

## Learning through story: A collaborative, multimodal arts approach

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*ABSTRACT: Literate practice in the arts encompasses both aesthetics and creativity. It is also multimodal in nature and often collaborative. This article presents data collected from a small multi-age school, with children from Prep to Year 7, during their preparation for an end-of-year show. The children had studied the topics of conservation and sustainability through the work of author Graeme Base and in particular his children's book The Sign of the Seahorse (1992). Using a mentoring and collaborative approach the children worked together to present the story through drama, dance and song. This research highlights the importance of expressing knowledge and meaning through multiple modes – not just using language. It demonstrates that creative and collaborative expression can be a powerful tool for learning and understanding story.*

*KEYWORDS: The arts, literacy, multimodal, collaboration, multi-age, story.*

### INTRODUCTION

The arts have the potential to interact or converse with literacy learning in meaningful and transformative ways (Barton, 2014; Ewing, 2010; Caldwell & Vaughan, 2011). Much research not only demonstrates the instrumental value of the arts but also explores the intrinsic nature of arts practice (Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002; Langer, 1953). This is particularly relevant given the increase in the number of ways in which people communicate, often articulated both aesthetically and creatively through the use of multiple modes (Barton, 2014; Greene, 1991; Jewitt, 2006). Recent research has explored the exponential growth of multimodal literate practice, influenced by technologies predominantly associated with visual and aural developments during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. However, application of these to teaching and learning still prevails from an English education point of view rather than valuing the distinct literacies that exist in various discipline areas including the arts.

It is important to acknowledge that each curriculum area has its own knowledge-building and learning approaches in the classroom context. For English and the arts, understanding and utilising strengths from each of the discipline's approaches to being literate is important. This kind of genuine integration, in which neither subject dominates, enhances the other. Recognising and valuing the distinct attributes each area brings to the other and enabling such a relationship where they "stretch" each other (Freebody, 2014) is potentially transformative and also values the notion of literacy as a socially constructed and multimodal concept.

In the arts both collaborative teamwork and individual expression are seen as central to practice. Artists encourage us to see things from a different perspective and use elements such as signs, symbols and metaphors in order to “give shape to formless ideas” (Wright, 2012, p. 2). This process can be applied in a school context, enabling children to create awareness and in the process create objects and stories that can be shared with others. This in turn assists in the development of literacy learning through multimodal representations of the narrative.

## **A REVIEW OF LITERATURE: A COLLABORATIVE, MULTIMODAL ARTS APPROACH**

Stories help to make sense of, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experience; the past with the present, the fictional with the “real” the official with the unofficial, personal with the professional, the canonical with the different and the unexpected. Stories help us transform the present and shape the future for our students and ourselves so that it will be richer or better than the past. (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, pp. 242-243)

Stories are important in helping us to make sense of the world. Russell-Bowie (2009) states that, “since the beginning of time, stories have been used to entertain, pass on information, values and culture, and nourish the spirit” (p. 236). Human beings are natural storytellers and evidence of storytelling has been found in most civilisations. Storytelling is therefore a way of understanding the world and ourselves. In regards to education, Elbaz (1991) contends that “story, is the very stuff of teaching, the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers, and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense” (p. 3). McCaslin (2006) reveals that although people tend to regard storytelling as being relevant only for young children, this perception obscures the importance of stories in many cultures as a way of disseminating important information for all members of society. Stories help people to understand their place in the world and make connections, and in doing so assist in the construction of their identity.

Schools are important places for children and young people to think about who they are. As McCaslin (2006) notes, students come from a range of backgrounds and are bringing “varied ethnic, racial, linguistic and cultural backgrounds into classrooms that only fifty or sixty years ago were homogenous” (p. 6). McLaren and Giarelli (1995) contend that identity is not static or pre-determined by elements such as race, class or gender, and implore teachers to build “new social spaces” in their classrooms to help them extend their sense of self (p. 8). This aligns with Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič’s (2000) notion that all literate practices are “socially-situated”. The arts are important vehicles to address this idea, in particular areas such as drama:

Learning in drama is active, social, and experiential; it involves critical inquiry and creative problem-solving. Also, drama engages the whole person – the intellect, the emotions, the imagination, and the body – and it develops socially useful skills and knowledge. Drama thus provides a space for “social dreaming”, where young people can participate in an open-ended and dialogic search for meaning. (Sinclair, Donelan, Bird, O’Toole, & Freebody 2009, p. 71)

