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## MULTIMODAL LITERACY AND PHOTOGRAPHY:

Literacy Practices that Support and Extend Classroom Learning

## Introduction

Twenty-two third grade students are in a semi-dark classroom, sitting at their desks and looking at the screen at the front of the room. The teacher projects a black and white photograph of a woman in a coal mine and starts the class discussion with the open-ended question, "What do you see here? What do you notice in this picture?" Students study the picture and raise their hand.

Aria: I see a lady.

Teacher: Yes, there is a lady in the picture. Yes. What else do you

notice? Kennedi? (Kennedi gets up and moves her fingers

along the outside of the picture.)

Kennedi: it looks like a house.

Kaylee: She's wearing something on her head like a hat.

Jasper: I think that this is a wall of a cave.

Teacher: Yes, he thinks it is a wall of a cave and I'm going to tell you

that is what it is. It looks a little like a tree, but it is a cave.

Frank: this is a miner.

Rebecca: The hat that she is wearing has a light on it and that is a clue.

This exchange is an excerpt from a class lesson where students "read" photographs. Students in this classroom are participating in a Literacy Through Photography Curriculum (LTP) in which photographs are used as part of language arts instruction. Through the LTP curriculum, students used critical thinking and creative understanding as they learn to read pictures and then they create projects related to three themes; self-portrait, proverbs, and community (cf. Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001). Reading pictures involves predicting, inferring, and discussing details they see. The critical thinking that happens as they analyze the photographs also supports their project-based learning that involves incorporating photography to understand and represent knowledge.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what happens when students participate in a language arts curriculum that integrates photography, drama, art, reading, and writing to learn, to express, and to communicate in a third grade classroom. There are three distinct components to this curriculum which have potential to expand students' literacy understanding and meaning making. First of all, students use higher order thinking skills to build meaning and understanding of the text when they incorporate multiple modes. In order to understand this complexity of multiple modes we focus in this paper on multimodality and multimodal pedagogy, which is a multiliteracies approach to teaching and learning. Second, photography can be a mode of understanding, particularly for learners who struggle with traditional reading and writing. Third, students are able to apply their knowledge in ways that are meaningful to them because the projects allow for many different forms of expression. Therefore, these multimodal practices provide students a platform for active participation and engagement in the classroom practices. In this classroom, photography was both taught and utilized as a visual language that has its own dynamic representational system (cf. Moran & Tegano, 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Research on the arts and creativity demonstrate that incorporating multiple modes (such as images, text, or sound) allows students of all ages various opportunities to build their understanding through various perspectives (e.g., McVee, Bailey & Shanahan, 2008; Ranker, 2009).

# The setting and history of the research

This study documented a diverse urban primary school in the United States that integrates photography in the language arts curriculum as a central component of writing instruction in an urban public school that is a magnet for the arts and humanities. Ms. Brown (all names in this article are pseudonyms), the teacher of this classroom, is a Caucasian woman who has taught in public schools for 10 years. There were 22 third grade students in the classroom, 8 males and 14 females, and their racial background includes 4 Hispanic, 7 White, 10 Black, and 1 Multi-racial children. Five of the students have been identified as Academically Gifted, four receive services for English Language Learning, and only 20% passed their End of Grade reading test, which is supposed to indicate whether they are ready to progress to the next grade.

Ms. Brown implemented the LTP curriculum into her reading and writing instruction. Students used critical thinking and creative understanding as they completed projects related to three themes: self-portrait, proverbs, and community. In each project, students worked in groups to develop ideas by using learning modes such as photography, drama, art, writing, reading, and other methods of understanding. Each of the three projects took approximately three to five weeks to complete and were integrated in the language arts curriculum throughout the school year. The projects reflected three main themes as listed in the table below:

Table 1. Literacy Through Photography Projects

Project	Description	Product Example
"Best Part of Me"	Students reflected on their physical abilities and photographed their "best parts".	A student who was proud that she could kick a soccer ball photographed her foot kicking a ball
African Proverbs	Students created photo- graphs of their understanding of African Proverbs, which often feature a moral or life lesson	Two students illustrated the proverb "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" by acting out that you shouldn't count on something before you have it and taking pictures of a child who told everyone he had a certain Christmas present but did not receive it.
Community Photographs	Students captured an aspect of their community (outside of school) that was important to them	One student took a picture of his grandparent's dog Max, sitting in front of the fireplace

The principal and teachers of this school have maintained the arts-based curriculum despite intense pressure to adopt more rigid methods of teaching and gear instruction to test preparation. This is particularly problematic in American schools, where the pressure to prepare students for testing discourages teachers from implementing creative approaches to teaching and learning (Allington & Cunningham, 2006).

