that we see, from behind, the child and (human) father walking up the hill, with the father’s body casting a very long shadow that looks like a giraffe. This could give children reading the book food for thought about shadows, and perhaps their own imaginative play with shadows, hence creating another possibility to identify with the experiences, feelings and interests of the child in the book.

All four books in different ways show how children may use their imagination and play to build or strengthen relationships. For example, we find that Patricia [24] has a strong bond with her grandfather, who like her, loves to imagine things. This is shown visually in an illustration of imagined creatures and objects that emanate from her grandfather’s mind while he is sleeping, an illustration very conceptually similar to the striking double page spreads that show Patricia’s thoughts “come tumbling out”. In Blackwood’s illustra-

tions [22], we can see Clancy and Millie’s relationship growing gradually as they create box structures and play act the story of the *3 Little Pigs*. The sibling bonds and friendships between the children in *Big Dog* [21] are shown in the way they work together to help Jen, the youngest child. Their playful creativity also leads to them building a friendly relationship with the dog that had seemed so scary, showing a different form of connection that arose for them through their imaginative play. King’s *My Dad is a Giraffe* [23] is also about a parent–child relationship, portraying visually and verbally one child’s use of playful imagination to explore and express their feelings about a parent.

## 6. Conclusions

This article contributes to literature that argues that supporting positive reading identities in young children is an important part of early literacy pedagogy. Central to this is the provision of books that resonate with children’s lives, for example their need to play and their rich imaginations. The article aims to build early childhood educators’ understanding of their role as selectors and mediators of texts in early childhood settings. To achieve this aim, I chose to focus on books in which the child characters use their imagination to express their feelings and navigate challenging life situations. Four books were chosen as exemplars, and I undertook qualitative, multimodal content analysis, underpinned by a socio-cultural perspective on young children’s literacy learning.

Childhood is a journey of learning how to be in the world—a journey of discovery and learning from dependence to independence, within complex webs of interactions and relationships [3]. It is also a journey of wonder, with play and imagination at its heart as a key to many aspects of learning and development [3]. Early childhood educators are partners in this journey, an important part of which is learning, through play, to communicate and to make meaning in many modes of literacy [7]. Picture books are a significant and valuable resource on the journey, and children gain much from engaging with books and identifying with the characters within [8,9], especially when those characters are involved in playing and imagining.

The four books explored in this article are a few of many that portray aspects of life seen through the eyes of children who use their imaginations and play to make sense of their world [18]. The analytical discussion of the books above, while not comprehensive, aims to give educators a sense of the many layers of meaning to be explored in such picture books, and to highlight some of the visual and verbal techniques through which meaning is created. The use of a content analysis and multimodality approach was appropriate for my aim of highlighting themes that may ‘speak’ to children, and contribute to supporting their love of picture books and hence their development of positive reading identities. The insights educators might gain from the use of this analytical approach introduces them to tools they can use to enhance their skills and confidence as text selectors and mediators for young children. These analytical tools, when shared with children, allow them to engage in rich meaning-making, and to glean a lot of information about the experiences and feelings of the books’ characters. When educators engage in shared analytical explorations of picture books such as those discussed in this article that are rich in multi-modal layers of meaning, they can experience the complex and sophisticated processes that are part of children’s meaning-making about picture books. It shows the potential for educators, using their own critical literacy to think analytically about books, to in turn facilitate the development of young children’s critical literacy skills. The resultant satisfaction, when the books themselves are engaging and children can identify with the characters in them, makes a crucial contribution in supporting the development of positive dispositions towards books and reading, and hence positive reading identities. The incorporation of books within classroom collections that contain characters who are themselves children, and who imagine and play just as their young readers do, can help to ensure that early childhood educators are working to support a love of books and reading by all children.

When accompanying young children on their early literacy journeys, books such as these open up valuable possibilities for building literacy concepts and skills while at the

same time nurturing children’s positive identities as readers. Repeated readings, rich conversations and guided but informal close explorations of illustrations support the development of important concepts about books and reading. Most importantly, however, these books allow children to identify with the child characters in them, especially their use of play and imagination. For educators, the play, imagination and creativity shown in the books can inspire the development of many creative play-based experiences to facilitate children’s meaning-making and literacy skill development. Children may enjoy drawing, painting or gathering materials that represent their “wonderful, amazing thoughts” after reading *Patricia* [24]. Alternatively, they might like to play with boxes as Clancy and Millie did and using their creations to imagine stories. The use of a camera or perhaps an iPad story making app to document the children’s stories and scribe the verbal narratives of their stories during this play could lead to the creation of new classroom books. In these ways, the children would become authors and illustrators, just like King, Gleeson, Blackwood and Greder. There are of course likely to be many conversations about their own experiences that may arise from the shared reading of all these books—about family members, memories, their homes, their friends or their fears. When educators select, and think analytically about, books such as these for children—books that link to their knowledge of the children’s personalities, lives, relationships and backgrounds, with consideration of their interests in play, imagination and creativity—they are supporting children in developing positive reading identities that are crucial to literacy learning.

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