

**Language and Literacy Workshops:
Supporting the Learning of Four Focal English Language Arts Practices
Through the Use of Quality Texts**

By

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Abstract

In Manitoba, a new English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum focusing on language and literacy *practices* invites learners to authentically and meaningfully engage with a variety of texts in the classroom. This thesis supports educators by valuing their professional judgment, as they are provided with researched text selection criteria and called upon to evaluate and choose texts of rich quality for use with children in classrooms in the beginning years of school (Kindergarten–Grade 2). Drawing upon this ELA curriculum, the author questions, provides insight, and reflects on how a variety of multimodal texts could be incorporated into the classroom learning by interweaving the four key literacy and language practices that represent valued ways of thinking, being, and doing in ELA. The author’s insights are presented in a written workshop format, in which a critical literacy stance is adopted in order to examine, discuss, and analyze an assortment of multimodal texts. These written workshops invite teachers into a dialogue with the author’s thinking about what the selected texts could potentially teach young literacy learners.

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Dedication

Throughout this learning journey I entered into a dialogue with my fellow educators; that dialogue supported my thinking, my learning, and my growth. Now, it is my hope that my learning journey can be used to pay it forward. I hope that my research, shared experiences, and personal reflections serves as a reminder to other educators to have confidence in their professional judgment and encourages them to embrace and take ownership of the new ELA curriculum. To my fellow educators, I dedicate my work to you.

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Thesis Organization

The first chapter introduces the reader to necessary background information about the new Manitoba English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum document in order to contextualize the significance of this thesis. Broad purposes of the thesis are then articulated, which are subsequently narrowed into a specific guiding inquiry question. A theoretical framework is offered, which seeks to ground the inquiry question and explain underlying assumptions and understandings.

In the second chapter research and professional literature relevant to the guiding inquiry question is reviewed. In this chapter, the author discusses the changing definition of literacy and offers a view of what literacy and literacy education look like in the 21st century. The concept of literacy as a social practice is highlighted as this concept underlies the purpose and focus of this thesis. The chapter continues with an exploration of how the four focal ELA practices can play significant roles in the complexities of language and literacy teaching and learning.

In the third chapter the author's thought process and decisions about text selection are explained and supported by related scholarship. Guiding principles and criteria are presented as a resource for supporting teachers in evaluating text quality. The idea that educators must also use their own professional judgment to evaluate texts is further discussed.

The thesis inquiry question is reintroduced and responded to in the fourth chapter. The author designs a document written in a "workshop format" in which four texts are closely examined to suggest how they might be used for teaching and learning with respect to the four ELA practices central to the new Manitoban ELA curriculum.

The fifth and final chapter concludes the thesis by highlighting the most significant insights gleaned through the research, text selection, and writing processes. The limitations of this study are discussed and followed by suggestions for future research. The author then refers back to the three stated purposes and discusses how each one has been achieved.

Chapter One: Introduction

William Doll (1993) suggested that one quality to look for in any curriculum is that of “richness”. By this he was referring to the ability of a curriculum to provide layers of meaning, depth, and allow for “multiple possibilities or interpretations” (as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2013, p. 216). This type of richness is exactly what the new English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum document provides. The new curricular framework presents literacy as “a complex, multifaceted concept that changes as society changes,” rather than as a skill to be developed (Altieri, 2011, p. 6). The focus of the new curriculum is on learners engaging in interrelated language and literacy practices. These practices are structured and designed in a way that offers multiple entry points for active learning that is *socially* and *culturally* co-constructed; learners’ competencies (a learner’s way of knowing, doing, and being) and cultural identities are accepted, valued, and built upon as they learn alongside their peers and teachers. The document invites teachers to co-create meaningful contexts, use multi-faceted ways of knowing, and encourage critical thinking to achieve richness in all learning experiences. A further explanation of these ideas and terms will be discussed in the second chapter.

Language and literacy is not something that can be developed in children by teaching them a set of skills in isolation from their meaningful, contextualized, and authentic use or by simply targeting and laying out a single path leading to the achievement of a myriad of independent outcomes. A prescriptive teaching and learning structure of that kind—developed independently by the teacher and then delivered to the children—does not sufficiently take into account that “language and literacy develop differently for each individual” or that “language and literacy learning and use is social,”

“complex,” and “contextual” (Manitoba Professional Learning Environment [MAPLE], 2015e). The new ELA curriculum responds to this shortcoming by proposing a model of language and literacy education that highlights four English language arts practices that encapsulate multi-faceted ways of knowing, thinking, and doing, both within ELA as a discipline and beyond ELA as forms of literacy used and learned within and among other disciplines. The four practices identified in the new ELA curriculum are: “the practice of using language as sense making,” “the practice of using language as a system,” “the practice of using language as exploration and design,” and “the practice of using language as power and agency” (MAPLE, 2015b). Teachers too have agency as decision makers and are expected to teach in creative and flexible ways, as they co-create authentic and rich learning contexts with children that invite different and multiple perspectives and interpretations. In this pedagogical model, children are encouraged to become seekers of meaningful knowledge as they explore questions, concerns, and ideas of individual and collective significance. Teachers and children unite in a partnership in which together they develop a deeper understanding of language and literacy as the four ELA-discipline specific practices guide the teaching-learning encounter.

I have immersed myself in the new ELA curriculum. Through my inquiries into this document, I have come to a better understanding of what has been selected as important and central to language and literacy learning expected in Manitoba classrooms. My intention for this thesis was to design a document—using a written workshop format—to invite educators into my thinking as I have examined and explored four quality texts that I believe have the potential to support the teaching and learning of the four practices emphasized in the new ELA curriculum. In 1998 Margaret Meek wrote a

book entitled, *“How Texts Teach What Readers Learn”*. In the book, which she called a workshop, multiple texts were highlighted to illustrate the reading lessons that potentially could be learnt from them (Meek, 1998, p. 3). It was this written workshop that inspired my own writing in my fourth chapter. The fourth chapter of this thesis was written with the intention of creating a “workshop-like experience” as I endeavour to share my personal connections to selected texts with an imagined audience of early years teachers. My writing efforts in the workshops focus on my own explorations of certain texts as I make sense and relate to the new ELA curriculum. In these virtual workshops I posed questions with respect to the texts’ written and illustrative content, and offered ideas and reflections about the texts as they relate to the new ELA curriculum. I designed my thesis in this way so that fellow teachers could easily access and engage with my thinking processes as an early years colleague teaching English languages arts.

The purpose of this thesis is, therefore, to support my own taking ownership of the new ELA curriculum, while specifically exploring its four key practices in relation to texts. Accordingly, I used my professional judgment to help me make quality children’s literature choices central to this workshop-format, fourth chapter document. Each text chosen was scrutinized and critically read for its potential to: invite children to make sense of the text, deepen their understandings of language as a system, support curious exploration and creative design responses, and critically confront issues and questions of agency and power. I imagined this workshop-format document as a resource for encouraging other teachers to vicariously join me on a journey of exploring and understanding the use of quality texts, as they consider how they might engage children in kindergarten to grade 2 in the ELA practices identified in the new curriculum

document.

I wrote this thesis while on an extended maternity leave. Hearing about a new ELA curriculum caused me to pause in the midst of my wonderful “mommy life” and wonder about the kinds of changes that were taking place in the educational world. Toni Morrison said, “if there’s a book you really want to read but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it” (as quoted in Jacobs & Hjalmarsson, 2002, p. 37). I took Toni’s advice to heart. I wrote this thesis not only to participate in a dialogue with other teachers as they worked their own way through the curriculum changes, but also as a way to help me become more intimately acquainted with the new ELA curriculum, in a way that might impact both my teaching life and the language and literacy learning of my daughter and young children like her when they enter school in Manitoba in the not too distant future. This thesis is meant to offer “shoulder-to-shoulder” support for Manitoba teachers, like myself, as we endeavour to reclaim our professional identities with a curriculum that encourages us to do so, and as we set forth on our own educational paths to positively and meaningfully impact children’s literate lives.

How am I Positioned as a Teacher-Researcher?

I have always been an avid reader. In elementary school I recall taking out books, reading them, and returning them—all in a day. And yes, that meant I had slipped the latest *Babysitters Club* book into my mathematic textbook and read it during class. At that point in my life I read for pleasure; I was reading texts that I found engaging, challenging, and memorable. I yearned to read and could not turn the pages of a book fast enough. One school year I had the chance to put my passion to good use. I signed up to be a part of a read-a-thon for a worthy cause. I made my rounds to various family

members and friends and asked them to sponsor me. One aunt promised me a quarter for every book that I read during the fundraiser—her hefty sponsorship at the end of the fundraiser helped me to win a clock radio. The next year she had learned her lesson and only sponsored me a nickel a book ... I left the fundraiser that year with a hacky sack.

Hacky sack in hand, I left my small town where I attended high school and pursued my education in the metropolis of Winnipeg, Manitoba. As I studied at the University of Manitoba and prepared to become an early years teacher my text selections became less for pleasure and more for knowledge; I read to better understand my own values, beliefs, and philosophies while also learning about and appreciating the value of multiple perspectives. I wanted to increase my knowledge by interacting with the world and learning from the insights of others, and so while in my first year in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) program I applied (and was selected) to join a small group of other first year BEd students in a course called “Thailand Teaching and Cultural Experience”. Together we made the long journey to Thailand where we were able to put our newly learned teaching practices to use. My teaching partner and I co-taught fifth and sixth grade ELA as well as seventh and eighth grade biology. Upon returning to Winnipeg three months later I completed the BEd program.

I consider myself a lifelong learner; my family jokes that I am a “professional student”. After becoming a certified teacher I went back to university where I completed my Post-Baccalaureate Diploma in Education, while taking courses of study that led to a Special Education certificate. Shortly after that I made the decision to begin the Master’s of Education program specializing in Studies in Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning. The choice to go back to school was of course voluntary and so the course books were read

with and for pleasure. I also read for knowledge as I thirsted to become more thoroughly informed about how to better my teaching craft. I would say that while being a student, specifically in the Special Education courses I took, I was encouraged to consider alternative points of view, grapple with what others' believed to be truths, and challenge my assumptions about certain topics. At this point in my life I was choosing and encouraged to read to gain a higher state of awareness—to read texts that gave me an opportunity to explore and understand the feelings and values of others so that I'd be in a better position to understand new encounters and events that I might later come across.

My teaching career started as soon as I had graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree. I was ready to change the world—or at least a small part of it, as my first job was to teach Grade 1. I loved my new career and had hoped that my “term” title would quickly change to “permanent”. After one year of teaching in Grade 1 an opportunity to transfer to the kindergarten classroom within the same school presented itself and I requested and received the grade switch. I was “on cloud nine”. For the next four years I taught kindergarten children (as a permanent teacher in the Winnipeg School Division).

I loved everything about these two grade levels, even the way my own reading repertoire expanded. I had never read so many books that contained flaps to lift, slides to move, and textures to feel as I did when I was a primary teacher. I loved reading the texts that the kindergarten and grade 1 experiences brought me. Together the children and I also learned to read emotion from illustrations, stories told in wordless picture books, and humour from comic books. Each new text offered the children such delight that I could not help but be excited along with them, and I eagerly anticipated the surprises these rich

and varied texts would offer us. This excitement continued as I started my new position as a Nursery/Kindergarten teacher in my sixth year of teaching. Although I was eager to learn from the challenges and rewards that being a Nursery/Kindergarten teacher would surely bring me, I was only able to teach the combined grade for half a year before starting my maternity leave.

I knew from an early age that I would be a teacher—and not just any teacher; I was going to be a primary teacher. I wanted to work with the youngest of our school learners and help them pursue a love of literacy and learning. I remember preparing for my first year as a Kindergarten teacher. I wanted to share my love of texts with the children and so I spent my entire summer before school started researching and reading children's literature. I then began colouring, cutting, gluing, and laminating to produce homemade educational invitations that went along with these chosen books. I wanted to encourage children to find value and excitement in these texts and I couldn't help but involve myself in the process from the very start.

My life experiences, knowledge, beliefs, interests, and passion for texts greatly influenced the writing of this thesis. The language and literacy workshops I have written as the fourth chapter of this thesis were created so I could engage myself (and vicariously other teachers) in exploring perspectives, strategies, ideas, concepts, and learning opportunities that I believe could help to produce effective and dynamic learning experiences in the classroom. It needs to be clearly understood, however, that my purpose was not to design a strict set of "how-to" lessons to be taught. Like Lawrence Sipe (2007), I wished to propose instead that:

we need multiple perspectives on literacy teaching and learning that

include the power of literature for young children, without turning it into a mechanical tool for teaching children how to “do school”—perspectives that recognize the ways in which children may playfully interact with literature while at the same time contributing to their literacy learning, high-level cognitive abilities and engagement with the imaginary worlds of stories so that they may develop more nuanced perspectives on real life, as well as critical stance toward that status quo. (p. 7)

This thesis reveals my own beliefs and values about teaching and learning as an early years teacher and represents my pedagogical imagining. I have explored an array of texts as a way of connecting my love of reading with my deepening understandings of the new ELA curriculum document. It is also my hope that other teachers might consider my ideas in relation to their own contexts and in relation to the children they teach, and adapt these and other ideas to their different contexts. I hope that my explorations and reflections in the workshops I have written will allow other educators to observe what I was doing and why and consider these decisions in relation to their own educational contexts. My perspective, it needs to be remembered, is merely one of many possible perspectives that could be considered with respect to how literature, language, and literacy teachings might be imagined as ways of meeting personal, social, and educational goals.

Background Information for the New Manitoba English Language Arts Curriculum

In December of 1993, Manitoba, along with three other Canadian provinces and two territories, signed onto the *Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. Through this partnership many educational

projects were initiated and developed, including, *The common curriculum Framework for English Language Arts, Kindergarten to Grade 12, 1998*, also known as the *ELA Curriculum Framework*. Clearly defined and shared student learning outcomes, educational resources, and learning standards were designed and agreed upon through the creation of this document, and these formed “the basis of Manitoba’s ELA curricular structure” (Manitoba Education, 2015b). Within this document (which I believe was very progressive for its time) there were six foundational language arts—reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing—that were to be taught and learned in interrelated and interdependent ways in support of children becoming confident and competent language and literacy users.

The 1998 ELA curriculum listed many learning outcomes and described for teachers the abilities, behaviours, and knowledge expected of students in their learning and use of the English language arts. While the front matter of the 1998 ELA document did not promote a skills-based view of language acquisition, the published supporting educational material and curriculum documents identified measurable and observable skills and learning outcomes that were to be achieved by children across grade levels. For example, while giving an overview of the former ELA curriculum the Manitoba government website for education stated that “at all grades, the focus is on acquiring language and literacy skills” (Manitoba Education, 2015a). Educational outcomes were to become the “target” of every teacher’s lesson plan and every child’s learning experience. This teaching goal was made clear on the same government website where one can find a tutorial that shows teachers how to use the *ELA Foundation for Implementation*. Here it was recommended that teachers identify and prepare their lesson plans around prescribed

learning outcomes (Manitoba Education, 2015e). In fact, teachers were expected to “target 1 or 2 specific learning outcomes (SLO’s) that will meet the need of the students” (p. 40). The tutorial stated that it was “the SLO’s [that] will guide [the] planning for quality learning, teaching, and assessment” (p. 40). While the new ELA curriculum was in the process of being developed, the Manitoban government website for education continued to refer to the 1998 document and stated that “in the language arts curriculum, a specific learning outcome or group of learning outcomes can be the starting point for planning” and that “care must always be taken to make sure that planning does result in activities that are connected to the specific learning outcomes of the language arts curriculum” (Manitoba Education, 2015e). The word choices and ideas in these statements reinforce for me (as a teacher) the idea that children needed to develop “literacy skills” and that teachers are responsible for providing lessons to “introduce, develop, or reinforce particular skills” (Manitoba Education, 2015e).

The new ELA curriculum document, in contrast, shifts from a focus on specific learning outcomes to consideration of big ideas, practices, and competencies to be entertained by teachers as they make informed decisions about the content and processes of learning in the English language arts classroom. The new document “considers ELA learning to be done in rich and complex contexts rather than [as] a series of skills, strategies, or decontextualized content” (MAPLE, 2015a). In the new document ELA is discussed as a discipline where “meaningful and relevant contexts for teaching and learning” have become the focus to frame the learning experiences, so that children can continue to build upon and develop their existing competencies (MAPLE, 2015e).

In place of outcomes, the new ELA curriculum identifies four practices as

“valued ways of knowing, thinking, and doing” (MAPLE, 2015f). By “identifying language learning in terms of practices rather than skills the underlying concept is that language can be used for a variety of interconnected purposes” (MAPLE, 2015b). The shift from providing teachers with prescribed outcomes to teach and measure to four broad and interconnected language practices is based on current understandings of language and literacy. Language and literacy learners are understood to acquire competencies in authentic and meaningful contexts of language/literacy use. This idea speaks to the need to recognize and value the competencies that all children bring with them from a plurality of families and communities, as they enter formal schooling. Children are not seen to be passive vessels that a teacher fills up with knowledge (Freire, 1996; MAPLE, 2015e). The new ELA curriculum document acknowledges that all “learners come to school as competent, literate beings having experienced and engaged in language learning since birth” (MAPLE, 2015a). Different values, beliefs, and cultures support children’s development and learning and it is the teacher’s responsibility to help the children deepen their literacy and language competencies as they interact with the four discipline specific practices. Helping children explore and actively seek out meaningful knowledge through the four practices named in the new ELA curriculum document means that children will be acquiring practices and strategies, and making meaning without “following only teacher-directed skills and strategies and spending time on isolated skill and drill” (MAPLE, 2015e). These ELA practices frame the literacy and language workshop-format document that is my fourth chapter and which constitutes my unique pedagogical inquiry in this thesis.