When children and young people are participating in role it provides them with the opportunity to become someone else and express things they may not normally say as

themselves. It also provides important opportunities for others to see them as someone else. Stories are an excellent resource to use as the basis of a drama activity. Students work with elements of the plot and characters to create dramatic fiction. During this process the students are continually reflecting on the story they are creating and make choices involving their character to contribute to the development of the drama activity. The social nature of drama requires interaction with others, high levels of communication and the ability to negotiate meaning. Rather than focussing on individual achievement, drama encourages group interaction and draws on a range of experiences that “enriches the minds and feelings of individuals within the group” (O’Neill & Lambert, 1982, p. 13). This can be particularly important in schools that have a small population of students such as multi-age schools.

### **The important role of small multi-age schools**

Small schools of populations of 200 or less enrolments represent 45 percent of Australian schools, mainly as a result of distance and low population (Halsey, 2011). One-room schools which have much smaller numbers (approximately 5-30 students) were common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in a range of countries including Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Spain. One teacher would be responsible for children from a range of ages and for the learning that took place. It was inevitable that small schools became, and still are, an intrinsic part of their communities at the local level. They are able to provide important opportunities for students to feel part of a connected community owing to the smaller teacher-student ratio. However, the paradox is that due to smaller enrolments these types of schools are constantly under the threat of closure but, as Halsey (2011) argues, they have demonstrated remarkable resilience due to their “track record for innovation, responsiveness and adaptiveness that has been driven by numerous factors including multigrade pedagogy” (p. 7).

The term “multigrade” refers to the process in which children are identified by a grade level, yet may be in a class in which two or more grade levels are taught together, which is also known as a “composite class”. Multi-age schools group students across ages without reference to the grade they may belong to. This can occur through ability level and/or interest and is often used in alternative schools such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia. Veenman (1995) argues that multi-grade classrooms occur due to administrative reasons, such as declining enrolments, whereas multi-age classrooms are based on the desire to institute pedagogical improvements.

In a study by Proehl, Douglas, Elizas, Johnson and Westsmith (2013) the findings showed that in multi-grade and multi-age schools many benefits are gained. These included students who were “more likely to nurture other students and be nurtured by them; assume shared responsibility and leadership in the classroom and at home; are involved in fewer disciplinary incidents; and are more respectful of their classmates” (p. 437). Multi-age groupings have found to be both “artistically and socially beneficial for children” (Kelehear & Heid, 2002, p. 67). Seidel, Tishman, Winner, Hetland, & Palmer (2009) assert that arts experiences are essentially social because they involve other people. Sawyer (2006) contends that the creative process is unavoidably collaborative and argues that the elements of improvisation, collaboration and communication are intrinsically linked to creativity.

## The important role of the arts in schools

The opportunity to work in a group in an arts experience to create something larger than one individual could “offers an identity and sense of purpose to one’s efforts that helps many young people sustain commitment to their own learning through their commitment to being a full contributor to the work of the group” (Baldwin, 2009, p. 40). Engagement in drama education fosters the development of skills to assist working productively in groups:

Through drama, children can become more socially confident and better able to work with others in a team. In many learning situations in school, it is possible to be solitary or be in a group, but working in parallel rather than truly working together. In drama, children have to work together and support each other and will gradually become more confident and braver about taking personal risks in relation to what they say and do. (Baldwin, 2009, p. 44)

As students start to put aside their own needs and desires and begin to work towards a common goal, they move through various stages of working in groups. Tuckman (1965) and Tuckman and Jensen (1977) identify these as: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning (and Transforming). This final stage has also been described as Deforming/Mourning.

Team stage	Team behaviour	Team Leader
<b>Forming</b>	Polite, impersonal, formal, watchful, guarded.	Getting people talking, introducing each other, giving purpose to the group.
<b>Storming</b>	Resisting involvement, arguing, opting out, feeling stuck.	Resolving conflicts openly, permitting differences, involving everyone, supporting individuals.
<b>Norming</b>	Getting organised, working together, setting ground rules and procedures.	Focussing group effort, giving feedback and encouragement, developing skills.
<b>Performing</b>	Reaching decisions, producing results, working closely and supportively, being resourceful and creative.	Giving support and encouragement, steering the group, reviewing progress, challenging the results, feeding in new ideas, standing back.
<b>Adjourning (and transforming) or deforming/mourning</b>	Completion of the group process resulting in termination of roles, completion of tasks and reduction of dependency.	Recognising that some members will feel a sense of loss, particularly if the dissolution of the group was unplanned. Providing support to enable team members to move on.