# Multimodal literacy and classroom learning

This classroom curriculum is informed by a multimodal pedagogical approach, which posits that language can be expressed through different modes of representation such as visual images, drama, or song (cf. Albers & Harste, 2007; Pahl, 2009). Reading literacy, visual literacy and other modes of literacies are not seen separate anymore. In everyday life almost all texts we read are multimodal. When children read a newspaper or webpage, they are consumers of written text

alongside images and graphics. In addition, written text is visual, seen in a same ways as images even though they use different "languages" and affordances and distinct logics. For example, written text has a reading path, it is read in western cultures from left to right and it is divided to language units like words, sentences and paragraphs. Writing is narrative and told in before-after-structure but image more spatial and governed by the logic of space. The syntax of the writing is quite stable but the semantic more open and has to be filled with meaning by a reader. On the other hand the image is semantically more closed but the syntax is open. There is not fixed place from where we have to start read images and not ordered reading path (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Kress, 2003).

Reading and meaning making can also be seen as synaesthetic activities which means articulation of meaning by using our all sense capabilities across different modes. Opportunities to learn with visual modes can broaden children's understanding and perspective while also promoting critical and higher level thinking that comes from creative thought (Greene, 2000). Scholars who have noted the visuality of literacy usually emphasize critical and creative aspects of meaning making and sign-design of students and suggest productive experiences (Tyner, 1998) and integration of everyday media practices to school work (cf. Kupiainen, 2013). In this way, 'literacy' suggests not only reading skills, it is inclusive of all modes of reading, writing and producing text and end products for different communicative purposes.

In this particular study, the teacher focused on expanding students' learning by integrating photography alongside many other semiotic resources found in reading and language arts classrooms. Photographs have been used in the classroom to support reflection and critical thinking as well as connect to the multiple contexts of children's lives. For instance, teachers have used photographs as a way to integrate knowledge of children's families, linguistic practices, and cultural backgrounds (Allen et al., 2002; Keat, Strickland, & Marinak, 2009). Photography holds the promise of supporting readers and

writers, especially reluctant learners, because it allows them to work with images and ideas (Zenkov, Harmon & van Lier, 2008).

# Data collection and analysis

Ethnographic techniques of participant-observation and descriptive analysis were applied to the classroom setting as Author 1 gathered data, on average twice a week, throughout a full school year (cf. Creswell, 2008). Then Author 1 used a case study approach in order to provide an in-depth, multi-dimensional consideration of phenomena by drawing on multiple data sources (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) to examine and describe the LTP program in this third grade classroom. Data were generated from classroom observations, student writing and photographs, interviews and discussions. During the photography projects, Author 1 observed and videotaped students, collected work samples, and informally asked questions about their work. After each of the three projects was completed (i.e., self-portrait, proverbs, and community), Author 1 conducted a retrospective think-aloud protocol (cf. Schellings, Aarnoutse, & van Leeuwen, 2006) with focus group students using multimodal interviews. The multimodal interviews consisted of asking students to provide verbal explanations and responses while viewing a PowerPoint with their own images and videos embedded in each slide. During the multimodal interviews, students discussed and analyzed their different artifacts and reflected on the process of learning using the different modalities.

Data analysis involved using descriptive analysis to create a thick description of the Literacy Through Photography program, language arts block, and classroom routines. Interviews with the teacher and students, student work, and field notes were used for describing the classroom context. The analysis focused on a specific array of communicative modes from students' projects which included photos, sketches, writing, and drama; however the focus of this article is specifically focused on the visual mode of photography in the language arts classroom.