Quality Texts

Whether the ELA curriculum documents prompted teachers to build their instruction around outcomes or practices, the use of quality texts has always been an unwavering condition of “good teaching” that teachers were expected to meet: “Quality literature is necessary for building literacy-rich classrooms and supporting learners’ continuous development as authors and inquirers” (Manitoba Education, 2015c). In literacy-rich classrooms, a range of exceptional resources help children to make meaning: “Students need opportunities to explore both fiction and non-fiction texts, and a variety of forms and genres” in order to inform, persuade, guide, and scaffold their learning (Manitoba Education, 2015c). In this thesis, I describe models and criteria to be considered, which are intended to provide assistance in determining some of the potentials of quality texts for language and literacy learning and teaching.

Purpose

The purposes for this thesis can now be further detailed. My first purpose is to identify guidelines and strategies to help select quality texts; the number of texts and “books published continues to grow, which makes selection even more difficult. Our job as teachers, librarians, and parents is to select the best ...” (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2014, p. 32). In this case I researched guiding principles and standards for evaluating literature and other forms of text to find out what key features other educators and literacy researchers prized. It was not my intention though to suggest that there is a single, universal standard for “good” texts. Rather, I believe that there may be different reasons why a text might be viewed as rich or of high quality, including of course whether it engages the readers and how the text serves children’s own inquires. Although

I used this research to help me make decisions when choosing texts for my language and literacy workshop document, I also relied heavily on my own professional judgment, experience, and knowledge about children and their relationship to meaningful pedagogy and ELA curriculum more than anything else to support my selections.

The second purpose is to explore the complexity of language and literacy learning. A key concept of the four focal ELA practices is that teachers are deepening children's understanding of the practices as they learn and use them, learn about them, and learn through them. Teachers are not teaching the practices per se, but are creating the conditions for children to use them in the course of their learning. The fourth chapter of this thesis became a space in which I provided a practical, comprehensible, and hopefully insightful perspective as to how I would imagine myself engaging with the four selected texts with the intention of authentically engaging children in learning with, learning about, and learning through the four ELA practices. After scrutinizing, critically reading, and questioning each of the four quality texts I had selected, I explored how certain texts might reinforce, highlight, support, and lead to learning that utilizes the four practices identified in the new ELA curriculum document. These practical written workshops endeavour to reinforce the connection between literacy and literature through detailed lessons. The written workshops are meant to identify the relationships that teachers and children in kindergarten to grade 2 could possibly make between certain texts and English language arts/literacy learning.

Finally, the third and perhaps most important purpose is for me to interrogate and take ownership of this new curriculum for myself as a teacher. After having been subjected to "boxed sets" of texts specifically designed for teaching reading,

accompanied by pre-scripted lesson plans, a teacher can begin to feel professionally voiceless. This is because someone who is not the teacher of the specific children in the classroom has planned the exercises and activities accompanying these sets of texts. These distant educators do not know the classroom teachers, their beliefs about education, or their educational background. Nor, do they know the learners, their interests, their “particular ways of thinking, doing, and being,” or their learning successes and challenges (MAPLE, 2015b). I believe that these boxed sets of texts and teaching scripts function to de-professionalize educators. This thesis was meant to put professional judgments back in the hands of the teacher. Through the writing of this thesis, I hoped to learn more about how to choose quality texts, and through my written workshop document I hoped to make visible the ways that such texts could be explored in order to provide opportunities for literacy learning that fully embraced the four focal ELA practices. Teachers have the responsibility to make professional judgments about how the curriculum can be used to support children’s learning. I have used my experience, knowledge, and professional judgment to select potential texts and have then considered how I might use them to make connections to the four key ELA practices.

Guiding Inquiry Question

With the new ELA curriculum document at the centre of my thesis, I wanted to explore one specific question:

- 1) With a focus on children in Manitoba’s kindergarten to grade 2 classrooms, how might I use quality texts to support these children’s uses of the four focal language and literacy practices identified in the new English language arts curriculum?

Given the complexity of this inquiry question, I asked three more specific, related questions: (i) What am I considering to be a text in relation to current definitions of literacy and current literacy practices? (ii) How could the four focal ELA practices be understood in relation to texts? (iii) What do I mean by quality texts and what might such a definition look and sound like in practice in kindergarten – grade 2 Manitoba classrooms?

Seeking answers to these questions took the form of both scholarly inquiry and curricular imagining. I was guided by the scholarship on *multimodal literacy* and *multimodal text* forms in my text selection; I investigated the different ways that knowledge could be represented and how texts could be constructed from the contributions of more than one semiotic resource. Though briefly defined, multimodality and semiotic resources are key concepts and will be elaborated upon in the beginning of the second chapter. I researched reasons for classifying texts as quality texts. I studied the new English language arts curriculum document to become well versed in the four practices. Finally, I used my expertise and educational background to facilitate my written workshops that I hope will convey to other teachers my thinking about how four selected texts might be used to support children's engagement with the four ELA practices.

Significance of the Study

The new Manitoba English language arts curriculum document's goals, philosophical underpinnings, and practices have been devised to provoke k–12 educators re-evaluation of literacy and what English language arts might look and sound like as practices in Manitoba classrooms. The new curriculum focuses on four discipline specific

literacy practices that are to be intentionally contemplated and interwoven in the classroom. The four practices act as big ideas that describe English language arts as a practice rather than as a skill or outcome. Manitoba educators' professional judgment and expertise is to be valued and trusted as the four practices are integrated in authentic and meaningful learning experiences. The curriculum supports teachers in building rich and powerful literacy experiences that connect and weave these practices together in a meaningful way. Teachers are guided by these four practices in making decisions about the texts they use in the classroom, the methods in which they present and share such materials, and the assessment that occurs before, during, and after learning.

Peter Johnston (2004) wrote that “children in our classrooms are *becoming* literate. They are not simply learning the skills of literacy” (p. 22). This statement might baffle or create tension for some teachers. Many educators are accustomed to identifying (with precision) the skills that are to be learned by children. Often they are expected to “check these skills off” in a child’s learning record, in terms of whether a skill is still in development or if it has been mastered. Some schools even encourage educators to use a chart of listed skills as the main teaching focus for literacy lessons. The idea that literacy is more than pre-specified learning outcomes to be “met” will challenge some educators’ thinking about what literacy should look like, sound like, and feel like in the classroom. This study, therefore, delves deeply into what literacy is and what it might look and sound like in 21st century Manitoba classrooms. In this thesis, I sought to expand my own thinking about literacy as more than a series of outcomes to be taught and mastered and to support other teachers in doing the same. Literacy as a social practice, as opposed to a skill or outcome, is explored in depth in this thesis in order to assist teachers on their

learning journey as they explore the new ELA curriculum document.

With every reading of, discussion about, and inquiry into the new ELA curriculum I have grown more familiar and knowledgeable of its conceptual framework and what an effective ELA program might look like. This thesis portrays how I interpreted the document and the meaning I made through my engagement with it. My interpretive labour was then channeled into creating four written teacher workshops that reflect my making sense of the new ELA curriculum document. Hopefully these written workshops will offer teachers an additional interpretive lens for making sense of the new ELA curriculum document for themselves.

It is my hope that this thesis will become significant to the body of work in Manitoba about literacy teaching and learning practices. What is known about literacy and language affects and influences day-to-day educational practices. The goal of this thesis was to provide a realistic, positive, and proactive approach to language and literacy teaching and children's literacy development. My intention was to "open up" a dialogue about language and literacy teaching in Manitoba while uniquely contributing to the scholarship of language and literacy teaching and learning beyond Manitoba borders.

Audience

A teacher colleague of mine recently expressed to me her love for the month of January. When asked why, she explained that January is her month to "take back" teaching. Report cards and child-family-teacher conferences (for the fall) are completed, the winter break has ended, initial year assessments are a thing of the past, and school concerts, fundraising initiatives, and special events are in the distant future. January, the first month of a new year, feels to her like a fresh start; it is a time when finally, finally,

uninterrupted and externally imposed teaching and learning can occur.

I would have hated to be the one to tell her about a new curriculum. A new curriculum to learn and implement could easily be met with a cringe, a widening of the eyes, and a “you’ve gotta be kidding me” look. It’s easy to grumble and gripe about curricular changes. Even if the curricular changes transform teaching paths for the positive or makes teaching easier, a new curriculum is still a government-mandated educational document that needs to be studied, discussed, learned, reviewed, accepted and challenged, then applied. That is why this thesis was written primarily as a workshop document for educators. This thesis is meant to help educators embrace the responsibilities of learning about and teaching the new ELA curriculum. It is hoped that this thesis will help to pave the way towards fostering and strengthening the use of the four ELA practices with carefully selected texts.

Although the ideas expressed when examining these selected texts were written with kindergarten to grade 2 children in mind, I see no reason why teachers of younger or older children could not benefit from this thinking as well. Becoming increasingly comfortable in critically interrogating and creatively thinking about texts is beneficial for every teacher. Specifically, though, this thesis introduces kindergarten to grade 2 Manitoban teachers to the new ELA curriculum by enacting it through teaching discussions, reflections, and examples of how four selected texts might support children in better understanding the world around them through their active engagement with four key ELA practices.

This thesis could also be beneficial for literacy support and literacy coaches, administrators, and aspiring teachers. One aim of this thesis is to provide insight into the

new ELA curriculum and a thoughtful perspective on how these practices might be enacted in the exploration of multimodal texts. Administrators, whose charge it is to observe and evaluate teachers, will also find the lead-up to Chapter Four, the Chapter Four workshop document, and the follow-up discussion described in ways intended to invite them, as co-learners, into a dialogue with their teaching staffs. Aspiring teachers may also benefit from the in-depth analyses of the four practices as well as the guidelines for text selection. The results of this thesis offer educators with differing experience and roles an appreciation and interpretation of the new curriculum as a way to construct knowledge with children in a relevant, purposeful, and effective manner.

Theoretical Framework

Social and cultural influences. The theoretical framework for this study focuses on the socio-cultural and contextual influences on literacy learning. Lev Vygotsky, a social constructivist theorist, viewed learning as a social process. Vygotsky (1978) stressed how social interaction is an integral part to development: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)” (p. 57). By this, Vygotsky meant that children first interact in a social environment with other people, places, and cultural practices and these interactions influence their individual development. Through these interactions children construct knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices. What began as social activity and as relational interaction becomes internalized and transformed as children both socially and then individually construct new ideas and create new meanings. An understanding of this learning theory helps teachers to acknowledge that learning happens in collaboration with

other people. The new ELA curriculum document advises educators to accept children “as competent co-learners who can socially and culturally construct knowledge with adults” (MAPLE, 2015e). The new document encourages teachers to assist children in seeking and creating meaning with others and for themselves—with learning appearing on both social and individual levels.

Understanding the social environment that has influenced a child’s learning can be important information for a teacher. Luis Moll (1992), whose work was influenced by Vygotsky, explained the numerous advantages of becoming knowledgeable of one’s social circumstances:

We gain a much more complete, and ... a much more valid understanding of them. We also gain, particularly in the case of minority children, a more positive view of their capabilities and how our pedagogy often constrains, and just as often distorts, what they do and what they are capable of. (p. 239)

The new ELA curriculum states that all learners come to school as competent and literate beings having been exposed to and engaged in language learning since birth (MAPLE, 2015a). Learners might have similar home and community experiences or quite different ones to those that are most valued in the school context. Valuing students’ experiences, knowledge, and personal cultural identity, therefore, helps “students make meaning and understand how they are positioning themselves to the world and their learning ” (MAPLE, 2015a). By offering children opportunities to share and expand on their prior learning experiences teachers can create dynamic, relatable, and powerful literacy experiences that can significantly impact and shape the educational experience.

Guided and collaborative learning. The *zone of proximal development* is a

fundamental teaching-learning concept described by Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) believed that the most effective knowledge was gained when new concepts were taught on the edge of emergence, or as Vygotsky put it, within “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Ann Brown and her social constructivist collaborators Doris Ash, Martha Rutherford, Kathryn Nakagawa, Ann Gordon, and Joseph C. Campione (1993) expanded on Vygotsky’s definition of what and who can provide guidance to a learner when they suggested that it is not only capable adults and children as active agents that help develop knowledge in others but that “artifacts such as books, videos, wall displays, scientific equipment, and a computer environment intended to support intentional learning” can also serve this role (p. 191). This understanding of what and who can provide scaffolding in the learning process is what drives this thesis. This thesis seeks to expand the definition of “texts” and to explore how high quality multimodal texts can serve as artifacts that help children grow in their literacy practices. When such texts are used in meaningful and authentic ways new learning can be propelled and can become foundational to further learning.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Plurality of Literacy

Literacy. What does this word mean? When you read this word what thoughts or images appear in your mind? Articulating an answer to this question might be difficult, especially since “literacy keeps changing and expanding” (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013, p. ix). Ideas about literacy and consequently what constitutes a text are undoubtedly different from definitions of even ten years ago: “The view of literacy is continually changing because the skills students must develop to thrive in society are constantly expanding and becoming more complex” (Altieri, 2011, p. 5). With the birth and widespread use of the Internet, cellphones, and social networking there continues to be an emerging acceptance of the plurality of understandings and forms of literacy. Take the word “text,” for instance, it probably no longer only conjures up an image of written words being inked onto paper: “Texts, once dominated by written language, are now experienced as multimodal ensembles that utilize visual images, design elements, and typographical features to communicate and represent ideas” (Serafini, 2014, p. 2). The capacity to read, comprehend, and respond to non-print texts, such as movies, web pages, and art, is also vital. These multiple text forms are a crucial part of what it means to be literate in today’s changing world. Children are required now, more than ever, to be more literate and open-minded to what literacy can look like than their parents were.

Multimodality

“What it means to be literate in the world today is changing” (Bowen & Whithaus, 2013, p. 4), and to keep up with this change it is important that visions of

literacy are broadened “so that *communicating* means more than reading and writing, and *text* refers to more than traditional printed pages that students can hold in their hands” (Altieri, 2011, p. xiii). I previously mentioned that there are six strands of language arts. The six strands, listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing all inform one another and are contained within the new curriculum. To acknowledge the importance of each strand value must be placed on the many *semiotic resources* that can be used to communicate. Theo van Leeuwen (2004) explained semiotic resources as “the actions, materials and artefacts we use for communicative purposes” (p. 285). A variety of semiotic resources, such as photographs, music, sculptures, and written text can be used within the six strands to express meaning. These examples of semiotic resources are also known as *modes*—“a unit of expression,” and every mode has a different way “for expressing and communicating meaning” (Rowell, 2013, p. 3; Serafini, 2014, p. 12). For example, there are many differences between a written description of the big bad wolf and a visual image of that wolf. A detailed written description might tell readers about the thoughts and feelings of the wolf, while an illustration allows readers to “quickly elicit aesthetic and emotional responses as well as intellectual ones” (Thompson, 2008, p. 11). One mode, just as one language arts strand, is not better or worse but each “has affordances and limitations and is in itself partial” (Serafini, 2014, p. 15). Storytellers choose their mode(s) carefully; they figure out which mode(s) will be best suited to express their version of the story. Jennifer Rowell (2013) suggested, “for every story that is told, there were a million other ways of telling it” (p. 8). Each mode plays a unique part in what literacy looks, sounds and feels like today.

Using multiple modes of literacy and language allows teachers to broaden their

teaching strategies and methods used when teaching children. This is especially important as classrooms are filled with an increasingly plural composition of children. Teachers are expected to connect with and motivate children with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Of course the diversity of children does not stop here. Learners in the classroom also have varied intellectual abilities and ways of learning. It is both a challenge and an opportunity for teachers to engage with this diversity. This means that children deserve opportunities that include “different potentials for engagement with a text: the point of entry, the possible paths through a text and the potentials for re-making it”—and this is just what *multimodal texts* offer (Jewitt, 2006, p. 7). Multimodal texts are texts that combine more than a single mode. For example, when children learn on a computer they “point, gesture, gaze at the screen, they move the mouse (or joystick), click on icons and sometimes they talk. Students learn from all the modes present on the screen and around it—not only from what is written and said” (p. 7). Instead of working on a computer to merely “reinforce isolated skills through repetitive drill and games” a range of digital devices supporting the children’s learning activities can be incorporated as tools for them to use, share, and from which to make meaning (Altieri, 2011, p. 5). Using multiple text modes in the classroom, such as a digital text, potentially accommodates a range of competencies that children may bring with them to school, and such a text “offers increased possibilities for instructional adaptation because it adds options” (Cornett, 2007, p. 29).

Through the use of multiple modes of literacy and language, children are offered sense-making options when connecting with and conveying their understandings of rich texts of this kind. These options are particularly essential for the many children who feel

that they have few alternatives available to them when they are expected to express themselves. For example, children still have stories to tell even if they have not yet developed a strong understanding of certain language arts such as written language. Some children may need to express themselves through other language forms such as sign language. For these children multimodal literacy plays an integral role in their learning and understanding. Different modes can give children a voice when they do not feel they have one. A puppet show, for example, allows shy children to communicate and represent their understanding of topics when they invent characters, summarize their learning in a performance (which may or may not include spoken language), and risk sharing their insights while staying visually hidden from their peers. Communicative practice involves a wide range of modes. By allowing children to appreciate and participate in multimodal literacy a teacher is accommodating to the diversity inherent in every classroom.

There is a range of representational and communicative modes that constitute multimodal literacy. These modes—including visual, somatic, and auditory—can be used to create a multimodal text such as a film, website, or book. These modes are changing how one can go about becoming successful in literacy learning. These modes are also shaping what it means to create and represent knowledge. In her book, *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, author, researcher, and teacher Jody Shipka (2011) explained how she invited her class to compose a text through a variety of modes. Many of the learners explored the process of creating a multimodal text. One of Shipka's learners had combined written words with visual art when she “transcribed by hand a research-based essay” on a pair of pink-ballet shoes (p. 2). Is this a surprise? How could this be considered a “real” writing assignment? Shipka had been bombarded by similar questions

and concerns while presenting to other educators about her student's learning project. Shipka responded that she was able to work closely with the student for over a month on the shoes and during that time it allowed her "to see, and so to understand, the final product *in relation to* the complex and highly rigorous decision-making processes the student employed while producing [the] text" (p. 3). The assignment allowed the readers to see and value the shoes as something more. The shoes had become a site for publication and an experimental form of discourse when the student courageously experimented with a form of literacy not bounded by print and paper alone (Shipka, 2011).