**Table 1. Stages of group formation<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Tuckman (1965) and Tuckman & Jensen (1977)

Table 1 provides an overview of these stages and how the roles of the team and the leader relate to each one. The Forming stage describes the initial coming together of group members, the Storming stage is where group members negotiate their place/role in the group, the Norming stage is where the group begins to work together, the Performing stage is the culmination of the group's goal and the Adjourning (and Transforming) stage is the final stage in which the group has met its goal and has decided there is no further purpose for the group. In some cases people also feel transformed through the process they have been engaged with and have a new sense of purpose and identity.

The notion of co-operative learning, which many also describe as collaborative learning, has evolved predominately from the theories of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and his concept of a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the distance between what a person can achieve as an individual, compared to what they can achieve if under the guidance of more capable peers. In educational environments, for example, teachers who wish to maximise what a child can accomplish will minimise the time the child works alone on school tasks, and maximise the time they can work with others who possess different knowledge or expertise. Vygotsky claimed that cooperative learning is the essential means by which the mind constructs knowledge and invents meaning (Thousand, Villa & Nevin, 1994). Educationalists have recognised a number of strategies which feature collaborative processes, such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning groups, which help students learn more effectively.

In the arts multiple ways of knowing can capture a range of thinking, contributing to diverse literate practices. In drama, for example, students are able to explore their emotions in the controlled environment of the classroom through various dramatic forms and techniques.

In the art of creative drama, we move outward as we communicate by sending and receiving messages through dialogue, actions, and nonverbal communication. Creative drama is concerned with receiving a message and a willingness to understand another person's point of view or way of looking at a situation. It also requires sensitivity to the needs, level of comprehension, and receptivity of the receiver. (Edwards, 2006, p. 205)

Personal qualities such as confidence, creative thinking, enquiry, effective participation, tolerance, motivation, managing feelings, an ability to work in teams, and empathy for others are developed through drama. These personal qualities are often a result of being able to express oneself through a variety of modes – indeed an ensemble of modes. The arts are inherently multimodal (Barton, 2014) and therefore provide a unique opportunity for children to present their knowledge, understanding and performative skills via arts practice (Wright, 2012).

### **The arts: Multimodal literate practice**

The study of social semiotics has influenced research in the area of literacy and therefore impacts on English education and practice. Semiotics refers to the study of symbols, involving the signifier (the form) and the signified (the meaning) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, 2006). In this sense, when children are afforded the opportunity to express meaning via multiple forms or modes, it often becomes their choice of which form or signifier has the best fit for their intended signified or meaning. Kress

and van Leeuwen (2006) offer three kinds of meanings present in meaning-making systems. These are: 1. Ideational or representational meanings; 2. Interpersonal or interactive meanings; and 3. Textual or compositional meanings. Ideational or representational meanings take into account those that are constructed by the forms of representation of events in the material world. These include visual meaning, objects and participants as well as the circumstances in which symbolic meaning occurs. Interpersonal or interactive meanings are about the relationships between these participants as well as between the viewer and what is viewed, and textual or compositional meanings relate to the ways in which objects and/or people are placed within a space. This can often indicate information value or intended emphasis on what is valued more than others (Barton & Unsworth, 2014). In arts practice it is important to note the integral role that all modes play in expressing information. The methods in which different ways of knowing are placed with, and in each other, is vital in understanding the three meanings described by Kress and van Leeuwen. Handerhan (1993) notes that multimodal opportunities need to be increased in classroom practice as, more often than not, language or linguistic modes of communication are privileged in school environments. This may result in many children not being able to express their deep knowledge of certain topics, including comprehension of stories in the study of English. However, Davis's (2008) finding in Australia's National Review of Visual Education revealed that "the curriculum stalwarts of literacy and numeracy are no longer sufficient to equip students with the basics they need to operate in the innovation oriented, digitally wired twenty-first century" (p. 10).

Multimodal interpretation and expression therefore can embrace and be most effective in addressing both receptive and productive modes (ACARA, 2012) required in curriculum and assessment in schools. Cope and Kalantzis' (2000) design elements for multiliteracies which includes aural, gestural, linguistic, spatial and visual modes, can be drawn on both individually or in combination by educators, (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Lemke, 2000) to explain key content and concepts, and in addition for describing students' knowledge and understanding.