# Photography as a distinct form of literacy

In this classroom, photography was both taught and utilized as a visual language that has its own dynamic representational system (cf. Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001). Moran & Tegano (2005) describe the particular characteristics of photography in this way: "Just as speakers search for the right word, teachers who use photography as a language of inquiry search for the right angle or how closely the camera comes to the children or scene being photographed in order to convey a particular message..." (p. 1). Important terms that were integrated in classroom lessons include:

Framing — what is included (or not included) in the picture

Symbol – what details comprise the photograph

Time — the specific point where the action is captured Point of View — the angle and vision of the photograph (Ewald &

Lightfoot, 2001).

In the classroom photography projects, students utilized these specific concepts in order to make meaning. One example of how photography used specific visual language was in a lesson where students began with a photograph to tell a story about themselves. For this classroom project, the teacher read a book called the *Best Part of Me: Children Talk about their Bodies in Pictures and Words* (Ewald, 2002). This book is a collection of photographs taken by children where they photograph their "best parts" and write a story that goes along with the picture. Students began this project by creating a rough sketch of themselves and jotting down stories or skills for different body parts. Ms. Brown started the lesson by telling them to, "...think about the different stories you can tell based on your body. So, for example, you might have some memories, or feelings, or associations, of your body".

Students brainstormed how their body tells a story (see Figure 1 for an example) by sketching a self-portrait and labeling it with ideas;

for example some students explained that "my feet are for kicking a soccer ball" or "my eyes are blue just like my grandfather's".



Figure 1. Brainstorming the Best Part of Me

After the children brainstormed ideas, they were instructed to select which body part they would photograph and write about, Ms. B. gave instruction on how to set up a shot by looking at other photographs and attending to the composition of a photograph. An excerpt of her lesson showed how she brought in the visual elements that are characteristic of photographs:

Ms. Brown: I also want you to remember **framing**. Thinking about what's in your picture, ok? We talked about that with Alejandro's picture (one of the children in an example), and the teeth.

He didn't include his whole body because he wanted you to notice his teeth. So when you're looking through the view finder thinking about what is inside that frame. [Goes to next slide with the next photo] Yeah you've seen this picture, what's in the background? So be thinking, is your picture going to be indoors or outdoors? If maybe you love to write, and so your hands are in the photograph then what could be some things in the background?

The class considered various aspects of photography using terms that were specific for that mode, such as framing (cf. Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001). An important aspect of this instruction was that students would be creating their own photographs; this process of creating their own products as usually is emphasized in visual and multimodal literacy theories. Instruction was geared to both introducing elements of a photograph and considering how students could use these components in their own photographs.

As students created their photographs, many of the elements related to composition of the photograph were considered, which reflected conversations they had engaged in while "reading" pictures. An example occurred when Jasmine took a picture of her foot kicking a soccer ball. Jasmine worked with a partner and was very deliberate in selecting a place to photograph her foot kicking a soccer ball. She explained that, "I decided what to take because I chose um, a picture of when I was playing soccer and I chose to take a picture where the fence is at because we play soccer over there the most for recess. And I just chose to take a picture over there." For Jasmine, both symbol (of the soccer ball that she brought from home) and point of view (of including the fence and the grass where they played the game) were important elements as she planned her photograph.

When I was playing sooder. I Did tricks With my feet, I can do tricks like Zig Zag inthe grass, I can move my feet straight, curved right, least. That's way I lik my teet



Figure 2. Jasmine's Soccer Picture and Story<sup>1</sup>.

For Jasmine, as well as other students, the camera becomes the mediator of the students' intentions and their actions of taking a picture (cf. Moran & Tegano, 2005). In his model of communication Kress (2009) emphasizes the interest and attention of the reader or interpreter. In interpretation process the interpreter makes meaning based on her interest and engagement. Therefore literacy does not actualize in quite passive cognitive reading action but in more active participatory process. The reader's interest determines how she engages with the

Jasmine's written story was: When I was playing soccer I did tricks with my feet. I did tricks with my feet. I can do tricks like zig zag through the grass, I can move my feet straight curve right left, that's why I like my feet.