Howard Gardner is known for his theory on multiple intelligences. He pluralized intelligence to include the multiple capacities of humans. Gardner's research illustrated that intelligences almost never operate "in isolation" (Blythe & Gardner, 1990, p. 33). Take an author's dramatic performance of a text, for example. A performance of this nature could employ at minimum three of the eight intelligences Gardner named, including: linguistic, body/kinesthetic, and visual/spatial intelligence. Gardner suggested that when ideas and abilities from different intelligence domains were converged a deep and meaningful understanding emerged. By employing multimodal literacy in the classroom children can be offered a "diverse means of transformation" and a way to develop breadth in their ways of knowing (Cornett, 2007, p. 41). Having dexterity with multiple modes of literacy provides children with a wider range of opportunities for effective communication. Making it possible for children to express themselves through multiple modes, such as a text created through movement or art to represent understanding, enables them "to express what cannot be conveyed in literal language or

in number” (Eisner, 2002, p. 4). There are times when words alone do not do our thoughts justice. The arts unparalleled symbolic languages exist because of this. It is a matter of choosing the most articulate means of communication. This lesson is one that teaches children that not all forms of communication are like spoken language.

Considering Literacy as a Social Practice

What does one have to know to be literate? When does formal learning about literacy start—at age five when a child starts kindergarten or perhaps at age six when from some perspectives “real” school learning occurs? Is literacy education really about teaching a set of decontextualized skills so these skills can be learned and universally applied in all literacy contexts? These are big questions and how teachers answer them will establish the practices for how literacy is experienced by children in the classroom.

In this thesis literacy is considered a *social practice*. Stringing many family memories together in a fictitious scenario helps me illustrate literacy as a social practice. I imagine a young child, dressed in pajamas, who races into her room and begins browsing through her text collection. She eventually pulls out a book and impatiently taps on the rocking chair located in the corner of her room while looking at her mother. The mother and child sit together on the rocking chair with the child on the mother’s lap. The toddler points to the illustration on the front cover of the book and the mother translates the toddler’s language sounds into predictions about what the story might be about. The mother shares control of the text by encouraging her daughter to turn the pages of the book. The one-year-old points to the written words on the pages as the mother reads them. The daughter makes the sound associated with the letter “d” and the mother imagines what she also might be saying about the plot twists and responds accordingly.

The daughter loves how the mother often responds to her efforts with verbal commentary or by clapping or with a kiss. When the reading comes to an end the child is put in her crib and the text is placed back on the shelf. This family's bedtime story reading routine could be described as a *literacy event*: "Occurrences in which written language is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies" (Heath, 1982, p. 50). For this family the routine is well established and all of the regularly performed activities in this ritual are what sustain this literacy event.

As the daughter and mother read together they are engaging in a social act. The mother is sharing with her daughter what she believes to be important about literacy. The event will influence and shape the child's understanding of literacy. Already the mother is noticing the impacts of the shared reading experiences. The mother often catches her daughter knee deep in toys digging through her belongings only to pull out a small board book. She notices that the child spends time looking at each page, pointing to both image and written word. Her daughter tells herself stories and regularly giggles and claps throughout this process. She comes to enjoy the social practices of reading that have been lived with her. *Social practices* are the "particular ways of doing and being as well as particular ways of acting and talking that are rooted in life experiences" (Vasquez, Egawa, Harste, & Thompson, 2004, p. xi). The mother's particular way of reading, talking, and valuing texts is being passed down to her daughter when they socially interact over texts in certain ways (Lankshear & Knoble, 2006). The child's experiences in literacy are not occurring in isolation, rather they are "inextricably bound to broader social practices and discourses" important to a family and a community (Jones Diaz, Beecher, & McNaught, 2000, p. 5).

This imagined family scenario has specific literacy social practices set in place that have been given meaning and value. When the mother reads to her one-year-old daughter, she is showing her and teaching her what she believes is important when it comes to reading a written and illustrated text through the literacy social practices in which they are engaged. As a primary teacher, I have shared many of these same values with my class. In my Nursery and Kindergarten class I have shown the children the importance that art (both in written word and creative design) plays in the meaning making process. I have invited the children to make predictions about a text before and during reading. I have emphasized the usefulness of reading with a peer. I have taught in this way partly because of how I was raised and because of the literacy social practices that were valued in my own family. These family-learned practices were carried over into some of my preparation as a teacher and have, after careful and critical assessment and adaptation, become teaching practices that influence the literacy learning of the children in my classroom. Brian Street (2006) illustrated these ideas when he claimed that “the ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants” (p. 2).

Of course there are also some social practices I grew up with that I do not share with my class. As much as the children mean to me I do not respond to their reading efforts by kissing them on their heads like my fictitious mother did with her child. This is because social practices are context specific. Street (2006) explained that when literacy is seen as socially constructed then the practices one displays will depend on the social setting: “The effects of learning that particular literacy will be dependent on those

particular contexts” (p. 2).

Accepting that literacy is a social practice is quite different from how literacy was once considered. Literacy learning has been thought about as a “neutral” set of skills, in the sense that literacy teaching at each grade level was fairly standardized—irrespective of the children’s unique home and community experiences, interests, previously acquired skills, or past literacy experiences. It was not always considered necessary to vary instructional approaches for different learners, other than by altering the rate and level of instruction. Literacy instruction was “reduced to a few generic skills” (Lundh & Limberg, 2008, p. 93). It was reasoned that children could learn these decontextualized skills they were taught and later bring them together in applied use. This way of thinking was described as the *autonomous model of literacy* and has been challenged by a view of literacy as a highly contextualized social and cultural practice (Street, 1984).

In contrast to the autonomous model of literacy Street posited the *ideological model of literacy* (Street, 1984). This alternative model shifted the thinking of how one acquires literacy knowledge. This model

offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another. This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model—it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being. (Street, 2006, p. 2)

This concept of literacy learning acknowledges that learning does not happen simply by

assembling the “skills” that are needed to become literate. Considering literacy as a social practice assumes that “context-specific or ‘situated’ practices rather than skills alone shape how [becoming literate] is accomplished and what counts as literacy” (Papen, 2013, Theory: an interdisciplinary approach to understanding informational practices, para. 4). The ideological model of literacy recognizes the importance of social practices in its relation to literacy knowledge. This understanding of literacy accepts literacy as a much more complex and substantial practice.

Street (2006) acknowledged that people address reading and writing in different ways and so my conception of literacy and what practices are held in highest regard may be unlike those valued in a different family. A different child might come to learn that reading is something that can be done without a paper and print text at all. Children may have little experience with books yet see their families using digital written language to gain access to information. Cellular phones, computers, and iPads may be the platforms in which primary communication is conducted and information accessed. Children with a majority of these kinds of experiences will grow up learning different sets of literacy social practices because of established and valued practices exhibited in their particular families. The social practices involved in using technology might include being able to navigate quickly through different websites, choosing the best technology for certain purposes, or having a working knowledge of the function of many technical applications. Yet other children are exposed to and have been taught to value verbal story telling. Written texts or technology may or may not have made a big appearance in these children’s homes, but, instead, family members may excitedly gather together to hear family members tell stories from the present or past. Literacy social practices connected

to speech, such as being able to tell a story from memory, being a fluent speaker, having particularized oral linguistic knowledge and how to use it, and understanding the power of an oral narrative tradition, may hold high value for these particular families. Different families and cultures have different literacy structures in place that give meaning and value to certain social and cultural practices: “Since different people have different life experiences it follows that social practices are differentially available to various individuals and groups of people” (Vasques, Egawa, Harste, & Thompson, 2004, p. xi).

When educators consider literacy as a social and cultural practice they take into account the diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing. Even the youngest school members will come to school with a wealth of knowledge and a vast array of social practices that they value. These practices might be different than the dominant practices of the teacher or school community. Learning about and valuing the social practices and semiotic resources of the children—such as rich literacy experiences in languages other than English, literacies of popular culture, and with digital literacy forms—ensures that certain strategies and the children associated with them are not marginalized or disregarded.

I imagine a new mom who wants to communicate in ways other than only through oral language with her baby. To make this happen the mother investigates the Internet, stops by a bookstore, and gets advice from her friends and family. She stumbles upon baby sign language and begins to learn some simple and key signs. The new mom applies parts of this visual language in her own family context as she teaches her husband what she has learned about the language. She then teaches a few signs to her baby. The baby, who begins to learn how, when, and what the signs mean, starts to use them as her own

language tool.

The teacher's knowing about the semiotic resources and language social practices children bring to the classroom is vital for helping children grow deeper in their sense of their identities and in helping their classmates to come to value the diversity in the classroom. In her book, *Breaking the Silence: Recognizing the Social and Cultural Resources Students Bring to the Classroom*, Catherine Compton-Lilly (2009) acknowledged the importance of learning about children's out-of-school lives and literacy practices. She shared that this could happen if educators made an effort to develop deep connections to the children's families. Since "children approach school literacy according to the models of literacy they bring from home," Compton-Lilly saw the benefits of these connections and attested that "home visits, frequent parent events in [the] classroom, and ongoing conversations with families" make a difference in acquainting oneself to children's at-home literacy practices (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013, *How do children become literate?*, para. 1; Compton-Lily, 2009, p. 17).

For Julie Coppola and Elizabeth Primas (2009), "knowing about students' background knowledge also helps the teacher to bridge from the known ... to the new" (p. 14). These educators recommend that teachers plan educational opportunities to learn about and to connect with children's social practices in popular culture. An example of this type of opportunity might include an educator "fill[ing] a bag with some favorite texts from home. Once shared, these texts provide examples and motivation for students to fill a bag with some of their own favorites from home. This 'show-and-tell' activity can focus students on making connections between identity and pop culture interests" (Hagwood, Alvermann, & Heron-Hruby, 2010, p. 17). Learning engagements such as this

help educators to learn about the children's background. Many researchers are adamant that "educators must find ways to include the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for literacy and language learning that ... students from other cultural backgrounds—bring into classrooms" (Boyd, Brock, & Rozendal, 2004, p. 2). This show-and-tell engagement could act as a jumping-off point from which a teacher will have a clearer idea as to what texts the children find relevant and interesting. For instance, if a child had brought in a video game manual or cheat sheet for show-and-tell and had passionately spoken about gaming, a teacher might connect that child's interest to curricular concepts and, accordingly, might "think of the literacy skills involved in writing a game script, researching a backstory (the history behind a game's plot), and designing walkthroughs (directions for playing a video game)" (Hagwood, Alvermann, & Heron-Hruby, 2010, p. 18).

It is important to consider the wider range of tools connected with multimodal literacy practices. Today, there are many ways children can read a text. With diverse literacy practices children might be familiar with literacies embedded in technology such as e-books, interactive white boards, and audio books. These text platforms require different social engagement practices and different kinds of opportunities to collaborate, interact, represent, and construct meaning. For instance, "a blog provides an explicit interaction between writer and reader quite different than writing in a print journal ... Other new media forms, such as wikis, also emphasize collaboration and dialogue" (Williams & Zenger, 2012, p. 6). When teachers recognize and appreciate the diverse literacy practices that children have they can build upon and extend their competencies. This can be done by employing a wide range of literacy practices and tools in the

classroom, which can engage and extend the children's literacy learning. Criss Jones Diaz and her colleagues Leonie Arthur, Bronwyn Beecher, and Margaret McNaught (2000) noted that "it is essential that early childhood educators develop insights into the social constructedness of literacy, which situates children's experiences of literacy far beyond traditional frameworks of developmentalist, constructivist and emergent literacy approaches" (p. 5). The more that is understood about literacy the more instructional practices need to change to adapt to these understandings. Assuming a sociocultural literacy perspective, I believe that as an educator I should not operate as if each child has had the same access to resources, the same experiences, and family and community supported literacy values. Doing so marginalizes certain ways of knowing and other literacy practices, such as multilingual literacies and literacies of technology, and assumes that these can be disregarded, ignored, or even thought of as detrimental to the child's learning about literacy in the classroom (Jones Diaz, Arthur, Beecher, & McNaught, 2000).

The Four Practices in the New Manitoba English Language Arts Curriculum

The literature review that has been presented thus far helps to create an understanding of the theoretical grounding for Manitoba's new ELA curriculum. Language and literacy learning is represented in the new curriculum as being social and complex. Learners are seen as competent beings who can socially and culturally construct knowledge with others, as they engage in using and working with a variety of texts. In Manitoba's new ELA curriculum, "'texts' refer to the variety of resources that we use to make meaning. These include oral, visual, print, digital texts and the various combinations of these" (MAPLE, 2015e). The new ELA document focuses on four key

practices to help guide learners exploration of “the types of language and texts that are used and how these language and texts are used” (MAPLE, 2015b). The learners are to see the practices as interconnected and can draw upon these practices “to fully engage in experiences with text” (2015b).

The next section of the literature review helps to clarify each of the four key ELA practices: “the practice of using language as sense making,” “the practice of using language as a system,” “the practice of using language as exploration and design,” and “the practice of using language as power and agency” (MAPLE, 2015b). Each of the four key practices are explored to show their significant value to the complexities of language and literacy teaching and their relationship to texts, resulting in authentic and effective learning experiences.

The practice of sense making. How can an environment in the classroom be created where engaged children will want to dig deeper into texts, search for meaning, and grow in their understanding of language? In their inspired book, *A Place for Wonder: Reading and Writing Nonfiction in the Primary Grades*, authors and researchers Georgia Heard and Jennifer McDonough (2009) tried to answer this question. They suggested ways in which a classroom could be arranged that would enable children to put their natural curiosity to work while they find, gather, and make sense of data, language, and text. They suggested creating discovery tables for unusual artifacts to be explored, setting up wonder centers where children could illustrate or write out and ask any questions they have, as well as arranging for spots, perhaps near a window, for child observation. Children could then illustrate and write about their experiences and their questions in a journal and use it as a guide for further research and text exploration. Embracing and

allowing children to reconnect to their natural sense of wonder provides an authentic and purposeful starting point for incorporating informational text into learning lessons as children try to uncover answers and make sense of information. Gerald Duffy (2014), like Heard and McDonough, believed that creating the right classroom environment was an important element for the language and literacy practice of sense making. For him that meant creating a text-rich environment, with a wide range of texts made available for each child to choose from. To help create this kind of environment Duffy proposed a guideline of having “at least 30 trade books per student, including a wide range of genres and levels of difficulty” available in the classroom to encourage browsing and to aid in empowering children to make text selections (p. 8). Additionally, Duffy reported that rocking chairs, beanbags, and an attractive book display helps set the mood to further entice children to read.

When teachers act as literacy learning coaches, they put their knowledge of children’s literature and their own professional judgment to work as they endeavour to create a text-rich environment. Being conscious of specific text features and reading challenges invites children to put their sense making strategies to use. The texts gathered and used in the classroom must invite children to ask meaningful questions, provide information both in picture and word for the children to synthesize, and resemble real language used beyond school settings so that children are able to make connections between texts and world experiences. In an effort to teach children how to employ various sense making strategies it is important to be aware of which texts are more likely to support these strategies and which are not. In Richard Meyer and Kathryn Whitmore’s (2011) book, *Reclaiming Reading*, decodable texts are scrutinized:

Predictable was reduced to phonetically regular words, such as *fat, cat, rat, sat,* and *mat*, squeezed into stories that neither make sense nor resemble real language, and have no rhythm or rhyme, as does good literature. The joy of reading was drowned in a litany of rules, sounds, and words that strained to fit into awkward and meaning-hollow texts. (p. 3)

Meyer and Whitmore went on to explain that picking these kinds of texts does not support children in making meaning. Rather, they suggested that teachers select texts that help children move forward in their learning about language. There are texts, and quite possibly predictable texts, which compel children to learn about language conventions—such as grammar, sound and letter patterns, and new words—but in dynamic and fulfilling ways. Such texts actively support children in fulfilling their “expectation of the use of language in a meaningful way (semantics), the use of certain linguistic structures (syntax), specific words (lexicon), and sounds (phonics)” (p. 3).

Deepening children’s understanding and comprehension can be a delicate task. From creating a wonder space to choosing a worthwhile text to explore, many choices are made that affect children’s practice of using language for sense making. How a teacher questions and comments on the children’s progress also plays a significant role in supporting children on their journey forward. In his book, *Choice Words*, Peter Johnston (2004) gave many examples of how the specific wording of questions affects a child’s growth in understanding a text. Words and phrases such as “how else ...,” “that’s like ...,” and “what if ...” gives children the possibility of agency (Johnston, 2004, p. 45-47). Language used in this way allows them to be flexible with their answers because this language shows them that there could be many ways of responding. These specific

teachers' words allow children to think for themselves as they reason and negotiate meaning. Reggie Routman (2003) would agree with the idea of being attentive to how teachers phrase their questions. She wrote that "if the first question we ask a student after reading is, 'What words did you have difficulty with?' we are giving them the message that reading is about getting the words right" (Routman, 2003, p. 167). Routman wanted teachers to help children understand that they should read for meaning. She prompted teachers to do this by encouraging them to start their questions off by saying, "why do you think ...?," "what do we learn ...?," and "where does it say ...?" (p. 169).