Barton and Ryan (2014) describe how multimodal approaches to reflection are often triggered by certain pedagogical nuances that can result in transformative learning. Oral approaches to expression, for example, require deep understanding of the speaker in relation to both the purpose of the speech and their intended audience. According to Barton and Ryan (2014) this process exemplifies higher-order thinking. Visual modes enable the learner to express understanding through visual language and conceptual images. They also afford children the chance to express internal ideas in an expressive way through use of colour, line, form, shape and so forth (Barton, 2014). Embodiment and movement require learners to "feel" critical concepts deeply in a corporeal way. Being able to cement understanding of a certain character, for example, through movement, highlights key attributes of that character such as age, emotion, compassion or tolerance, or even hatred. When children experience and use these particular modes and/or combination of them to express meaning it, in turn, develops their capacity to show strong evidence of understanding both individually and collaboratively (Stinson, 2014). It ultimately means that they are multimodally literate, and skills such as effective problem-solving, creative and critical thinking, and ethical understanding are further enhanced (Greene, 1991). The opportunity to work with others collaboratively also enhances and consolidates these understandings.

## **BACKGROUND: THE ARTS AND LITERACY PROJECT**

The arts and literacy project upon which this paper has drawn is a research study that aims to identify the distinct literate practices that occur in various art forms in education contexts. As such, teachers' classroom practices in each of the arts, including dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts, were observed and recorded. Findings from the study so far indicate that each of the arts has differing ways in which students become "arts-literate". Further, these approaches are often multimodal and have at their core creative and aesthetic expression and interpretation (Barton, 2014).

This phase of the research explores the application of this knowledge to improve literacy learning. Literacy as a concept appears to have divergent definitions between both policy and practice. Prevalent in the literature is the fact that standardised testing, and the ways in which literacy is viewed as a result of these tests, encourages a narrow perception of literacy. This consequently impacts on the ways in which teachers interpret literacy learning for their classrooms, and tends to focus more on improving results on literacy tests rather than embracing the extensive research that acknowledges literate practice as an "open-textured" concept (Freebody, 2007) – one that embraces diversity, addresses the exponential growth of technology and conceptual thinking, and accepts multiple ways of knowing and communicating.

The context for this phase of the study is a small multi-age school, with a total of 18 students from Prep to Year 7. The school had at its core multi-disciplinary and multi-age pedagogy. The children, while at times working within their own age-groups, also shared a number of key learning areas together, including the arts. Every year in the final term of school, the teaching staff and children would prepare for an end-of-year show. They valued the process of learning creative arts and story through this performance. This annual event was a key component of the school's identity, where the whole school community, including those with previous associations with the school, would come back together to celebrate the students' learning journeys.

In 2012 the school staged Graeme Base's *The Sign of the Seahorse*, a story with a moral message of environmental consciousness and sustainability for the sea and its many creatures. As part of the production the children studied their characters in detail, including the appropriate voice to use, how to move as that character and how to relate to other characters. They were also involved in varying degrees in creating costumes, props and sets. The children worked closely with their teachers and teaching assistants as well as one other throughout the entire production.

In 2012 the production was documented through the use of video, reflective practice and interview data with the view of investigating the impact of the process on the children's understanding of the narrative as well as the ways in which they worked collaboratively together.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature as it aims to view phenomena in action. A number of data-sets have been used including: video data of rehearsals and the final performance, interview data, reflections, samples of students' work including writing samples, costumes and sets, and staged and dance choreography. Each data-set involved a number of "learning experiences" that were drawn upon to report on the research findings.

Ethical approval was gained from both the university's and education department's respective research ethics sectors. All participants, including the 18 children and two teachers, signed consent and image release forms.

### Data analysis

Drawing on the theories of collaboration (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) and social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), as explored in the literature review, a coding framework was developed to assist in the analysis of the "learning experiences". For the purpose of this paper four key learning experiences will be discussed including: 1. Becoming familiar with the script; 2 & 3. Belonging to a storytelling group; and 4. Being a collaborative and reflective performer.<sup>2</sup> The coding for each of these learning experiences appears in Appendix A.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Description of Learning Experience 1 (LE1): Becoming familiar with the script

The first "learning experience" (LE1) occurred at the beginning of the term after the students had already read the story *The Sign of the Seahorse*. The teacher shared with the children the script which they were to base their performance on for their end of year performance<sup>3</sup>. Owing to the small number of students attending the school, the learning experience enabled the older children to be paired with the younger children as they read through the script. See Appendix A for further detail on the activities in this learning experience.