text. She make choices, shape her ordering of the text, "redesign" the text. Kress explains this in a following way. Reader's existing

"interest shapes
attention, which produces
engagement leading to
selection of elements from the message, leading to a
framing of these elements, which leads to their
transformation and transduction, which produces a
new ('inner') sign"
(p. 42)

Photography goes beyond making a visual image in this classroom; photographs are multi-layered forms of meaning with many potential interpretations. As a result, it can even be described as a "language of inquiry" that provides opportunities for students to learn about the world around them (Moran & Tegano, 2005). Students are utilizing visual language and resources of photography: framing, symbol, point of view, and time as they understanding concepts and integrating such concepts in their classroom curriculum. In this way, photography had a specific way of knowledge representation that is distinct from writing or reading. By providing students with an opportunity to express their understanding through photographs, students had new pathways for learning and communicating.

# Photography supporting the "traditional" language arts curriculum

Not only did photography provide a unique form of literacy with specific modes for expression, it also supported other forms of literacy in the language arts curriculum. Teaching how to "read" visual images can support reading comprehension. For teachers who incorporate picturebooks as part of their reading program, they often focus on

visual modes of understanding when they attend to the significance of the illustrations (Sipe, 2007). In the excerpt below, Ms. Brown attends to sounds, images, and text as she reads a picturebook aloud to students.

Teacher: Ok. I want you to think for a minute, how would you, what

did you learn about black cat's community? How would you

describe it? Rebecca?

Rebecca: It's very vocal.

Teacher: Ok, what do you mean by that?

Rebecca: Lots of people are there. Because you can tell by how many

houses and there's subways. Because probably the streets get

so crowded. And um, stuff like that.

As the teacher guided the students through the process of analyzing illustration, students were using visual meanings of the images created by text and pictures to understand the story. It is important to note that the teacher encouraged students to consider the images created by the text and pictures. This understanding of images was helpful to understanding the visual elements of photography as well.

While visual elements can be emphasized as students read a picturebook, analysis of visual images in photographs can also connect with comprehension instruction. An excerpt of the way the teacher conducted a classroom discussion where students critically analyzed a photograph indicates how analysis of photographs integrates many important strategies related to language arts objectives:

Teacher: Okay, so the photographer has given you several clues. And I want to let you try and figure out what's going on here, let's use our detective work. You've told me about how his body is positioned and what kinds of gestures he's making. We've talked about the color and about how this black and white makes it look like he's floating. And then James noticed how it's white here and it's dark here and the windowsill is

white. You can't see it as much here. What do you think the photographer was trying to accomplish with the dark colors? What mood does it create?

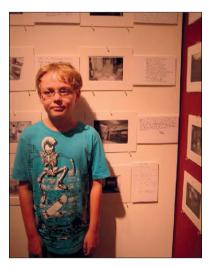
In many ways, the conversations where children "read" photographs support many of the strategies reading and writing instruction. Students are encouraged to comprehend what is happening in the story, use their critical thinking to consider the scene, and talk about setting, tone, and mood. This occurs even though there are some aspects of the conversation that are characteristic of visual forms of literacy. Students are looking at colors, gestures, and body positioning; these aspects could only be interpreted in a certain way because it is a photograph.

Students also learned writing instruction through integration of photography. The process of incorporating photographs supported students' writing through teaching topic selection, attention to detail, and story development. For example, Eric was a student whose composing process was positively affected by integrating photography. In many instances in the classroom, he struggled with what to write and how to get his ideas on paper. He often set quietly or provided very little details during writing time. An example was when he began planning his multimodal community project where students were to bring a camera home and take 24 pictures that represented their community. Ms. Brown used many brainstorming techniques and read many stories to encourage children to plan out ideas prior to taking the cameras home. Students started by sketching their ideas about community and then discussing their brainstorming ideas in small groups. Eric contributed very little to the small group discussion. When finally asked to tell what he thought about when he considered community, he responded, "I don't really have an idea about my community. Maybe it is the club house at my apartment complex". Eric had difficulty justifying his ideas or elaborating details about his community.