When social, intellectually rich environments are created, by asking questions that lead to strategic thinking, and when teachers are mindful about their language choices when they interact with literacy learners, children are more likely to take the time to observe and notice important elements within a text as they construct meaning. Johnston (2004) pointed out that teachers have a responsibility to help children notice "significant features of text" including unusual words, patterns, and differences between print and illustrations (p. 17). Johnston commented that when children were asked what they noticed, where there were patterns, or what about the text or illustrations surprised them it taught them to take the time to question, observe, notice, and explore texts more thoroughly. He tried to entice teachers to try out this teaching practice by commenting that teachers would soon see that children would not be able to put a text down without noticing compelling language, favorite phrases, or interesting artistic patterns both in written and illustrative form. Letting the children take the lead with their own questions and observations about the text allows instruction to begin "with a joint focus of attention because the children are already attending" (p. 18). This can become the start of a

discussion, a reason to research, and the push children need to dig for meaning.

“Comprehension is the essence of reading. If we do not understand a text’s message, we are not reading” (Duffy, 2014, p. 12); therefore, it stands to reason that children need to learn and to use multiple strategic ways to handle the language in the texts that they encounter. Many researchers would agree that these strategies would include asking content questions, visualizing, drawing inferences, synthesizing information, and having readers make connections from one text to other texts, to their own lives, and to the world around them (Cunningham & Shagoury, 2005; Harvy & Goudvis, 2007; McEwan-Adkins, 2010; Miller, 2013; Tovani, 2000). There are countless texts dedicated to teaching each one of these comprehension strategies. Researchers and educators have explained, provided examples, and created guidelines and templates about how to introduce and invite use of each strategy. But what about multimodal texts, do these same strategies apply to them?

Living among multimodal texts, children need opportunities to “expand their repertoire of strategies for making sense of these complex, multimodal ensembles” (Serafini, 2014, p. 2). Unfortunately, Frank Serafini, (2014), author of *Reading the Visual: An Introduction to Teaching Multimodal Literacy*, argued that children are not being effectively taught strategies that will help them to make sense out of the vast array of multimodal texts they encounter. While comprehension strategies for written text is an integral part of every teaching approach, think for a moment of the other ways in which we need to make sense of incoming information. While riding in a car, children see billboards towering over restaurants, giant movie posters on the side of the theatre, and traffic and road safety signs at every turn. Visual images are displayed everywhere, and

yet Serafini has argued that comprehension strategies targeted towards certain literacies, including visual images, are not being focused on in classroom instruction:

As the texts students encounter rely more and more on visual images and design features to communicate ideas and make sense of our world, our instructional approaches should focus more and more on the strategies used to make sense of visual images and the multimodal ensembles in which they are encountered. (p. 4)

From the writings and teaching strategies presented in Suzanne Miller and Mary McVee's (2012) book, *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms*, it would seem that they agree. In their book they explored ways to enhance a child's ability to interpret and appreciate the subtleties of multimodal texts. Miller and McVee wrote that children could be taught to "consider how camera angle and camera distance play a role in understanding and representing a classic drama" (p. xi). Even a multimodal text such as a picture book, they insisted, needs to be explored differently. It is essential that children are "understanding the visual images and design elements, codes, and literary and artistic devices that have influenced the production and interpretation of picturebooks" (Serafini, 2014, p. 6). These elements work together to create a complete connected meaning of a story (Miller & McVee, 2012; Serafini, 2014). After reading a picture book, how colours were used to illuminate a significant theme, for example, or how visual images were able to show what the written word did or could not convey are all worthy elements of the text to be explored.

Many researchers have described how children become more and more independent as the teacher slowly releases responsibility for doing this with them.

Routman (2003) relied heavily on this concept as she designed her own *optimal learning model* to depict the process of moving from more scaffolding to less or no scaffolding—from “expert assistance and encouragement” to gradually increasing “independence” (p. 44). In Routman’s model the teacher first demonstrates a literacy strategy. The main goal is to help make the literacy practice visible to children through explicit explanations, feedback, and modeling (Duffy, 2014; Gambrell & Morrow, 2015; Routman, 2003). Learners are not to feel pressured to participate but rather work hard at watching intently, by listening to the teacher explain the purpose, and by starting to feel more confident about the strategy as confusions are worked through (Routman, 2003).

Next, invitations are given to the children to encourage them to collaborate with the teacher on a specific strategy. Don Holdaway (1999), who offered a similar model of movement from greater dependence to greater independence, wrote that the teacher “engages in a special mixture of showing-and-explaining-while-doing” (p. 14). During this shared demonstration the teacher still takes the lead and there is no pressure on the children to master the practice being taught; children need to simply participate with the teacher. Holdaway wrote that when the children participate within these instructionally rich sharing situations “it is the intuitive skill of the ‘teacher’ in initiating, guiding, suggesting, questioning, supporting, backing off, acknowledging—and a host of other facilitating interventions or withdrawals—that mediate the efficiency of the situation” (p. 17).

By the third phase of this kind of model the children have learned a new sense of the practice and have been able to participate in using it with direct support from the teacher. Next, the children use this practice to take charge of their learning, as the

teacher's role fades more to one of being a coach. The teacher offers encouragement and feedback to the children but is no longer leading the way. It is important for the teacher to gradually reduce the amount of support as the children become increasingly ready to apply this practice in real reading situations (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

The last phase of this kind of model is what Routman (2003) described as “independent practice” (p. 46). This phase places a lot of responsibility on the children as they direct their own learning with minimal support from the teacher. The teacher focuses attention on monitoring the children's use of the practice and supports the children's problem solving successfully on their own. Children's small successes are to be recognized and their continued learning encouraged. This is to help children develop awareness of their learning and to invite them to take pride and joy in the continuous process of their literacy learning.

The practice of language as a system. Children need various opportunities to explore, learn about, and use language arts. They require time to investigate language and literacy in order to gain an understanding of how these systems work—what the rules are, and when these structures can be renegotiated. Discourse patterns, grammar, and spelling are among a host of elements that play into language rules and conventions that help make a language a system. These are essential elements that can be explored in a variety of ways in order to afford children the opportunity to learn how language operates, so that they may better understand and create meaningful texts. Children need to be supported as they bring their literacy knowledge forward and use language to convey their messages to others. Texts can also be used to support learners as they pause to reflect on how language works as a system. As young children are supported in their development of

language and literacy, texts (if used in a meaningful and purposeful way) become part of powerful literacy events in which “words, sounds, grammatical constructions, the parts of a book or texts, and the relationships between each other, other texts, and other contexts” can be discovered (Meyer & Whitmore, 2011, p. 4).

There are a multitude of conventions that are important for communication and meaning making. Punctuation, grammar, register, and form are examples of the conventions that enhance and contribute to the clarity of communication. While researching and learning more about these systems of language I wanted to focus on one in particular—spelling. While I could have picked any number of language conventions to research, since all conventions contribute to meaning making, I decided to specifically highlight spelling because methods of teaching habitually evoke controversy. Many adults will remember that as children they spent time memorizing words for a weekly spelling test. Copying words into notebooks dozens of times to “learn” how to spell them was a practice that seemed like the only way to become a conventional speller. Now, many educational theorists and teachers argue that young children should be immersed in authentic, engaging, and purposeful writing in lieu of participating in programs and instruction that separate skill learning from their meaningful use and conscious study (Dombey, Moustafa, Barrs, Bromley, Ellis, Kelly, & O’Sullivan, 1998; Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2012; Routman, 2003, 2012). Meyer and Whitmore (2014) suggested that instead of a formal spelling program, younger school-aged children can learn the many concepts about how the written language works as they are exposed naturally to “print-rich environments and through purposeful engagements with real texts and literacy events” (Classroom Practices- Preschool and Kindergarten, para. 1). Meyer and

Whitmore suggested that using

texts such as big books, projected songs, and poems on posters, which allow everyone to see the print, also teach children about spelling. Aside from enjoying such varied reading materials together, children can be encouraged to notice how words in these texts are spelled. (Read Broadly, para. 1)

In literacy-rich environments where children experiment with alliteration such as in predictable rhymes and structured verses “young children develop phonemic awareness” (Routman, 2003, p. 51). In these environments, children begin to recognize words or patterns in the texts as their visual memory increases. Children, becoming more familiar with the words, start to understand how words should look and therefore make more sophisticated judgments when spelling (Meyer & Whitmore, 2014).

When wanting to become more knowledgeable, flexible, and comfortable using language learners must have constant exposure to language that catches their attention and is given conscious attention. All kinds of reading engagements, including being read to, reading with others, and reading independently are important practices that allow learners to hear, explore, and practice literacy. The authors of the book *Literature and the Child* have specifically recommended that children need opportunities to explore literature, as it will contribute to the growth and development of language:

When children and adolescents read or hear stories read to them, they learn new vocabulary; they encounter a greater variety of words in books than they will ever hear in spoken conversation or on television. Each reader builds an individual storehouse of language possibilities and draws on that wealth when speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Literature also helps develop readers’ facility with

language because it exposes them to carefully crafted poetry and prose. Young people who read literature have a broad range of experiences and language to put in their storehouse; they have greater resources on which to draw than do people who do not read. (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2014, p. 6)

With the youngest school learners there are only certain texts they can read for themselves. But, these young learners can be exposed to rich, clear, and well-crafted language while listening to their teacher read aloud high quality texts that are more complex than the children are able to read for themselves. Read-alouds also provide children with the opportunity to spend time with a text they might not have otherwise chosen. In this case, children are getting the chance to hear stories and words that may have remained elusive. Children learn vocabulary, fluency, new information, and how stories and written language work when their teachers share texts through read-alouds (Routman, 2003).

Hearing and reading different genres also gives children the chance to listen to and recognize other elements of language. Rhyme, for example, can be enjoyed and studied in many poems. Poetry is often rhythmic and rhymed, and this pleases many listeners. Deborah Wooten and Bernice Cullinan (2015) pointed out that “[children] like poems that tell a story—poems with rhyme, rhythm, and interesting sounds” (Read Deeply, Think Deeply, Write Deeply, para, 4). Whimsical, silly, and nonsense lyrical poems can appeal to children of all ages. When poems are used as a part of classroom learning it allows wonderful opportunities for children to hear pattern, verse, attention-grabbing sounds, and to experience imaginary, figurative, and clever word play.

Another genre of text that is well suited for exploring language as a system is

folklore. Folktales (stories, legends, tall tales and myths) are stories that have been passed down through generations. These stories, whether being read or told orally have “special characteristics that make them exceptionally good for language teaching [and learning]. Their frequent repetitions make them excellent [resources] for reinforcing new vocabulary and grammar. Many have natural rhythmic qualities that are useful for working on stress, rhythm, and intonation in pronunciation” (Taylor, 2000, p. 1). As children listen to or are read or read folktales published as children’s literature, they come to realize that there are multiple versions of different tales. The ELA practices become interconnected as children enact the practice of sense making by asking themselves how they are understanding what they read and hear as different words and phrases are used to describe similar or alternative story scenarios. The practice of language as a system is also enacted as children use what they know about language and ask themselves how they can communicate to others. Children can become comfortable in knowing that as they tell their own version of a folktale they are allowed to experiment and have fun with language. Each time the tale is spoken and heard a new version of the story is born. Children can take what they know about language to draw their listeners and readers into their own versions of the story as they allow their imaginations, creativity, and lexical choices to help them become authors. Although many folktales are now represented in children’s books, there are also more difficult literary retellings of these folktales. These more sophisticated retellings often “keep some of their oral characteristics, but they are often longer, and their language is often both more ornate and more difficult” (p. 4). Children, learning to appreciate these texts, can be supported as they investigate meanings of words, compare and contrast different versions, and notice underlying

language and text structures. Children learn that exploring conventions helps them to make meaning from and with texts.

In order for children to fully enact the practice of using language as a system they need to explore the relationships that are important for meaning making. A genre that positions children to use multiple modes of literacy for meaning making is picture books. Usually limited in terms of the amount of text it is the illustrations that predominate in children's construction of meaning as they engage with picture books. For example, *Rosie's Walk*, written and illustrated by Pat Hutchins (1968), is made up of only thirty-two words and yet it has twenty-seven pages of pictures. If one were to read the words alone the character of the mischievous fox would never be realized, for he is never mentioned in the written text. In picture books, readers analyze the relationship between both print and images (Meek, 1988). It is this unique relationship, the play between written text and illustration, which allows readers to enact the practice of language as a system while also utilizing the practice of using language as sense making.

When using the practice of language as a system, children need many opportunities to inquire into how language works in order to compose their own meaningful texts. Lee Galda, Lawrence Sipe, Lauren Liang, and Bernice Cullinan saw a clear link between reading and writing. They believed that exposing children to high quality texts could effectively accomplish such inquiries:

Outstanding literature helps readers become better writers as well. When children read a lot, they notice what writers do. They see that writers choose from a variety of language possibilities in their writing. When readers write, they borrow the structures, patterns, and words from what they read. (Galda, Sipe, Liang, &

Cullinan, 2014, p. 6)

Some children might think that “borrowing” in this way is “cheating” (Dorfman & Cappeli, 2007, p. 3). Children may require encouragement that this is how we learn because we are social beings. In order to encourage children to borrow literacy styles and techniques, literature that exemplifies inspired writing needs to be available. In their book, *Mentor text: Teaching writing through children’s literature, K-6*, Lynne Dorfman and Rose Cappelli (2007) encouraged teachers to be on the look out for *mentor texts*. They referred to these texts as “pieces of literature that we can return to again and again” because of our love for the author’s wonderful examples of writing (p. 2). Dorfman and Cappelli were enamored with such mentor texts because they believed “they help students envision the kind of writer they can become ... Writers can imitate the mentor text and continue to find new ways to grow” (p. 3). For instance, children can revisit mentor texts to: identify unusual sentence structures, analyze how an author and illustrator *show* versus *tell*, and locate snippets of poetry in prose (Dorman & Cappeli, 2007). As children compose their own meaningful texts, their writing becomes stronger when they try out the writing crafts demonstrated by the authors in mentor texts for their own purposes (Cunningham & Shagoury, 2005).

While Meyers and Whitmore (2014) provided a handful of meaningful classroom practices where texts support children in their natural progression of learning to spell, they also acknowledged that “some spelling instruction benefits all students; some is appropriate for individuals who are currently learning about specific concepts” (Classroom Practices- Primary and Intermediate, para. 2). The same understanding applies to learning about language as a system more generally. Being exposed to texts as

central to a variety of literacy events is not the only way to teach children about a language system. But, using rich texts in purposeful and authentic ways is one of many ways to help children as they naturally develop their knowledge about language.

The practice of exploration and design. How can literacy events be designed so that explorations are promoted? Why does anyone need to become an explorer of text in the first place? Many educators today are feeling the pressure to meet the high academic expectations laid out for them by their governments, their school divisions, and their school administrations (Leithwood, McAdie, Bascia, & Rodrigue, 2006). Authors and researchers Kenneth Leithwood, Pat McAdie, Nina Bascia, and Anne Rodrigue (2006) observed that the pressure felt by many teachers to “cover” mandated curricula resulted in them merely skimming the surface of learning objectives instead of taking the time to thoroughly explore and dig deep into the material. While aiming to design experiences where the children gain a deep comprehension of learning goals and practices may seem like an obvious goal for teachers, sadly “deep understanding is rarely achieved by most students” (p. 4).

Digging deep into learning materials and allowing children to explore language, ideas, and issues found within texts fosters a deeper understanding of a wide range of ideas and forms. When learning experiences are designed to provide time for children to question, ponder, and become inquisitive they become interested, engaged, and motivated to find answers. When deep understanding is emphasized children begin to think critically and creatively, which leads them to make thoughtful judgments and informed evaluations. The process of exploration enables children to enact the practice of using language as sense making as they seek out, create, and make meaning for themselves and

for others while at the same time making connections to their own and others' experiences and knowledge. This can all be accomplished while actively taking part in individual and social learning processes.

An exploration of text is not “just another thing” that is tacked onto already busy class schedules. Text explorations can become opportunities for children to situate their learning in the known and the new. For example, learning experiences can be designed where the learning starts by children and teachers asking genuine questions that matter to them and which become increasingly complex and pertinent to their experiences and concerns (Wilhelm, 2007). Jeffery Wilhelm (2007) would describe this process as “inquiry”. From a teaching perspective this might involve helping children to frame their wonderings in ways that matter to them and which take them deeper into a particular focused study that is both personally and collectively (in terms of the class) purposeful and meaningful. Children actively partake in learning by acknowledging their own concerns and questions, and content and processes are collaboratively negotiated in ways that make sense to the children and the teacher. Children, guided by significant ideas, questions and concerns, and ways of pursuing them are supported in conducting “deep investigations into big and enduring ideas” (Krauss & Boss, 2013, p. ix).

In inquiry-based teaching and learning after the initial questions have been posed by both the teacher and the children, children start the process of investigating by collecting data, taking part in class discussions, and pursuing information and knowledge that can lead to possible answers and new questions. Such teaching and learning is of course not restricted to texts and children are engaged in explorations of multiple sources and resources. As well, since texts are never neutral, children explore and research using

multiple texts while at the same time learning to critically evaluate these texts as sources and resources for their inquiries. An evaluation of a text might include having learners ask how the form, register, or genre influences meaning making. These types of questions enable learners draw on their repertoire of ELA practices while working with texts. This also helps the children to deepen and broaden their perspectives and confidence in what they are learning. As they encounter different texts this “enables young people to explore and understand their world” (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2014, p. 6). This exploration of literacy and context in the “real world” also helps to deepen children’s understanding, increase their knowledge, explore different feelings, and values as their questions become deeper and deeper.

Play, like inquiry, is a big idea that can be located in each of and across all four ELA practices, but it too seems particularly well aligned with the practice of exploration. Play not only allows children to learn through exploration but also enables them to take pleasure in doing so: “One constant in the changing world of childhood is that children play” (Thompson, 2008, p. 24). Encouraging children to participate in dramatic play inspired by their own stories written down or based on read-aloud texts, as one example of play, makes it possible for them to try on different roles and collaborate with peers, all while exploring narrative structures, familiar and new vocabulary, improvised dialogue, and the performance of a dramatic script. While engaged in this type of play children have fun as they uncover authentic purposes for their own and others’ texts and language. Exploration through classroom play allows children to build connections with one another through purposeful, dynamic, and creative, make-believe worlds. As children design their own play worlds they are “seeking to actively understand the world around

them and their own place within that complex world” (Broadhead & Burt, 2012, p. 3).