### Analysis and discussion

As this learning experience focused on becoming familiar with the script by reading through it, the main semiotic representation was that of written language. However, the children and the teacher read this orally. At the beginning of the experience the teacher and older students would support the younger students with speaking, if they had any lines in the script. The children in Prep-Year 1 were partnered with the older children for this support. Through the phases of the lessons the representational

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<sup>2</sup> Being, belonging and becoming is from the DEEWR Early Years Learning Framework that Wright (2012) discusses in arts education practice.

<sup>3</sup> The authors would like to thank both Graeme Base and Hal Leonard for their support of the school's end-of-year project.



modes increased from oral language to gestural language, as the teacher encouraged the children to think about ways in which they could best represent their allocated character through their voice. Terms such as tone, volume and pace were explained so that the children could express their character more authentically. The teacher also explained that facial expressions or body movements could also add to this characterisation, particularly once the children were “acting” it out. At this stage of the learning cycle, ideational or representational meaning is the focus, as it is the preliminary stage of learning about the characters and the setting of the play.

In this learning experience, according to Tuckman’s (1965) model, the group was in the forming stage, as the team leader introduced the script, gave advice, explained the purpose of the task and provided encouragement along the way. The children were just beginning to build skills in oracy as well as to consider the ways in which each of the main characters could be represented through their voice. As the children became aware of what was required, some moved quickly through a storming stage as they negotiated their roles in the group, whilst others moved straight to the norming stage where they began working effectively as members of the team, which included supporting others to achieve the group’s goal. For example, at the beginning of the “being familiar with the script” lessons, a number of the younger children would become tired while the older children continued to be able to read their lines. Working with a range of age-groups, it became clear, required the teachers and older students to provide other options for the younger children in case they strayed off task.

### **Description of Learning Experience 2 (LE2): Belonging to a storytelling group**

The second learning experience (LE2) saw the children “stage” the performance for the first time without their scripts. The teacher marked out on the ground with masking tape demarcating key places for them to guide their movements on the “stage” (see Appendix A: LE2).

### **Analysis and discussion**

In LE2 the main mode of representation was once again oral language as the children were now allocated their characters and had memorised their lines from the script. This was the first time they would start to “stage” or move around without referring to their scripts for support. Therefore gestural communication was more important in this learning experience. The teacher had mapped out on the ground the boundaries of the stage. She also marked spots with which the children were to become familiar in regard to the staging and movement in this space. Therefore spatial awareness was also important – the children needed to know where they were to enter and exit the stage but also where they were located in relation to other characters in the space. In this learning experience, all three meanings, that is, ideational/representational, interpersonal/interactive and textual/compositional were addressed. However, the emphasis lay in both textual/compositional, as the children were beginning to learn where they were placed on the stage, and interpersonal/interactive, as the spatial awareness also influenced the ways in which they would interact with each other in this space.

In regard to the stages of group work in this learning experience, the main ones were storming and norming. The children were already quite familiar with the script, so

they were now starting to belong to a storytelling group. Collaboratively, they were aiming to tell the story to the best of their ability, so beginning to stage it with an awareness of one another as a team was important. The teacher would consistently provide supportive feedback and encourage the children to improve the ways in which they were presenting their characters. One younger student was not following instructions well, so the teacher asked her to move off the stage area and sit down until she was able to participate correctly. This was a minor storming incident in the lesson, as it did not impact on the other children and their practice.

### **Description of Learning Experience 3 (LE3) and LE4: Being a collaborative and reflective performer**

The third learning experience (LE3) was the children's first dress rehearsal and learning experience 4 (LE4) was the actual end-of-year show. We have included these together as they both led to the children being collaborative and reflective performers, and ultimately multimodal storytellers, through their acting on stage (see Appendix A: LE3 and LE4).