After taking his camera home and developed his pictures, his idea about community was much more extensive and reflected his

experiences at both his mother's and grandparent's houses. He told us that he "took the camera home and took pictures of everyday things" which included his dad using the phone and working on the computer, his grandparents in front of the fireplace, and a dog who greets him every day when he gets off the school bus. His final product included a photograph of his grandparent's dog Max, sitting in front of the fireplace and a poem that read:

My dog Max she is relaxed she likes sitting by the fireplace and chewing on laces Max is black like midnight she has green eyes like a leaf from a tree.



Eric is an example of how students can use the images to help them with their writing. In his case, the images gave him a way to explore the concept of community. He, in turn, was able to successfully express his ideas in written form. His final product consisted of a photograph and story that he was visible proud of (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Eric displaying his photograph and poem

# Learning implications in the classroom

As students participated in projects that allowed for multiple modes of expression, it was important for students to explore their ideas using various modes (photography, reading, writing, sketching) and also create a final product that reflected their understanding. One of the most significant aspects of using a multimodal pedagogy is that it allows students to understand and challenge their existing conceptual knowledge using different conceptual modes (Zammit, 2010). It is significant to move students from exploring their own understanding, to learning different modes and then moving to interpreting and constructing new texts.

Probably the most powerful evidence of how visual literacy supports and extends reading and writing comes from the students' feedback. In a group discussion where students were asked to describe how they used photography, they told the first Author that it was helpful because, "...the kids will get into like a picture and it makes them like know what they're talking about". More significantly, two students named Zed and Amelia explained how the integration of photography helps them when they are struggling with reading and communication. Zed explained that photography was helpful, particularly when they struggled with understanding the meaning of ideas. He told us that "...if the kid has a hard time like reading out the words the picture will help him understand how to do it". Amelia agreed with him, explaining that when "teachers are reading and they don't understand it" that the images can help them with their learning.

The opportunities for literacy learning in this classroom allowed for various ways to differentiate as students explored their ideas in meaningful ways. For example, the culminating project for each LTP topic was a photographic exhibit. Students had the opportunity to share their final product, discuss their classmates' products and share with a larger community (see Figure 4).

These students benefitted from learning the skills of photography and also integrating photography into their classroom literacy learning.



Figure 4. Students' Community Photography Exhibit

## Discussion

This research contributes to the field of multimodal and visual literacies in a way that connects pedagogical understanding. Utilizing different forms of communication, such as photographs, alongside traditional school literacies, such as readers' workshop, expands the options that children have of processing and expressing their understanding. The use of multimodal literacies does more than connect the "known to the new." In this classroom, it was found that students' literacy practices are expanded and engaged when they have the opportunities to utilize different forms of communication, such as photography or drama, alongside traditional school literacies, such as writer's workshop or reading groups. The multimodal practices support students' meaning making process as they integrate their own experiences, interests and engagement to the content. Literacy is seen more active and even embodied practice where students' can *select* and *frame* meaning making elements and produce their own stories.

It is important to consider how literacy educators and researchers might consider how visual literacy can impact classroom teaching and learning. While our world becomes more visual with increases in technology, learning strategies are being revisioned as we recognize the impact of such advances. As schools and classrooms are increasingly abandoning curricula that encourages diverse and creative ways of knowing in lieu of teaching practices that focus on repetitious and standardized learning (Siegel, 2006). This is particularly the case for low performing urban schools that are racially and culturally diverse, such as the context of this study. Many schools are adopting curricula that teach to the test while teachers are losing their professional autonomy and principals are concerned about how test results impact their job security. The emphasis on testing preparation only expands the digital divide and makes learning more disconnected and less relevant for students. As we progress with teaching and learning in our increasingly visual and technological world, the way people teach and learn are continuously changing; we hope that research and pedagogy continues to explore, understand, and innovate techniques to inform both literacy research and teaching.

Multimodal literacy practices give teachers and students great opportunities to create versatile cross-cutting pedagogies and inclusive learning conditions where all students can actively participate in the learning process. As a result, it is an important aspect of this multiliteracy research to use this knowledge to advocate for expansive and inclusive ways of learning and representing, embracing the diverse ways of knowing found in our 21st century classrooms.

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