Children engaged in play are also hard at work. Younger children, who are pretending to work in a restaurant, for example, are also working hard to problem solve with their peers and working to understand and recognize environmental print that has been included as part of a prepared play environment. They may well be acting as language explorers while “experimenting with and testing different ways to communicate” in ways that are meaningful to them (Miller, 1991, p. 8). Through a child’s imagination, play can become the springboard that cultivates further literacy exploration.

Children often do not limit themselves when they are engaged in a creative activity. Teachers, however, may need “permission” to allow themselves the freedom to ask their personal and professional questions and indulge their personal and professional curiosity, creativity, and wondering. Curricular imagining, an enthusiasm for one’s own and colleagues’ learning, and an insatiable yearning to better understand children’s literacy learning and ways to better support their learning, could be considered part of the practice of exploration for teachers.

One of the principal ways of improving literacy instruction is for teachers to explore children’s literature, becoming more familiar with engaging texts that can enhance children’s literacy learning. For instance, when early years teachers begin to read, study, and familiarize themselves with wonderful children’s literature, especially picture books, they are reminded of the importance of aesthetics. Understandings of color, line, sequence and other visual signs convey meaning and help readers interpret a story. It is important for teachers to explore an array of texts so that they do not forget

that their ways of knowing too can be transformed. By reading rich and diverse literature, teachers can enter new worlds, construct new knowledge, and entertain new possibilities for teaching.

Nikki Gamble (2013) wrote that “effective teaching and learning in language and literature depends upon deep subject knowledge, of both a range of texts and of approaches to studying them” (p. 1). To add to this point, Eve Bearne (1996) argued that it is not just the “children’s implicit knowledge of a range of texts and contexts [that needs to] be brought out into the open,” but, as well, the teachers’ understanding and knowledge of children’s literature that needs to be extensive (p. 318). Both teachers and children, therefore, can enjoy becoming explorers of text. By designing an environment where explorations of texts are encouraged children and teachers alike begin to recognize the full range of literary works that can draw them in and eventually become a part of their personal and shared literary repertoires.

The practice of power and agency. The last of the four practices in the new ELA curriculum at least in part situates children as active citizens. Active citizens—citizens who can advocate for themselves, for others, and for their environment—must be able to examine, interrogate, and question information gathered from multiple sources.

Recognizing the influential power of language enables learners to further investigate complex issues from many perspectives, interrogate biased information, and contemplate alternative positions that can lead to self and social development. While this section of the literature review is devoted to reviewing the practice of using language and literacy for power and agency, an overview of an instructional perspective that encourages learners to recognize the power of language while embracing their own agency for

positive change is first introduced because of its relationship to this ELA practice.

Critical literacy. What power does a four-year-old possess? Can a child in grade 1 make any real change in the world? Why would an elementary child need to become a social activist? The answers to these questions could propel teachers to consider a *critical literacy* perspective and its role in their classrooms. Texts are not neutral (Kuby, 2013; McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004; Vasquez, 2014). Hilary Janks and her colleagues Kerry Dixon, Ana Ferreira, Stella Granville, and Denise Newfield (2014) explained this idea by stating that texts are partial because “they cannot capture the world as it is. Even the original oral text presents us with only the ideas, beliefs and values of the speakers” (p. 2). It is for this reason that becoming an active critic of text is an important learning goal. When practicing critical literacy one seeks to reflect on the point of view of the text producer—the words that are used, the degree of formality, the tone of voice that is captured, the author’s perspective and positioning; for these are the elements that shape our thinking and our identities (Luke & Freebody, 1999). In the classroom, teachers “imagine critical inquiry, negotiation, contestation, and reimagination at the center” of their literacy curriculum to help the children dig deeply into matters of social justice and equity (Vasquez, 2014, p. 1). Children employ critical literacy practices when encountering texts by being supported and guided in a process in which they reconsider their current thinking by “reimagining, adjusting, reconstructing, and redesigning” what they encounter and perhaps what they believe themselves (p. 2).

Just as no text is neutral, all discourses involve power, including professional teaching discourses. Teachers have the power to negotiate a critical literacy curriculum. This power comes from first creating a space for critical literacy and then by seizing

opportunities to address real life issues, texts, and topics. For instance, to create a critical literacy space educators can first observe children, the things they say, the images printed on their clothes, or the questions they ask, and then consider those observations when planning possible curricular learning experiences (Vasquez, 2014). Teacher can share their power as they allow the building of a curriculum and choosing of texts to reflect the issues and topics that are of interest to the children. Teachers can also share their power with children by teaching them to examine these texts—by disrupting and critiquing the perspectives and information that is put forth. This could be done while identifying differences and similarities in the language found in related texts or by comparing a variety of multimodal texts (Vasquez, 2014). Children are then able to take a more powerful role in their learning when they ask questions about “representation, benefit, marginalization, and interests” (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. 123).

Another benefit of deconstructing the position of any discourse is the action that can arise from feeling powerful. When teachers create a critical literacy space in the classroom that allows children to address issues and topics that they find significant they will feel motivated to make their voice and ideas heard by being a part of the discussion, and by suggesting alternative ways of being. These discussions and ideas may lead to children feeling powerful enough to transform their power into action by acting upon possibilities for change or improvement. When this power is appropriately and responsibly used then children and teachers begin to practice agency. It is not only enough for teachers to scaffold the children’s learning as they become emerging members of society, a critical literacy teaching stance supports children in becoming active and contributing members in their present context as well,

Power. Children gain critical literacy power when they acknowledge and become aware that “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” is a lie. It has been stated that the “truth no longer exists. What matters is what story gets spun” (Lankshear & Knoble, 2006, p. 8). Every story has its own version of the truth. This is made possible by the biases that contribute to any story. My gender, age, income level, race, nationality, prior knowledge, and mood are all elements that play into my perspectives, language, thinking, reading, and production of texts. With my chosen words and the formality of the language I use, I become powerful in how I use my language to persuade the thinking of others, and how I portray my version of the truth (Hindley Salch & Marino, 2001). Taking what I know about the practice of using language as a system I can use carefully chosen adjectives, inflection, and precisely placed pauses as powerful representations of my language. To persuade listeners I can ask myself how I’d like to communicate my knowledge and ideas and by utilizing the practice of using language as sense making I can deliberately choose to express and leave out certain information. Listeners, because they have their own perspectives, might very well interpret my truth differently from my initial intention. Brent Davis and his research partners Dennis Sumara and Rebecca Luce-Kapler (2007) explained that even if they were standing side-by-side, individuals could still perceive experiences, events, and texts entirely differently. Language focuses our perception of knowledge in a certain way. Hence, “because there are connections between language and power, language also matters” (Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville, & Newfield, 2014, p. 5).

Paulo Freire (1987) clearly saw this connection between language and power and noted that literacy education is “a set of practices that functions to either empower or

disempower people” (p. 141). Literacy education for empowerment encourages children to read and write with a critical mind. For instance, when a story is told readers/writers must use their language to question whose reality was being ignored and whose was dominating. When children are aware that certain voices are foregrounded while others are marginalized they begin to see texts in different ways. Attitudes and thinking towards text affects what language learners deem as appropriate and serious. This knowledge can empower readers to take action. Literacy researchers Christine Leland, Mitzi Lewison, and Jerome Harste (2013) explained the differences between being an agent and victim of text:

Readers who are able to size up the situation and draw their own conclusions become *agents of text* since they retain the power to make their own rational decisions about what to believe. Those who don't engage in critical reading are more likely to become *victims of text* since they tacitly accept assumptions that might not stand up under further scrutiny. (p. 4)

This argument further adds to the idea that language influences thinking, and realizing this becomes part of a pedagogical plan focused on agency.

Agency. Freire, an educator, activist, philosopher, and revolutionary, saw that in many traditional modes of teaching it was often the teacher that held the most power. This, he believed, leads to the oppression of the student (Freire, 1996). In what Freire (1996) called the *banking concept of education*, students become passive and docile followers. He noted that students, in this model, do not think critically; instead, students patiently receive, memorize, and retain the information given by the teacher. He went on to conclude that this misguided educational system left students only receiving the

information that the teachers deemed valuable, which, in turn, left them lacking creativity and unable to transform knowledge for their own purposes. Freire believed that there was an alternative to this type of teaching, one that allowed teachers to share power with students. This alternative way of teaching begins with teachers proposing problems with in my case children, while supporting them in becoming active participants in their own learning. These problems encourage thinking, dialogue, and partnership between all members of the classroom, including the teacher. Teachers would not have a predetermined answer to these problems, but rather the teacher and children would join together in dialogue, learn from one another, and come to a conclusion together.

Freire (1987) believed that critical literacy could become a vehicle in which “the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices” (p. 157). Liberation could be possible if first literacy was built into something more than merely decoding and encoding print. Literacy and language used for agency would involve people in interrogating their own assumptions and the assumptions of others. During this process, the children and teacher would work together to investigate texts, conflicts, and issues. Children might ask: “how are the words I use and the actions I take influencing others?” With responsive support, such questions could lead children to entertain alternate ways of being. As they brainstorm ideas and look for alternate viewpoints and perspectives, they would be positioned to learn the multi-faceted “truths” that are possible. Such language and literacy practices have the potential to help children emerge as active citizens.

Freire (1974) thought that people should make it their priority to pursue a critical consciousness of the world. This was to be accomplished through a process of reflection

and action. For action, Freire believed, was the only way to bring about transformation. This action was derived from dialogue and critical thinking about the world and the people in it. Freire (1996) stated, “true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking” (p. 73). Critical thinking in itself, of course, does not produce agency; it is the person who becomes an agent. Children apply their critical literacy practices to “understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice” (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013, p. ix). Children can become advocates for themselves, their communities, their environment, and for the citizens who have not yet sought to turn their power into action, or for those who are not yet powerful. This is an important step that needs to be realized for every teacher and child. Children, encouraged by their teacher, gain the courage to think and act for themselves; they become concerned with the interests and needs of others, for if they don’t then “we have failed to educate them” (p. 4).

Johnston (2004) argued that “if nothing else, children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals” (p. 29). This is *agency*. To gain an understanding of children’s sense of agency, Johnston explained that the stories that children tell must be listened to. The stories that children tell to themselves and to others shape their sense of who they think they are. Children can spin their stories to make themselves failures or heroes. As well, these stories can strongly affect their academic achievement (Johnston & Winograd, 1985; Nicholls, 1989; Nolen-Hoeksema, Girus, & Seligman, 1986). Johnston explored how teachers could arrange for their children to tell literacy stories to help build a positive sense of their own agency—stories where children were viewed as literate individuals. He explained that as children

work on composing meaningful texts and reading rich literature, teachers can position children in a way that helps them see the bridge between their actions and consequences, by asking them, “how did you figure that out?” (Johnston, 2004, p. 31). This type of question invites the children to pay attention to how their choices and actions are responsible for the successful completion of a problem. Children may then portray themselves as the successful protagonist in the story: “Such a narrative invites a sense of agency as part of the child’s literate identity” (p. 31). This positive agency is key. When learners only tell narratives where they have been unsuccessful or when they attribute their success to others, they may well “disengage, decrease effort, generate fewer ideas, and become passive and discouraged” (p. 40). The relationship children have with their academic success reinforces their sense of agency (Clay, 1987; Johnston, 2004). It is important that children are helped to develop a strong belief in their own competency as “already literate” so that they tell agentive narratives.

Reflection. “Being able to tease out various agendas, purposes, and interests represented in texts, are necessary for all of our students” because they aid in the learning of two important literacies: power and agency (Stevens & Bean, 2007, p. 4). I believe that when even the youngest literacy members of a school system are seen as having thoughts and feelings that are important and worthy of being heard and acted upon, then these children gain the inner power and strength they require to use their agency and become activists in addressing problems and issues that concern them.

Review of the four practices. Focusing on key practices suggests that there is a specific way of thinking, doing, and being in the ELA discipline. Each of the four practices brings significant value to the discipline and is to be thought of as central to the

big ideas that ground learning and teaching in ELA. Teachers, planning effective and purposeful learning engagements, will give children opportunities to engage in the four practices. Teachers have the flexibility to be responsive to the topics of interest, inquiries, and broad questions of the children in order to provide authentic experiences. Through the four practices children will have the opportunity to explore, question, and deepen their understanding of language and text. While exploring significant ideas and concerns the practices become intertwined and interconnected. Each practice must be viewed as a part of a whole where each part plays an important role in an effective ELA curriculum.

Summary of the Literature Review

Current issues and understandings of literacy and valued literacy practices discussed by teacher-researchers, literacy researchers and other scholars have helped me to establish the value and importance of the directions taken in the new Manitoban ELA curriculum.

In this literature review I have sought to clarify the meaning of the word literacy for myself. My research suggested that literacy is an evolving concept. The rapid changes and continually shifting purposes of literacy have expanded beyond our prior conceptualizations. Being literate can be expressed through many recognized modes. How I am able to convey and represent meaning can take multiple forms. To be literate in today's world, I must develop an understanding of multimodal literacy practices. Encouraging children to create, compose, and interpret their knowledge through multimodal systems allows them to construct meaning while developing and extending their literacy knowledge and practices.

My research further suggests that literacy needs to be considered a social practice.

By thinking about literacy as a social practice rather than as a skill, I acknowledge that literacy and language learning are not simple and neutral skills that can be extracted, taught and applied irrespective of individual and community uses and varied contexts.

The four practices highlighted in the new ELA curriculum document have also been critically evaluated and rigorously explored in this literature review. Methods of learning through the practices have been supported by the scholarship I have cited. While each practice was researched and written about as separate entities, it should be kept in mind that the new curriculum encourages and emphasizes the interconnectedness of the practices.

Chapter Three: Text Selection Process

When beginning to work on this thesis, I was interested in the scholarship that would help me to broaden my understandings of text in the 21st century. I was also interested in deepening my understanding of the four focal practices of the new ELA curriculum. I allowed myself time to reflect upon, discuss, and question the scholarship that I was reading. I needed to critically analyze this information and decide if and how it moved my thinking forward. I then considered how the new insights I had gleaned could be presented in a way that would demonstrate my current and newly constructed understanding and knowledge. Engaging in this reflective scholarly exercise gave me the opportunity to: build upon my understanding of what could be considered a text; shape my understanding of the four practices that ground the teaching and learning in ELA; and deepen my understanding of how literacy learners could meaningfully engage with a variety of texts by enacting these specific ELA practices.

With a heightened awareness of the relationship between the ideas in the new ELA curriculum and my deeper understandings of literacy, I felt that I was then ready to begin the next step in the learning journey. I was ready to proceed with selecting four texts that could be used to reinforce, highlight, support, and enrich young children's learning in ways that utilized the four practices identified in Manitoba's new ELA curriculum document.

The first step I took in the new phase of my journey was to tour local museums, browse through library shelves, and surf the web to find and review texts. I found, read, viewed, explored, and considered a plethora of texts, but I knew I only needed to select a

few for a close analysis. I asked myself: “which texts should be the focus of my written workshop document?” I wondered if I could simply pick up any text to explore and discuss? Would I not be able to select any text, no matter the genre, writing style, illustrative content, mode, or other, and be able to provide insights as to what and how the selected text could potentially support young literacy learners? Nor Isa and Che Mahmud (2012) suggested that “text selection appears to be the most important consideration that must be taken seriously if we seek for a more meaningful engagement with literary texts” (p. 77). This bold argument made me pause and consider the immense responsibility teachers have when it comes to choosing the texts that support and guide classroom learning. Rather than merely selecting the first few texts that I came across for my written workshop I decided to keep exploring and browsing through texts and allow myself the opportunity to carefully consider my choices.

A Text-Rich Environment

In my literature review I referenced Gerald Duffy (2014) who believed that every child in the classroom should have access to at least thirty books. This guideline, he argued, could be the start in creating a text-rich environment. I decided to sit with a colleague of mine to discuss and reflect on our own classrooms: how did we create text-rich environments? As a Nursery/Kindergarten teacher I made use of a variety of texts and gave children ample opportunities to explore these texts before, during, and after literacy instructional engagements. I recalled my counters and bulletin boards being filled with sculptures and paintings—both purchased or acquired and created by the classroom children. My learning stations had rotating artifact and discovery tables. My interactive whiteboard and computers allowed children to digitally interact with poems. My music

station was piled high with sheet music, instruments, and CDs. When thinking back to how I designed my text-rich classroom I wondered if the description would satisfy Duffy. He referred to a text-rich environment as one where books were readily available. Galda, Sipe, Liang, and Cullinan (2014) also noted the importance of books in the classroom when they wrote, “the power of books to open new worlds, to cause readers to think in new ways—in short, to transform their ways of knowing—makes books the greatest single resource for educating our children” (p. 7). I agreed, although I had broadened my own understanding of text I still considered a traditional “ink-pressed-onto-paper” book a valuable source of text. In my own classroom I also had many books; literally hundreds of children’s books were stacked on the long shelves that stretched across the entire length of my classroom walls. By far the majority of the books I owned and used in the class were trade books. Because of my familiarity with these types of texts and the support for trade books that I was reading about from the writing of other teacher practitioners, I wondered if I should choose trade books to focus on and include in my written workshop? What do trade books have to offer?

Trade books are books that were “published for sale to the general public” (Harris & Hodges 1995, p. 258). They are books that can be found in public libraries and bookstores and in many class libraries. These books are not designed for only school-based audiences, like textbooks or academic guides, but were instead “designed to appeal to a wide audience” (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013, Why Trade Books Matter, para. 2). Trade books focus on the authentic use of written language to tell a story or to explain a concept. For example, they may bring to life a memorable character or use writing to entertain through humour (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013). When texts provide this

kind of rich language and story lines, children become interested in the craft of writing and often fall in love with particular authors and characters. Many trade books, especially the ones written for younger audiences, are multimodal. Not only is the writing authentic and rich but the illustrations are also dimensions of the “reading/literacy process”. Often the visuals work to contribute to the readers’ understanding of the written information presented in the text while other times the visuals are significant in adding another or different layer of meaning to the story. These positive aspects of trade books make them appealing choices when a teacher’s intention is for children to enjoy a read-aloud.