### **Analysis and discussion**

This phase of learning was "being a performer". The children had now learnt their lines (language), knew when and where they appeared on stage (spatial), and were able to play their roles well. They were now putting the final touches on their performance so that the audience would be able to understand the story. Most of the learning was cyclical in that the teacher would provide tips and other feedback verbally, and now the children were able to apply this knowledge through their voice (language), in their body movements including facial expression (gestural), in their dance steps to the soundtrack (gestural/corporeal or embodied and aural), and also via a supportive and collaborative approach with each other. Often the older children would guide the younger children on stage by reminding them what to do and when to do it. In some ways the team leader's role was transferred to the older children, leading to a collaborative project and performance. All three meanings ideational/representational, interpersonal/interactive and textual/compositional were important in this phase of learning as it is when the children needed to commit to the intent of the play and how they would express this on stage for an audience.

In the analysis of this learning experience we could see that the final stages of group work featured – performing and adjourning/transforming, leading to a transformative process in which the children performed to their family and friends. During the dress rehearsal the focus was on the costumes and set (ideational/representational and textual/compositional meanings) as well as the fine-tuning of the performance. Understandably there were some minor issues such as children forgetting to bring their costumes and being in the wrong position on stage, causing the teacher and other students to be frustrated. In the end though, the performance was the culmination of hard work and successfully conveyed the key messages of the story by skilfully using all modes of representation. The children were aware that this was the final performance and were therefore able to move through to the adjourning/transforming stage quite easily. This was evident in their celebration of the performance and also in the confidence and ease with which they spoke about their participation in the post-performance interviews.

My character was Swali – he was mean and helped the baddies with their evil schemes....The dances made it really energetic and more fun. You got to do more things like dancing and acting not just writing. It helped me to think about stories that could have happened before. (Year 2 student)

I was Finneus – he is like part of a gang and is a red fish. He does his own things; he doesn't do what his parents say. The catfish gang wanted to be part of the bad team but the bad team didn't let us so we made a catfish game – I was the leader. I like the dancing and the lights flashing when we danced. I learn how to have a loud voice and acting such as moving around the stage. (Year 3 student)

Taffy was my character and I was tough. He is naughty and we get in trouble a lot. I like all the dancing; it was fun and I liked the audience there. When there is no audience you don't feel great because there is nobody there except the teachers. When it is the show you feel so excited because there are all these people watching you. You feel happy and know it is going to be a good night. It helped my drama and my voice to get bigger and it is really fun. (Year 1 student)

## CONCLUSION

Throughout each learning experience it is evident that the meanings associated with the phases as well as the grouping focus and semiotic representation intensifies and becomes more complex up until the actual performance. There are also a number of “transitions and transformations” that take place. When learning about story, a number of phases occur. Firstly, children need to become familiar with the main characters, the setting and the theme. Before the children learnt the script they were already familiar with the characters and story, as they had read the story a number of times. It is in this phase that the ideational/representational meaning of the story, the forming and norming group process, and language verbal and written are emphasised.

This impetus leads to the next phase where the children begin to “stage” the performance without the use of their scripts. The ideational/representational meaning is now shifted out of focus so that both the interpersonal/interactive and textual/compositional meanings can be enhanced. This consequently increases the number of semiotic representations (verbal language, gestural, spatial) being used as the children begin to find their place and work on their interactions with one another on stage. The group stages are more focused on forming and norming, with some storming, as the children learn how to convey meaning through multiple modes. This was evident in Interview Participant 4's post-interview response when asked if there was anything he did not like about the experience: “[Student's] timing. He mixed lines that we were supposed to say together.” When the interviewer replied that would have been frustrating, he replied, “Yeah, I had to adapt.”

After a four-week rehearsal period, the final phase or learning experience included the dress rehearsal and performance. Here the children and teacher brought together all meanings and modes of communication (aural, verbal language, gestural, spatial, visual) culminating in the end-of-year show that was performed for family and friends. It was also at this point of the storying process that the final stages of the group formation were enacted, including performing and adjourning/transforming. The children showed through the performance their deep understanding of the story.

They had done this through a collaborative and multimodal arts approach, which gave them agency and independence as story-tellers.