Trade books have been written for the general public, and therefore do not focus on the prescriptive teaching of particular literacy skills. Rather than use trade books to support, deepen, and build on children’s literary competencies some educators argue that children learning to read require texts that are specifically designed to teach them reading skills according to a particular scope and sequence. Linda Gambrell and her research partner Barbara Palmer (1992) interrogated this assumption in a research study they conducted into first and second graders’ knowledge about reading and writing. They studied two groups of children as developing readers. The first group were children whose teachers used a basal reading series—which targets the teaching of specific reading skills—during literacy instruction periods, and who left the children’s reading of trade books to voluntary reading times. The second group of children had teachers who used trade books exclusively, for both literacy instruction and voluntary reading. Gambrell and Palmer concluded that the children who experienced trade books-based instruction actually drew more upon what would be considered “skills” in the basal reading program—such as graphophonics, word recognition, and so on—than the

children who were actually more explicitly instructed in such skills in the basal reading programs. And not just that, Gambrell and Palmer also found that the children in the trade books-based program had superior understandings of the purposes of the authors' writing, while also experiencing greater pleasure from their reading.

Literacy researchers Richard Allington and Peter Johnston (2000) also conducted a study to find out what key features promoted effective literacy instruction. Allington and Johnston studied thirty elementary teachers in their classrooms for at least ten full days. Drawing upon their research data, they published a book of case studies that highlighted the qualities of six teachers from their research. In their book they celebrated the six teachers as “exemplary” because they were deemed to be “caring, enthusiastic, and confident that they [could] teach children to read” (Allington & Johnston, 2002, p. xiii). These two researchers found that one of the commonalities of the six teachers was that they used trade books, ranging in difficulty and genre in their teaching. The researchers also noted that experience with rich literary texts was consistently woven into the teachers' literacy instruction, and that content area instruction also was scaffolded with meaningful trade books and other texts.

Since trade books are written for general audiences they can be a great resource for piquing children's interest, while at the same time serving the goal of intertwining reading instruction with other discipline-based curriculum elements. This view is echoed by the research highlighted in an article offered by Booksource (n.d.). In this article attention was drawn to recent research, journal articles, and professional books that argue the case for trade books to be used in the classroom:

When students have access to trade books, they ... acquire a host of specific

knowledge about reading processes, such as comprehension, concepts of print, letter knowledge, concept of story, and writing. In addition, reading widely supports students' overall growth and progress in academic learning and world knowledge. And this benefit holds for all learners. (p. 7)

In any discipline children can be provided with trade books to support the learning of curricular concepts, processes, and practices while at the same time being encouraged to “analyze the mechanics of the text,” rather than focusing on these reading skills in isolation during a specific reading lesson (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013, *Critical language study challenges the traditional focus on discrete skills*, para. 2). For example, nonfiction trade books could be used to teach informational concepts in a science class while at the same time demonstrating particular grammatical or genre constructions and “introduce[ing] students to the academic vocabulary they must master” (Young, Moss, & Cornwell, 2007, p. 3). Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) extended this thinking into critical literacy and argued that when children were involved in using trade books to study language it accomplished two goals: “both the traditional goal of grammar study and the newer more urgent goal of helping students understand how language can be used to privilege or marginalize them and others” (*Critical language study challenges the traditional focus on discrete skills* para. 1).

After reflecting on the scholarship dedicated to supporting trade books being used to support classroom learning, and because of my own familiarity with using trade books, I decided that I should select a few multimodal trade books to explore for my written workshop. With this decision made I began to feel as if I was making progress with the selection process, but before long I had more questions that I needed to answer on this

journey: “which trade books should I choose?” and “how would I make this decision?”

Crowson and Hopper (2009) admitted that the process of choosing trade books to accompany academic learning is “a daunting task for any educator, new or veteran. There are so many different trade books available today and some educators simply do not know where to start when choosing one that best suits the lesson being taught” (p. 1).

These words rang true for me. The multimodal trade books that I chose for this thesis were to become the center of my written work; they would be scrutinized, examined, and explored; and they would need to have the potential to support the children’s learning as they used the four language practices and deepened their understandings of them. The pressure that I began to put on myself to select rich, quality literature in order to design insightful and effective workshops was intense. At first I was “caught up in the idea” of wanting to make sure that I picked “perfect” books for this project. I wanted to make sure that I picked “good” examples of trade books. I asked myself, “how does one go about making sure that the chosen book can be perceived as excellent from a literacy standpoint?” and “are there universal qualities that make a good children’s book ‘good’?” I turned to Kathleen Horning (2010), since she had tried to answer questions that paralleled my own:

There are no quick, easy answers to [these] question[s] because there are so many different kinds of children’s books that can be outstanding for different reasons.

Furthermore, as times change and our perception of children evolves, so too do our standards for excellence in children’s books. (p. 2)

Similarly Deborah Stevenson (2006) wrote that when it comes to rating a book, “‘good’ is a tremendously complicated and shifting idea” (Finding Literary Goodness in a

Pluralistic World, para. 2). This pushed me out of a fantasy that I could find the “perfect” set of books for the workshops. What is determined as “good” can be influenced by a number of factors. If I wanted to select trade books that I thought would be best suited for this project I had to consider many elements.

One purpose of my thesis is to identify resources that I could use to help me select texts of quality. Through scholarly inquiry many guiding principles, standards of literature, questions, criteria, and strategies would be considered in order to find out what key features of text other educators and literacy researchers deemed as quality. While attending to this information I would also use my professional judgment, based on my experience with young children, to make the complex decisions necessary to select texts for the workshops, much as I would have done in the classroom if I were currently teaching. Because I am not currently teaching and do not have specific classroom invitations in mind or a particular group of children to consider when choosing these texts, I decided to draw upon my past knowledge and experience of children in kindergarten to grade 2. I would select texts that I believed would interest, engage, challenge, and support children I had taught in the past. With almost infinite texts to choose from, I acknowledged that my own personal taste and interests would also come into play as I carefully selected a variety of texts to explore and to consider in light of their connections to the four ELA practices. These four texts, I reminded myself, were only selective examples of the wide range and variation of texts that learners could work with as resources for constructing meaning.

Text Selection #1—A Social Issues Text

As a Nursery/Kindergarten teacher I had a wide age range of children whom I was

able to watch grow over the course of a year. The children at the end of the year seemed so mature to me—the way that they could problem solve, their ability to make and keep friends, the complex and thoughtful questions they asked at the end of every school year. Year after year, I was thoroughly impressed and astonished by the social and personal growth of the children. When the next school year started and the tiny three and a half year olds entered my classroom, well, I was always taken aback for a moment. Most of these new tiny learners were not sure how to handle conflict, they did not know what it meant to be a friend, and many were only comfortable playing with peers of their same gender. I needed to remind myself how much my five- and six-year old kindergarten children too had begun the school year as shy, anxious, and dependent.

To help my young learners become better acquainted with their new class, peers, and teacher, I had devoted time to reading texts that gave children an opportunity to explore relationships with others. These multimodal texts usually included books that contained written information, visuals, and an array of other semiotic resources, such as different physical textures. We reflected on the multimodal texts as we discussed and questioned how friendships could be made, what respect looked like and sounded like, and so on. Those initial learning engagements helped the children become more comfortable with their peers and the ways they wanted to treat one another. These learning engagements were ones that continued throughout the course of the students' schooling as they expanded their understanding and inquired into more complex social issues such as social justice and equity. Since I used social issues oriented texts on a regular basis in my own classroom, I wanted to explore such texts a bit more. I wondered, what was the underlying scholarship and what were the arguments in favour of using

social issues texts in the classroom?

It is important that even in the primary grades, teachers and children begin to use social issues texts. Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) have written extensively about the importance of including texts in the classroom that address social and political issues. They argued that

this realistic fiction genre includes books that have the potential to build students' awareness of how systems of meaning and power affect people and the lives they lead. They invite conversations about fairness and justice; they encourage children to ask why some groups of people are positioned as "others". These stories do not make difference invisible, but rather explore how differences in culture, language, history, class, gender, sexual orientation, and race *make* a difference. (Principle #1: Books About Social and Political Issues Open up New Curricular Spaces, para. 1)

I searched for and chose texts that addressed inequitable relationships among people or tackled disregard for the health of the planet and so on that were relevant to the children and helped them "better understand why injustices persist" (Damico, 2012, p. 6). While the texts themselves may bring forward important new information and insights what happens in and out of the classroom after reading such texts is equally important.

Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) pointed out that when texts focusing on social issues are used in the classroom they can "serve as springboards for digging deeper into issues, feelings, and perspectives" (Principle #1: Books About Social and Political Issues Open up New Curricular Spaces, para. 5). James Damico (2012) would agree; he wrote that using "risky stories" in the classroom "opens up curricular and learning spaces

for readers to engage with particular subject matter,” which can help serve to “deepen readers’ self-awareness ... and develop empathy for others” (p. 6). After a text is read, critical conversations, brainstorming sessions, and investigations can be promoted so that children become more informed about certain injustices. Through ensuing conversations, questioning, and reflecting it is anticipated that children will begin to “make connections to their own lives and broader social contexts” (p. 6). Teachers and children can work together to learn and consider potential actions to redress certain injustices. Children can be guided and supported in taking action to improve the quality of life around them. These conversations help stimulate and challenge children and make the classroom feel like an exciting place in which to learn (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013; Lewison, 1998).

These social issues texts might be considered by some as “controversial” or “risky,” especially for young learners; however, young children are concerned about social issues. Differences of gender and class, for example, are portrayed on television, in texts, and in the subtle words and actions that families use when speaking to their children. Johnston (2004) noted, for example, that many young children already have “learned some of the roles open and not open to girls, the feelings and actions that go along with those roles, and how certain behaviors should be understood, such as a boy who reads or a girl who argues” (p. 40). He explained that certain views and children’s choices could be expanded or altered by foregrounding them in the agentive narrative texts that are chosen for classroom use. Agentive narrative texts enrich a child’s understanding of life and show children how they can begin to take action when they are faced with social conditions that they feel need to be changed.

I believe that children can and should have opportunities to examine and explore social issues and using a social lens can support this. Many multimodal text producers, including both authors and illustrators, have the creative and artistic talent to take a powerful message and beautifully tailor it to a child's level of understanding. It is my opinion that children's texts that address social issues can become a great resource for helping children understand the conflicting messages they face in their everyday lives. These texts can help children construct meanings for citizenship, the importance of standing up for others, the value of peaceful conflict resolution, and better understandings of the power of friendship. These rich and diverse texts not only enable young learners to further discover their own perspectives and feelings but to also cultivate empathy for the feelings of others and to "understand why others react as they do" (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2014, p. 7). For these many reasons I decided to select a trade book that can be used as a prime example to explore social issues as the focus of one of my Chapter Four written workshop.

Considerations. Through my scholarly inquiry I had learned that social issues texts could be used as the catalyst to move discussions forward and to encourage brainstorming where children dig deeper into particular subject matters. Vasquez (2014) posed six critical questions to ask after engaging with a text to help teachers and children begin a discussion in order to make social issues, such as social justice and equity, significant.

1. Vasquez (2014) asked readers to consider: "What is this text trying to do to me?" (p. xiv).

Text producers have particular motives for writing, illustrating, and designing texts in the

ways they do. Engaging in critical literacy helps readers to understand the author's/artist's motivation to use a text to create a particular understanding. When readers start to understand that the author's/artist's perspective is not the only perspective, then readers can become "active users of the information in texts to develop independent perspectives, as opposed to being passive reproducers of the ideas in texts" (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 7).

2. Vasquez (2014) invited readers to critically consider: "Who is marginalized or privileged by this text?" (p. xiv).

Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) promoted the use of social issues texts in primary classrooms. They suggested that these texts invite readers to participate in discussion about fairness and justice. Social issues texts, they argued, "can enrich our understanding of history and life by giving voice to those who have traditionally been silenced or marginalized (Principle #1: Books About Social and Political Issues Open up New Curricular Spaces, para. 1).

3. Vasquez (2014) further asked readers to consider: "Whose account of a particular topic or issue is missing? Said differently, whose voices are silenced?" (p. xiv).

Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn DeVogd (2004) stated that readers have power and that readers must use their "power to question that perspective and engage in *reflection* about whose voice might be missing, discounted, or silenced" (p. 14). When questioning and reflecting, readers may gain a new appreciation or new understanding for an alternate perspective.

4. Vasquez (2014) alerted readers to ask: "Whose voices are dominant?" (p. xiv).

All texts can only ever offer partial perspectives. Texts are not neutral since they reflect the view of the text producer and because they only offer part of the story (Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville, & Newfield, 2014). Text producers want to communicate their ideas and so will use language as a powerful tool to persuade readers to believe their particular version of the story. Certain voices will override others as a way to fulfill the intentions of the text producer. For these important reasons, one must read a variety of texts to affirm diverse voices.

5. Vasquez (2014) challenged readers to critically evaluate: “Whose reality is presented?” (p. xiv).

While discussing this consideration with my colleagues we agreed that all artists, authors and illustrators alike, have the power to name, describe, and illustrate subject matter in the way that they see fit in their texts. They have the power to present a certain reality by choosing which events, people, and information to include and which to exclude in their work. Instead of being passive recipients of knowledge, readers must dig deeply into texts and use their own power to construct understanding (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004),

6. Finally, Vasquez (2014) asked readers to think about: “Whose reality is ignored?” (p. xiv).

Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) wrote, “it’s important to be consciously aware that trade books, like all texts, are not neutral but are trying to get readers to believe something about life” (How books position readers, para. 1). While the values of the author’s/artists can be embedded in their created text, I believe that readers also assign their own values to the texts. Take *The Rainbow Fish*, by Marcus Pfister (1992), for

example. In this story a proud fish is only able to find friendship when he learns how to share. Do readers smile and nod in approval after the fish showed generosity when he learned to share instead of displaying vanity? Can this same story challenge the thinking about the other fish whose friendship had to be bought with another's most prized possession? Can this story be discussed from a political perspective, for instance, by critically examining individualism in relationship to the more public good? What is focused on—the reality that we choose to present or ignore—is a joint responsibility of the author in transaction with readers.

Vasquez (2014) acknowledged that it was these six points she would ask teachers to consider when choosing and engaging children in critically analyzing social issues texts. Although the criteria explored here represent only some ways to critically evaluate a text, “this unpacking of the textual layers helps the reader become more conscious of the decisions that the author and/or illustrator made, foregrounding the choices and omissions” (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 4). These six points that Vasquez identifies helped guide me when making the decision about which social issues text I focused on as part of my written workshop.

Text Selection #2—A Global and Culturally Diverse Text

The student population at the school where I taught was representative of considerable cultural and linguistic diversity. Children of many nationalities and newcomer families were constantly arriving. It came as no surprise to me to have students register for my class in the middle of the academic year. In fact, I even had new students placed in my room during the month of June. Throughout the school year my young learners were faced with a wide range of diverse characteristics among their

classmates. Their peers had different skin colours, different values and beliefs, and different ways of communicating. As an elementary school teacher, who was lucky enough to work in such a culturally and linguistically diverse community, it had always been a priority of mine to help my students to not only value their differences but to also find and acknowledge their similarities.

I believe that certain texts give readers the opportunity to “gain insight into human experience” (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2014, p. 7). Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer (2003) were convinced that children need to be exposed to texts that expanded their worldviews, texts that helped them to better understand the varied depictions of what being human means, and texts that gave them insight into the different ways of being. In my own classroom I often turned to multimodal global and culturally diverse literature. The written words and visuals were used to help the children relate to, appreciate, and become more informed about ideas, world events, and ways of being in different global and cultural contexts.

“Make the world more beautiful by bringing the world home to our children through literature” is not only a wonderful quote, but it is also a good definition of *global literature* (Lehman, Freeman, & Scharer, 2010, p. 1). Global literature refers to texts that were produced beyond the country of origin of the reader. Barbara Lehman, Evelyn Freeman, and Patricia Scharer (2010) wrote that when global literature is used in a positive manner, it inspires future generations to “reach out and welcome diversity, to eagerly learn more about other people, to work for solutions to global challenges with fellow human beings from round the world, to promote world peace, understanding, and cooperation rather than strife and conflict” (p. 2). By drawing upon such texts, children

can be supported in developing critical thinking as they come to see how they are connected to others across their differences. These differences and connections can become ways of eliciting empathy and appreciation as children and teachers work together to understand and value the experiences of others.

Literature written from diverse cultural perspectives can also be a vital tool in the classroom. Authors Harris and Hodges (1995) wrote *The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing* and defined multicultural literature as “writing that reflects the customs, beliefs, and experiences of people of differing nationalities and races” (p. 158). Ambika Gopalarkrishnan (2011) broadened this view and pointed to the marginalization of groups for reasons of “gender, class, ethnicity, identity, and sexual orientation” (p. 5). Culturally diverse texts can address social issues and help make children “aware of the need for social justice in our society and throughout the world” (Atkinson Smolen & Oswald, 2011, p. xi). An important reason to include texts of varying sociocultural backgrounds in the classroom is “to be inclusive of and provide validation for all children’s experiences” (Gopalarkrishnan, 2011, p. 5). Having access to such rich and complex literature “opens up spaces for breaking down boundaries and misconceptions of ‘the other’” (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013, Principle #2: Authentic Multicultural Literature Matters, para. 1).

I believe that by focusing on a global and culturally diverse trade book as my second text choice for my written workshop I was able to “provide literary experiences that reflect the multitude of backgrounds from which the children in our schools come” (Yokota, 1993, p. 156). Schools are becoming increasingly culturally diverse, and from my past experience and knowledge about the diverse families that entered my own class,

I believe that there was a need to include a trade book of this kind into my written workshop.