Team stage	Semiotic representation and meanings - mode/s	Team behaviour	Team leader
<b>Forming</b>	Mainly language – oral, language – written Ideational/representational	Polite, personal, initially formal, supportive, guided	Getting people talking, introducing each other (including characters), giving purpose to the group, encouraging
<b>Storming</b>	Mainly language – oral, gestural (embodiment of feelings and emotions) Interpersonal/interactive	Resisting involvement, arguing, opting out, feeling stuck or frustrated, needs to experience challenges in order to move forward	Resolving conflicts openly, permitting differences, involving everyone, supporting individuals, modelling, providing critical and constructive feedback
<b>Norming</b>	Language – oral and written; gestural (movement on stage, dance), spatial (being aware of space and place), visual (stage sets, props and costumes) and aural (music) Ideational/representational, Interpersonal/interactive and textual/compositional	Getting organised, working together, understanding established ground rules and procedures for performance; Dress rehearsal	Focussing group effort towards a mutually beneficial goal, giving feedback and encouragement, developing skills, becoming prepared and ready for performance; guiding, managing, directing
<b>Performing</b>	Language – oral (script) written (program), gestural (movement, facial expression), spatial (awareness of space, place and position), visual (stage sets, props and costumes), aural (music) Ideational/representational, Interpersonal/interactive and textual/compositional	Reaching decisions, producing results, working closely and supportively, being resourceful and creative, creating an end product for an audience only possible through collective effort	Giving support and encouragement, steering the group, reviewing progress, challenging the results, feeding in new ideas, standing back and enjoying final performance
<b>Adjourning (and transforming) or mourning</b>	Language - oral (congratulate and feedback); gestural, visual, material-operational (back at school to celebrate with food and families) Interpersonal/interactive	Completion of the group process resulting in termination of roles, completion of tasks and reduction of dependency; feeling of accomplishment as a team; sharing with an audience and being congratulated, documentation of final process and celebration, reflecting	Recognising that members will feel a sense of accomplishment but also to some degree loss particularly if the dissolution of the group was unplanned. Providing support to enable team members to move on; congratulations and celebration, reflecting

**Table 2. An arts-led collaborative and multimodal model**

It has been noted that arts-based approaches to learning can be profound and transformative for young children (Ewing, 2010; Wright, 2012). In a multi-aged setting this is very much the case. Using the theoretical frameworks of social semiotics and Tuckman and Jensen's group formation stages, we have identified that in arts practice and performance a number of phases of learning occur. As children move through these phases of learning, both the complexity and level of expression increases. This ultimately leads to a deep understanding not only of the performance

process but also the story which they are performing and sharing. Table 2 shows how arts-led practice is complex, deep and allows for higher order and critical thinking and transformation in learning. Encouraging an arts-led English (or other curriculum area) approach to curriculum design and practice is potentially exciting and inspiring for all children. This is particularly the case when story and storytelling are embedded in practice and aligns with Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler's (2012) *Path to Action*.

This process shows the relationship between our experiences and our internal process for creating and assigning meaning to events and experiences (Barton & Barton, 2014). This was certainly exemplified in one of the older children's response in the post-production interview: "We're like one big family – it's like Christmas... We all gather together and do something together and that was a bit, that was quite special." (Interview Participant 2) This sense of a large family was certainly reinforced through the multi-age grouping of the students within the school and the supportive environment in which the performance took place.

In conclusion, in the teaching and learning of English education, demonstrating understanding of story through multiple modes of expression is important for children. Relying on language alone, such as through written and oral language, could potentially be limiting for children as expressing meaning via other means – visually, aurally, gesturally – allows for a more collaborative and personalised approach. This is particularly important in contexts such as small multi-age schools. Representing story in this way as an arts-led approach to English education can be more rewarding and transformative for children.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Coding for four learning events

#### *LE1: Becoming familiar with the script*

Phase of LE	Activity	Collaborative process	Semiotic representation	Video time code
1	Teacher pairs up a younger student with an older student so that they can support each other throughout the lesson. T hands out script – 1 per pair.	Forming	Language - oral	00:00-02:10
2	T explains that the children already know the story of “The Sign of the Seahorse” and reminds them of some of the characters (although not all in the book will appear in the end-of-year show). T then explains they will be reading through the script. The children have been assigned parts to read – although these may not be their character in the play. T says she will take notes while they are reading through.	Forming	Language – oral; visual (T has book to show)	02:11-05:18
3	The class read through Act 1 with the T interjecting every now and then explaining the scene they have just read. At the end of Act 1 T asks the children to re-tell the story so far. She also asks them what they think will happen next.	Forming	Language – oral and written	05:19-12:21
4	Act 2 is then read through with the teacher providing support to children who need prompting (Prep-Year 2) while encouraging the older children to project and start to “characterise” their voices (i.e. think about pace, tone and facial expressions)	Forming and Norming	Language – oral and written, gestural (starting to develop expressive movements that align with characters)	12:22-to end of lesson