Considerations. It has been my experience that when reading texts that focus on global and cultural diversity, the literature sometimes provides only a limited cultural study and may contain stereotypical stories and information. This may be more pronounced in overly simplistic texts geared to primary readers. Even young learners, however, should be able to engage in texts that challenge them as readers and provide them with opportunities to “discover new ideas ... increase their own knowledge, explore their own feelings, shape their own values, and imagine lives beyond the ones they live,” all while enjoying a text where the written and visual story is complex and engaging (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2014, p. 6). If young learners are to be truly able to value and comprehend the richness and depth of the available global and culturally diverse texts then there must be a critical evaluation process in place for selecting these texts. With a growing availability of diverse cultural literature, Junko Yokota (2009) listed criteria to keep in mind to ensure “high quality multicultural and international literature is available to students” (p. 67).

1. Authenticity: “Do the author and illustrator present authentic perspectives? ... Is language used authentically?” (Yokota, 2009, p. 67).

Readers must be diligent in their search for culturally authentic literature. Yokota (1993) wrote, “without cultural accuracy, a book cannot be considered a quality piece of multicultural literature” (p. 159). With the exception of historical depictions, when describing the characters, setting, relationships, and themes authors and illustrators need to make sure that the details and ethnic and cultural groups represented are being

“represented as they are today, not just as they were in the past, and that the distinctive characteristics of each group are represented, avoiding the merging of subcultural groups into one group” (Atkinson Smolen & Oswald, 2011, p. xi). An author’s use of language, dialect, and specific word choices need to be critically analyzed in terms of contemporary standards. Charles Temple, Miriam Martinez, and Junko Yokota (2006) recommended that readers look critically at the illustrations and assess if they present authentic perspectives. While “judging authenticity is neither an exact science nor an objective exercise,” Atkinson Smolen and Oswald (2011) recommend that teachers use their knowledge and experiences or turn to knowledgeable reviewers to help make judgment calls (Bishop, 1997, p. 16).

2. Details: “Are cultural details naturally integrated? ... Are details accurate and is the interpretation current?” (Yokota, 2009, p. 67).

Yokota (1993) emphasized “the importance of rich details in multicultural literature, believing that accurate details are often best handled by being embedded in the text, thus becoming more natural and less didactic” (as cited in Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013, Details Matter, para. 1). Including cultural details in the writing and illustrations also helps make a story come to life; however, these details need to be accurate and up-to-date and “should not impede the flow of the story” (Atkinson Smolen & Oswald, 2011, p. 3).

3. Cultural Portrayal: “Is the culture portrayed multi-dimensionally?” (Yokota, 2009, p. 67).

Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) suggested looking for authors and illustrators who present characters who “are portrayed in realistic, dynamic, non-stereotypical, and multi-dimensional ways” (Diversity Counts, para. 8). When searching through texts, Kathy

Short (2009) warned educators not to get caught up in the global stories that only focus on superficial and touristy information such as food, fashion, or festivals. Numerous diverse cultural texts may have to be read in order to learn about the complexity and diversity of a particular culture.

For Yokota (2009), “it is clear that culturally diverse literature can be and should be central to student learning, and well-selected, high-quality literature can have an impact on students’ sense of self, and sense of others” (p. 71-72). The critical questions that Yokota presented are helpful in selecting high quality literature to represent a wide variety of human experiences, which helps shape and support the curriculum. Yokota’s critical questions were a helpful guide as I set out to find one global and culturally diverse text.

Text Selection #3—A Nonfiction Text

I have always looked forward to spending time with books in and out of the classroom. My passion for reading drove me to inspire my own students to pursue a love of reading. Early on in every school year I gathered everyone together and invited the children to pick a multimodal book of their individual choosing. I purposefully gathered and displayed a variety of multimodal books—ones with pictures, words, flaps to lift, textures to feel, and parts to move. These texts were selected in part because I wanted my students to understand and value the language art strand of viewing. I also wanted to use these texts to show the children how they related to and expanded on their understanding of reading. These multimodal texts allowed me to then demonstrate the different ways that a book could be read. It always came as a surprise to the children that I considered reading the illustrations “real reading”. With their chosen book in hand they rushed to

find a spot in the classroom to engage in the reading process. I responded to each child's reading efforts as I moved around the room listening to each of the stories they could tell by examining the illustrations. Calling the children readers created an excitement in the air—of course, there were always a few skeptics who, with an eyebrow raised, reminded me that they in fact could not “really read”.

I knew what the children meant when they claimed that they could not read. They regarded reading as only being able to decode the written words and understand the meaning behind them—and most of my age three-and-a-half year old students did not yet have that ability. Being an avid reader of illustrations and written word I sympathized with their frustration. Reading the illustrations in a story allows children to interpret the story for themselves using the story images, but does not necessarily provide them with an understanding of the written text (if there is a written text) and its relationship to their reading of the visual images. And what about the books that do not have illustrations or flaps or other elements to promote the creation of imaginative stories? Books with fascinating written information, rhythm, and/or clever word play may remain elusive if children regard reading as a print decoding skill that first must be mastered. So, I understood their frustration. In order to allow the children to gain pleasure from the books with written text that they could not yet independently read I made time in my daily schedule for the children to listen to books being read to them. This included older reading buddies and guest readers reading aloud and the children listening to a book in audio format (a read-along book).

While thinking about my third text selection I began researching the benefits of reading nonfiction texts with children and was surprised to learn that the use of nonfiction

trade books during read-alouds and read-alongs has been neglected. I wondered why. Barbara Moss wrote a considerable amount on the topic of nonfiction trade books for classroom use. She encouraged educators to use nonfiction texts in a variety of ways including during read-alouds, as part of the classroom library, and during independent or voluntary reading periods (Moss, 2003). Although she passionately advocated for nonfiction texts to be used more on a regular basis she acknowledged, “in the past, a good deal of children’s nonfiction was of mediocre quality. It was often characterized by inaccuracy, pedestrian writing, and minimal visual appeal” (Moss, 1995, p. 122). Thankfully, nonfiction trade books have undergone a transformation and are now a valuable resource in early years classrooms—especially during read-alouds and read-alongs. Moss (1995) argued that many nonfiction trade books now have “excellent writing with eye-catching formats” and that when used in a read-aloud they can “enrich elementary children’s literacy learning experiences” (1995, p. 122). Vacca and Vacca (2004) also promoted the use of nonfiction trade books in the classroom and stated that they can “provide depth, considerate and accurate information, material at a variety of reading levels, and motivation for learning” (p. 161).

So, with this transformation in nonfiction trade books, are educators becoming more willing to make use of them during literacy-connected class times with young children? While conducting a qualitative study to explore how teachers and children in primary grades used nonfiction trade books, researchers Rosemary Palmer and Roger Stewart (2003) identified many reasons why these specific texts may still only get little use in the classroom. Although there are many nonfiction trade books, on a wide range of topics and reading levels, many educators discussed with Palmer and Stewart that they

still had troubles finding nonfiction trade books for their young readers. The educators stated that either the books were too easy and did not contain a lot of information or that the books were too difficult and that it was the visuals that were the only aspect of the book that the children attended to. After observing and interviewing eleven primary classrooms Palmer and Stewart found evidence that supported the teachers' claims when they observed that many children were using nonfiction books that were beyond their decoding abilities. Instead of being able to fully understand and engage with the written information in the text, the children were primarily attending to the beautiful photographs and illustrations. While being able to read and obtain information gathered from visuals is valuable, reading is quite often a multimodal experience. The ability to gain insight from all of the semiotic resources presented in a text—including both the written word and visuals—can make for a deeper and more rich reading experience. In order to enable children to fully access the information in the multimodal nonfiction texts Palmer and Stewart noted that educators were using a variety of methods including reading aloud part of the book to the children or allowing children to listen to an audio accompaniment to the book at a listening center time.

Though there may be some challenges when selecting a nonfiction trade book for classroom use, Terrel Young, Barbara Moss, and Linda Cornwell (2007) offered many reasons for including nonfiction books in the classroom, including: to “promote inquiry,” “motivate reluctant readers,” and to “combine reading for pleasure with reading for information” (p. 2). Palmer and Stewart (2003) also promoted the use of nonfiction trade books in the class. They found that children enjoyed these texts and that children often chose these books because they were interested in a certain topic, because they were

familiar with the topic, or because they wanted to learn something. I knew that I needed to work on growing the number and range of nonfiction trade books for my own classroom. As I reflected on the evidence gathered from Palmer and Stewart about the issues children came across when trying to read nonfiction books for themselves, and the various teaching strategies that educators could use to introduce these books, I felt a responsibility to carefully select a nonfiction trade book for my third text selection for this thesis. In order to effectively integrate a nonfiction book into classroom learning, I challenged myself to find an engaging book that could be read in concert with the children reading along.

Considerations. Teachers need to exercise caution when picking out nonfiction books. This may include: checking for accurate information, being vigilant about misrepresentation in illustrations, and assuring appropriate content (Crowson & Hopper, 2009). Moss would agree since she urged educators and readers to consider criteria, which she called the *five A's*, to help when selecting and evaluating the quality of nonfiction texts. The five A's are: authority, accuracy, appropriateness, artistry, and attractiveness. I dug more deeply into Moss's criteria to find out the important role each plays in determining text quality and what I should keep in mind when choosing the nonfiction text that would become the focus of my written workshop.

1. **Authority:** "*Authority* relates to the author's qualifications for writing the book. The best authors consult authorities in a variety of fields to ensure credibility" (Young, Moss, & Cornwell, 2007, p. 5).

Like Moss, literacy researchers Galda, Sipe, Liang, and Cullinan (2014) also believed that the integrity of the author is one essential criterion to contemplate when selecting

nonfiction texts. They declared that nonfiction text writers and illustrators should either be qualified to write about their chosen topic or should acknowledge the ways in which they were helped by others who were qualified. Sharon Gill (2009) also urged teachers to “look for books with consultants listed and source notes or other features that contain information about the research process” (p. 266).

2. **Accuracy:** “*Accuracy* of content as well as visual features is the lynchpin of good nonfiction” (Young, Moss, & Cornwell, 2007, p. 5).

Gill (2009) noted that a book’s accuracy was a key feature of nonfiction that should be evaluated. She stated that teachers must “choose books in which the illustrations accurately depict the content, and in which the information is presented realistically, without anthropomorphism” (p. 266). When teachers ask children questions such as “who wrote this book? How did he or she find out this information?” they can focus attention on the accuracy of a book and help interest the children in delving into the author’s source notes and references to assist them in learning about how authors go about researching and presenting information (p. 266).

3. **Appropriateness:** “The best nonfiction books are *appropriate* to their intended audiences” (Young, Moss, & Cornwell, 2007, p. 5).

A working knowledge of children’s current reading competencies, experiences and conceptual understandings would assist in selecting materials that are appropriate for them. Young learners, for example, enjoy direct address and are often engaged with texts that describe concrete details and examples (Huck, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993). Young, Moss, and Cornwell (2007) explained that authors should not feel the need to “talk down to readers,” but instead must show respect for the readers by using appropriate language

and illustrations to successfully make complex concepts comprehensible (p. 5). Amy McClure (2003) also wrote that while authors and researchers needed to convey their passion for their work in their books that they should not use a tone that is condescending to children. Without compromising engaging writing, authors, she noted, need to use language that is appropriate for the intended reader.

4. **Artistry:** “Literary *artistry* refers to the need for quality writing in nonfiction. The best nonfiction books contain engaging information presented through the use of narrative devices like similes and metaphors, ‘hooks’, and others” (Young, Moss, & Cornwell, 2007, p. 5).

When evaluating the literary artistry of a text it should be ensured that the author has used an engaging style of writing. The use of visual imagery, for instance, with “juxtaposition of alliterative words, and unexpected comparisons,” can help “make information come alive,” and can pull the readers into the story (Moss, 1995, p. 123-124). A weakness in any nonfiction text is when the author’s writing fails to arouse a child’s interest. Children who are bored while reading or being read to will not be able to sustain focus in order to learn concepts or understand the presented information.

5. **Appearance:** “A book’s *attractiveness* matters to today’s students, who are accustomed to an array of visual media. They expect materials with a strong visual impact. Attractive presentation of information can mean the difference between a book students will select rather than reject” (Moss, Leone, & DiPillo, 1997, p. 420).

Page layout should present verve and style to entice readers to pick up that text and read and re-read it. James Giblin (2000) stated that the creators of nonfiction texts have been

working on attracting readers by creating visually appealing design layouts. Betty Carter (2000) would agree and argued that while in the past nonfiction texts had “small type and limited illustrations . . . today, [children] encounter books with carefully designed illustrations that partner with the text to contribute to their thinking” (p. 707). Many newer nonfiction texts present visual elements on the covers, table of contents, copyright pages, and so on (Gill, 2009). It is the placement of text and illustration that “can mean the difference between a book that children pick up again and again and the one that they open only once” (Moss, 1995, p. 124).

Moss (1995) wrote the “five A’s” to help with the selection of quality nonfiction reading material that would “capitalize on children’s natural curiosity about the world around them,” and help to ensure that their fascination with facts would lead them to become enthusiastic and engaged in the reading (p. 125). The “five A’s” were in mind as I searched for a read-along audio recording that accompanied a nonfiction trade book.

Text Selection #4—An Art Piece

Although Moss (1995) is a big supporter of nonfiction texts, she acknowledged that “the key to the successful selection of any book is knowledge of one’s students, their interests, and their background experiences” (p. 124). Similarly, Galda, Sipe, Liang, and Cullinan (2014) pointed out that “readers of all ages find content engaging when it relates to their own interests and experiences” (p. 123). In any classroom, children will undoubtedly have many varied interests and experiences and will find pleasure in different types of texts; hence, drawing upon a wide range of texts increases the chance that many children will be captivated and satisfied by these texts and go on to choose them for their own reading pleasure. This advice made me pause and reflect on the types

of texts that I wanted to select. Although I had decided to use three multimodal trade books for this project, and I would be making a point to select a variety of genres and formats, I wondered if this variation was enough. Throughout the process of engaging in scholarly inquiry my understanding and appreciation for what could be considered a text has continued to expand and so I wanted to further challenge myself in exploring different communication systems. I wanted to select a very different kind of text—a text that some may not even consider a text at all. I believed that by selecting a text that might also challenge other teachers’ understandings of what would constitute a text within an English language arts or literacy learning contexts, I would not only gain a new perspective of the four language and literacy practices for myself (and come to more fully understand them and how they might be interpreted), but I could also engage teachers who read my written Chapter Four workshop in an exploration of the potentials of many different kinds of texts.

I felt that my own and the language and literacy field’s previous understandings of literacy and text had privileged the selection of print-based texts. To act on my newfound knowledge of literacy (and the implications for teaching and learning), as well as my expanded definition of a text, I explored a work of art as my fourth and final text selection for this thesis workshop. In making this selection I wanted to find an art piece that did not use written language as the sole means to communicate. As I began my inquiry into literacy and arts integration I gathered some colleagues together to find out their thoughts on the subject matter. As part of our discussion we wondered, “what unique contributions can the visual arts, and potentially other art forms, bring to classroom learning in literacy education?” “What can the visual arts teach language arts

and literacy educators and young children?”

Cornett (2011) wrote that communication was one unique contribution of the arts. While language is often used to respond to and express one’s understanding, emotions, and thoughts, arts-based communication uses different symbolic languages. These symbolic languages “exist because all thought cannot be captured with words” (Cornett, 2011, p. 11). Artists have many options when wanting to express their story. A range of composition forms, such as music and pottery, can be used to convey beliefs, feelings, and knowledge. Learners also have a unique contribution to make when deriving comprehension from the arts. As interpreters, they construct meaning using their own opinions, experiences, and knowledge to understand and communicate their impressions of an art piece.

Interpreting a piece of art, especially one that might invite multiple interpretations, enables children to see that there is a range of viable ways to “read” an artist’s story, provided that they can support their interpretations. While children’s views may differ from their peers, they can take pride and comfort in knowing that what they think about the art piece matters, while at the same time considering the perspectives of their classmates and their teacher. What could emerge from such meaning making discussions is respect for supported positions that are different from one’s own. Providing opportunities in education for children to have access to art pieces could help them to become respectful and mindful of the different ways that people make sense of their world. Children come to appreciate that meaning can be represented in multiple forms and using a wide range of symbol systems and elements. The children learn that others who engage with the same texts have different thoughts about what they mean and have

to find support in the genre and communication system of that particular modality for their interpretations. They can be supported in coming to value their own ideas, while at the same time learning to read a range of symbols and artistic styles while also learning to respect multiple ways of interpreting texts. When exploring a painting and looking at the connection between colour and feeling, for example, children can become more empathetic and aware of how warm colours can be used to express intense emotions such as love or anger, while cool colours are sometimes used to create a sense of calm. When exploring the connection between line and feeling children may become aware of how jagged lines can create excitement while swooping lines can leave them feeling relaxed. By exploring these artistic elements—how colours are used, the angles of the brushstrokes, or the motion behind the line—children can be encouraged to reveal what they thought the artist felt when creating the text, and then express their own emotions in response to the art piece. Educators can then help children to identify with the work of art by inviting them to ask and answer questions such as, “what if I had been the artist: what would I have been trying to make viewers feel or think about? How does this piece make me feel?” (Hoffmann Davis, 2008). Jessica Hoffmann Davis argued,

the identification with and consideration of another person’s feelings is what empathy is all about. Through their encounters with works of art, students acquire an empathetic perspective. And this perspective will serve them well in the sense making they are asked to do in other subjects....” (p. 61)

Especially with a generation of children who have grown up with screen-based literacy, I feel that visual literacy is an important dimension of literacy and that it was important to choose a work of art as my fourth text selection. I also believed that I would

be truly challenged as I tried to connect a painting to the ELA curriculum. The four practices in the ELA curriculum are introduced with the following phrase: “the practice of using language ...” (MAPLE, 2015b). I needed to think about how exploring a painting with children would deepen their appreciation and understanding of language. Feeling a bit anxious about this challenge, I reminded myself that this thesis was never meant to confirm the knowledge that I already had. I wanted to grow professionally, to learn something new, to be challenged, and to be inspired to use what I learned while inquiring and writing, in order to become a more engaging teacher—one who gives children opportunities to meaningfully and authentically enact the four ELA practices by exploring a variety of texts and looking for ways in which they are similar and different. I believed that by choosing a painting as my fourth text I would enable myself to construct new meanings about language and literacy, as my own ways of thinking and doing were continuously transformed.