Figure 1: Becoming familiar with the script  
(Image release courtesy of the participants)



***LE2: Staging the performance***

<b>Phase of LE</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Collaborative process</b>	<b>Semiotic representation</b>	<b>Video time code</b>
1	The T is marking out the ground with masking tape while the children get ready for the lesson	Forming, norming	Language – oral (chatting amongst themselves or asking the T questions while she marks out stage), gestural; gestural (some of the children are practising their dances)	00:00-01:14
	The T asks the children to take their positions on the “stage” for Act 1 – Scene 1. She explains to them not to take script into the “staged” area – if they forget their lines she can remind them. One of the younger children starts to get frustrated as she wants to stand in a particular place on stage but her sister is trying to guide her to the correct position without much luck so the other T2 asks the sister to help her with some dance steps so she feels comforted – this is when the younger child then goes to her correct place.	Forming, storming	Gestural/Visual – Students move to positions. Younger child works with sister to practice dance steps – seeking to find her place in the group.	01:15-03:02
2	T1 asks children to watch her to explain that when they begin the scene their “actions” or “frozen pictures” need to be natural and facing the audience. “Try not to block out your face as the audience needs to see what you are doing”. During this phase the young child who was in correct position moves back to incorrect one.	Forming and norming	Language, Visual, gestural – the T spends some time talking to the children about their movements on stage.	03:03-05:12
3	T asks young child to stand in their correct place. As she refuses to she moves her off the stage to the seat until she is ready to do the correct thing.	Storming	Language – oral, gestural as the T guides the child to the bench to sit down.	05:13-05:25
4	The children rehearse Act 1 with the audio soundtrack. The T stands up the front and models the dance moves to the “Angel Fish” and encourages children to bring energy to the performance.	Performing, storming and norming	Audio, gestural, language-verbal, visual	05:26- end of LE  (At 06:15 the young child hops into her correct spot)



**Figure 2. Staging the performance (first trial without the script)**  
(Image release courtesy of the participants)

***LE3: The dress rehearsal***

Phase of LE	Activity	Collaborative process	Semiotic representation	Video time code
1	The T displays to the Chn everyone's costume and explains some more about their character. The Chn then change in costume. Those without costume help set up the set and props.	Forming and norming	Language verbal, visual, audio, gestural – embodied, spatial	0:00-05:54  05:55-11:43 (time is spent setting up and getting dressed and ready to do the dress rehearsal)
2	The Chn perform the show from the beginning. While they perform the T calls out commands and feedback (often with a raised voice – the show is tomorrow night!). The focus is on the staging and what the audience will see.	Storming, performing and norming	Language verbal, visual, audio, gestural – embodied, spatial	11:44-21:40
3	T walks onto the “stage” to model the movements for one of the main characters. She asks the student to stand at the front of the stage to see it visually.	Forming, performing and transforming	Language verbal, visual, audio, gestural – embodied, spatial	21:41
4	T has children all sit on the floor to provide feedback and reflections on their performance. Comments on costume alterations are made; smaller children are told to face out towards the front as much as possible (mentions particular scenes); need full costumes for next time; the children provide comments on how they think it is going or what they might need for characters (e.g. costuming)	Performing and transforming.	Language, gestural, spatial	43:02-end of lesson



**Figure 3. The dress rehearsal**  
(Image release courtesy of the participants)

***LE4: The performance***

Phase of LE	Activity	Collaborative process	Semiotic representation	Video time code
1	Getting ready back at school	Norming, Performing	Gestural – children understand their role and what they need to do.	00:00-42:36
2	Performing the show to an audience	Performing, transforming	Language – oral; visual – costumes, sets, props, lighting; aural – music soundtrack; gestural – movement on stage, dancing, facial expression; spatial – placement on and off stage, entry and exit	The show is videoed – approximately ½ hour in length
3	Back at school celebrating with family and friends	Adjourning	Language – oral; gestural	NA
4	Reflecting back on performance a few days later. Individual videos of children’s perspective on being involved in the show.	Adjourning, mourning (only a little)	Language – oral; gestural	Approximately 2 minutes each



**Figures 4-9. Scenes from The End of Year Show**  
(Image release courtesy of the participants)