Considerations. With each of the other three texts I had investigated there were criteria that others had thought were important to consider when choosing a text. When choosing a visual image as my fourth text, I needed to keep in mind that images are not neutral and that they could be interpreted in a variety of ways. With this in mind I was reminded that there is not a single standard or set of guidelines that could be used to define an art piece as “good” quality. I opted to review some considerations that could be kept in mind when choosing an art piece as my fourth text.

1. Thompson argued that “*first, an image is not neutral*” (2008, p. 10, emphasis in original).

Visual artists have their own intentions for creating their texts. Throughout the

creation process artists have to undergo many decision-making processes. For example, artists have to decide “what is in the foreground and background, what is in focus and out of focus, where the borders are constructed ...” (Thompson, 2008, p. 10). Artists will make many decisions that affect the final product. Adding more of one colour, blending two colours together, using a fine tipped paintbrush, or providing texture are some of the choices that artists may contemplate. Their choices will include certain art elements and exclude others. These choices are done with purpose and reflect what the artists value, what they think, and who they are.

2. Thompson followed up her first point by arguing that “*second, an image can be read in multiple ways*” (2008, p. 10, emphasis in original).

Even though visual text producers have their own intentions when creating art “an image, like any other text, is presented to people who bring their own social and cultural understandings as well as their unique life trajectories to the act of interpretation” (Thompson, 2008, p. 10). Educators can help children appreciate the different ways that art can be interpreted by posing questions that do not have a wrong or right answer. Questions such as, “what would you have called this painting if you had made it yourself?” and “what questions does this painting ask you?” give permission to children to think for themselves and to provide a response without feeling as if they are going to be judged (Hoffmann Davis, 2008, p. 72). A painting, for example, can mean different things to different people and by generating questions and answers about the artwork viewers are given a chance to actively construct their own meaning.

The Importance of Pleasure

I was at the library one sunny afternoon when I witnessed a heartwarming

moment. A young child was squirming her way out of her mother's arms. She struggled to be released from the secure grip until her mother finally put her down. The child clung to her mother's hand and started to waddle towards the library doors. Once inside the girl shrieked with joy. I'm sure that every pair of eyes was suddenly upon the two of them, I know mine were. The bashful mother gave a quick smile to her "audience" before her daughter once again began tugging on her hand, pulling her further into the library. The toddler continued to giggle and "talk" until the two of them reached the children's section in the back corner of the library. As they passed the librarian she gave them a warm smile and said, "I hope that she will always enjoy the library as much as she does today!" I recall this moving event with ease, but truthfully a version of this story happens each time I take a moment to "kidwatch" at the library. The children's section in the library that I frequent has a colouring station, kid-sized tables and chairs, a private children's reading room, large ottomans shaped like animals, and a wide selection of multimodal texts including sculptures, posters, and paintings. It is no wonder that "libraries today are busy places. Children's bookstores, as well, are full of vibrancy as readers from toddlers to adolescents find books that they just *have* to read. Obviously, books, whether picturebook, poetry, novel, or nonfiction are *alive* and *thriving*" (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2014, p. 6, emphasis in original).

This vignette reminds me that the texts I choose must be ones that I believe children would find enjoyable and could help them reclaim pleasure in reading. Enjoyment was a consistent theme that ran through the first four chapters of the book *Teaching Children's Literature: Its Critical!* (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013). The idea promoted was that the first task of every teacher is "to get children and adolescents

to take pleasure in books and to value them” (Guiding Principle One: Create readers, para. 5). When children are passionate about texts, they are motivated to seek out exhilarating stories and fascinating information. When children turn to texts for pleasure they allow themselves to “learn to read and to love reading” (Galda, Sipe, Liang, & Cullinan, 2014, p. 6). Enjoying and engaging with texts produces an enhancing looping effect. Galda, Sipe, Liang, and Cullinan (2014) explained that when children enjoy reading they read more and “the better they get. The better they read, the more they learn. The more they learn, the more curious they become. And the more curious they become, the more they read” (p. 6). Thus, turning to texts for pleasure and enjoyment is incredibly important. In fact, Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) wrote that “enjoyment is the primary goal for language arts teachers” (Turning Children and Adolescents on to Reading: The Basics, para. 1). This is a big responsibility for teachers. It is important to “help children develop a positive connection with books and illustration, which will later translate into a positive attitude toward books in general” (Diamant-Choen & Hetrick, 2013, p. 4). With this in mind, I continued to research how trade books and alternative texts, such as paintings, could be used to bring joy into the classroom.

One way that Manitoban teachers bring joy into the classroom when using texts is by reading aloud to their students (Boyd, 2014). For the listening process to be appealing for the children, educators need to devote time to reading and re-reading the chosen text. When reviewing the chosen literature, it is important for the teacher to rehearse the reading before using it in a classroom read-aloud (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004). This rehearsal process allows the teacher to become comfortable with the words and rhythm of the text. Spending time with the text instead of merely skimming over it gives

the teacher the opportunity to search for inappropriate language, new vocabulary, as well as unexpected grammatical constructions or phrases. This preparation time can also be an opportunity for the teacher to practice bringing a dramatic flair to the reading performance. Using different character voices, facial expressions, and hand gestures greatly impacts the pleasure children experience when listening to texts being read. In fact, researchers Douglas Fisher, James Flood, Diane Lapp, and Nancy Frey examined the read-aloud practices of thirty-five teachers and concluded that these dramatic performance elements played a significant role in creating classrooms where “children loved to listen to their teachers read” (p. 12). Betsy Diamant-Choen and Melanie Hetrick (2013) also agreed with the idea that a read-aloud conveys the pleasure of reading and wrote that when “presented enthusiastically, good books can hold any audience spellbound” (p. 3).

After children have finished a shared reading or listening to a story or viewing a non-print text the enjoyment of the text does not have to end. Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) wrote, “enjoyment comes from relating to the [text]—talking about what things we really liked or didn’t like and how the [text] connects with our life experiences” (Guiding Principle One: Create readers, para. 1). After viewing a painting, for example, a conversation starting off with simple open-ended questions—such as, “what did this text remind you of?”—could support children’s participation in rich and multifaceted discussions (Beck & McKeowen, 2001). Hoffmann Davis (2008) posed many open-ended questions that she believed would help children deepen their thinking. For example, a question such as “what emotion or ideas do you see expressed in this work?” gives children an opportunity to reflect on their experiences while analyzing the

art piece (p. 67). Such discussions not only enable children and teachers to share their thoughts, views, and related knowledge about the text but also allow participants to hear what others have to say. This is particularly important because “while one person can read a story and make a specific connection to her own life, another can read the same story and make a totally different connection” (Leland, Lewison, & Harste, 2013, *Why We Wrote This Book*, para. 1). Discussions and conversations serve as scaffolding for helping children as they engage in collectively making sense of sophisticated concepts (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). The different views and opinions that classmates share help children to make new connections to similar or different knowledge. This aids in deepening understanding and expanding children’s ways of knowing and ways of learning with and from others (Barrentine, 1996).

This section of the thesis was meant to remind me that while, yes, I was choosing texts to support learning and children’s use of the new ELA curriculum, it was also important to foster joy and delight in the reading process. Lukens, Smith, and Miller Coffel (2012) wrote that “from literature of any kind, we seek pleasure” and so it is important, and a challenge that teachers must undertake, to help instill a sense of enjoyment as texts are used as a central part of classroom learning engagements (p. 2). Of course, regularly during the classroom day the children would be choosing texts for reading themselves and with other classmates, but when it is the teacher who is making the text selection choices then professional opinion and judgment must be honored along with consideration of the children’s feedback, interests, and reactions.

Professional Judgment

As educators of young children, what types of texts do we need in our

classrooms? What makes listeners sigh and smile at the end of a read-aloud and ask for more? What does the text, which is on permanent renewal from the library, have that others do not? What new interests and conversations do these texts provoke? These questions remind me that a teacher's opinions and professional judgments matter a great deal in the text selection process. When evaluating texts for the classroom a teacher "requires a great deal of deliberation, careful thinking, perhaps even consultation with outside sources of information," but there are other times when an "evaluation can be done very quickly, drawing on a wealth of professional or personal experience" (Horning, 2010, p. 2). As I began the research and writing process of this thesis I not only reflected on my own teaching experiences and knowledge but also relied heavily on outside sources to inform my thinking and decisions. The writing of educators directly in classrooms themselves or closely connected to classrooms and writing about their experiences in professional books were often the resources I trusted most. Many of these educators were also researchers themselves or they drew on research to strengthen their arguments. I believe that these educators/researchers/authors were able to rely on their experience and knowledge as they planned for the children in their classrooms, negotiated curricula and schedules, and acted from educational values and philosophies developed from firsthand or collaborative teaching experience. They were then able to present their theories, research, and personal stories with authenticity to teachers reading their professional books. They were able to ask and answer questions that other educators/readers were interested in; they were able to show and defend their curriculum and text choices by acknowledging their own interests, understandings, and contexts. This practitioner-research perspective is one that I value and have intentionally

considered as I have tried to make sense of the new ELA curriculum for myself, and when I began the process of evaluating my text choices. The ideas presented in this thesis offer educators ways in which to consider and consult with outside sources. However, educators—new to the field or well established—also need to learn to use and have confidence in their own professional and personal instincts, especially when evaluating a text they are choosing for a classroom context that they know better than anyone else. Of course, this is not an uncritical process of selection. Teachers need to constantly be asking themselves why they have chosen the texts they have chosen—in view of the particular children in their classrooms, the classroom and school context, their professional beliefs and values, their ongoing professional learning, and so on.

Next Steps

The scholarship that I have uncovered in this section of the thesis has allowed me to become more familiar with guiding principles, standards, and questions that could be considered when selecting a variety of texts. It is this scholarship alongside my professional judgment, expertise, and knowledge that has guided my multimodal text selection for the written workshop-format document presented in the next chapter. Each text I have selected was examined, explored, and scrutinized in order to uncover its potential for supporting and highlighting the four practices identified in Manitoba's new ELA curriculum document. In the upcoming chapter I make visible my own understanding, learning, and reflections with respect to the texts selected and connected language and literacy practices. I have described my self-reflexive conversations in the next chapter as part of a written language and literacy workshop. I chose to present these conversations in this format because I felt this format enabled me to reveal my thinking

processes while hopefully beginning a conversation with other educators about the selected texts in relations to the new Manitoba ELA language and literacy practices.

Summary of my Text Selection Process

While reflecting on how I created a text-rich environment in my classroom I was moved to pursue the scholarship on the use of trade books. I have argued that trade books can be used to not only intrigue children but also as a resource for effective literacy instruction. My decision to choose three trade books (including a social issues text, a global and culturally diverse text, and a nonfiction text) was guided by my critical reflection on my previous classroom experience and further inquiry into each of these specific kinds of text. A unique type of text—a painting—was also discussed and the questions and apprehension that I had about selecting a text of this nature were examined. Considerations that educators might attend to when selecting these particular kinds of texts were identified and explained. Supporting scholarship was then provided to help me explain how readers' experience of pleasure in their engagement with such texts provides them with a positive looping effect for further learning and reading. Finally, how readers derive enjoyment from a text was also explored.

I have also encouraged educators to proactively access outside sources in their determinations of how a text might be evaluated in assessing its quality. Professional judgment and teachers' opinions were also considered important in this text evaluation process. I have endeavoured to make it clear that while the criteria presented could help with the process of evaluating a text, educators must take responsibility for critically drawing upon their experience as teachers in their own contexts and exercising professional discernment about whether a text would be well suited for the children they

teach and for the purposes of their teaching and the children's learning.

Chapter Four: A Focus on Literacy and Language Practices in Four Quality Texts

The goal of this study is to consider how I could use quality texts to support children's use of the four focal practices identified in the new ELA curriculum. To achieve this goal I selected four texts and used a written workshop format focusing on language and literacy lessons connected to these texts, which were inspired by the new ELA curriculum practices. I thought specifically of children I taught previously in kindergarten to grade 2 in choosing the texts. I used my professional judgment, knowledge, and experience with children in these grades when making these text selections. Text selections were also aided by drawing on scholarship and by specifically referring to children's literature recommendations and guiding principles that other educators have considered when selecting quality texts for their classroom use.

While children in kindergarten to grade 2 were kept in mind when selecting the texts, I also thought about the teachers of children in this similar grade span. Teachers reading the workshops will be able to observe what I did and consider my ideas in relation to their own thinking and their own educational contexts. The workshops are meant to offer teachers the lenses that I had used to make text selections with the new Manitoba ELA curriculum in mind. The reading lessons presented in this chapter were written in a workshop format and emphasize what could be learned from the nature of the text itself. Texts were analyzed to pinpoint where and how teachers might wish to view the text in order to use language and literacy practices in the ways discussed in the new Manitoba ELA curriculum. The language that I used, the observations that I noted, and the reflections that I shared were meant to help me enter into a dialogue with other

teachers as I explored texts to find their potential to support children in participating in the practices in the new curriculum.

This chapter is presented as four language and literacy workshops for early years teachers. One workshop is dedicated to exploring a social issue text. The next workshop concentrates on a global and culturally diverse text. The third workshop reveals potential lessons to be learned from a nonfiction text. The fourth text choice—a painting—concludes the written workshops. Each language and literacy workshop was formatted the same. The workshops all begin with an introduction to the text. Following the introduction is an exploration of the text where I attend closely to many elements of the text to support teachers making connections to the new ELA curriculum practices. Each workshop ends with a reflection on why, in light of my experiences with early years children and my knowledge of ELA practices, I chose each text for the workshop, imagined how I might use the text as an inspiration for classroom learning invitations, and provided my additional considerations.

Language and Literacy Workshop # 1: A Social Issue Text

The Lion & The Mouse. Jerry Pinkney, an award-winning author and artist, created both text and illustrations in his version of one of Aesop's most well known fables. *The Lion & The Mouse* is a story of power, acts of kindness, and an unexpected friendship. Pinkney (2009) wrote that “of all Aesop's fables, ‘The Lion and the Mouse’ is one of my childhood favorites: the tale of a mouse who accidentally disturbs a lion from his rest, and the lion who makes a life-changing decision to release his prey. When the mouse remembers her debt, she frees the lion from a poacher's trap” (Artist's Note, para. 1). Pinkney carefully chose only a handful of words and creates subtle details within his

illustrations to retell this classic fable. To make sense of the semiotic resources readers must use multiple sense making strategies as they work to understand, imagine, and discover the layers of meaning within this text.

To start this workshop I tried to recall the latest library book I borrowed. What aspects of the book helped me to decide if it should be kept as part of my text selection or not? Did the title urge me to pull it from the shelf? How important did I find the illustration on the front cover? What about the back cover: did I study or give much attention to this part of the book? Pinkney explored the ways that illustration and text could be juxtaposed when he designed his book jacket. What is unusual about the 2009 first edition's book jacket is that there are no words on the front or back cover, not even the title is displayed. From the beginning of the text it is made clear that the readers will not be able to rely heavily on the author's writing to help piece the story together, rather they will rely on artistic brushstrokes alone. With (almost) no text to guide or carry the story readers are left to learn a very important reading lesson. Readers become part author when they read this text. Though Pinkney guides the readers through the (almost) wordless retelling of this fable with the use of stunning full colour illustrations, rendered with pencil, pencil crayon, and watercolour on paper, it becomes the readers' job to stretch their ways of knowing by analyzing and interpreting what they view. Readers, in order to understand what is being viewed, need to dedicate time to explore the single and double-page spreads. Readers may have to reread the text numerous times in order to understand the story line and how each page connects to the narrative. Time needs to be spent looking at each page's design elements, including the colours that were chosen, the positions of the animals, the carefully selected text, and the changing facial expressions

of the characters, in order to spark the readers' imagination and to help drive the narrative.

Pinkney set the tone as to how the two main characters (the lion and the mouse) are to be perceived with his words and his illustrations. Pinkney first described the lion in a message he left to his readers on the last page of the text. In the message Pinkney (2009) referred to the lion as "the majestic king" (Artist's Note, para. 2). To show how majestic the lion is Pinkney dedicated the entire front cover of the book jacket to him. The illustration's design is powerful as the lion commands the entire presence of the space. His head is the only body part showing and his mane reaches all four corners of the page. There is no title or other text to take away from the illustration; sole attention is on the lion. The details and bright hues used to depict this creature help to quickly capture the readers' interest and hold their gaze. While readers might be awestruck by the artwork of the lion, the king of the jungle is by no means interested in the readers. The lion is looking towards the left, but there is nothing there. It is not until the reader opens up the book in a way so that the front and back cover can be seen simultaneously that what has captured the lion's attention, the image on the back cover, is exposed.

Pinkney used the back cover of the book jacket to reveal a picture of the other main character, the mouse. Pinkney (2009) described the mouse as "a humble rodent" (Artist's Note, para. 2). To create this modest and unassuming character Pinkney drew the humble mouse to look small, dull, and rather ordinary. Although still large in size, the mouse does not even cover half of the page. Bright coloured grass, leaves, and a branch surround the mouse. The dull coloured mouse is looking towards the right and smiling, implying that she is looking at the lion—unafraid. She has no power or right to be front

and centre of attention and so must take her place at the back of the book.

With most books the book jacket may be only glanced at or may be skipped all together during a read-aloud without any impact to the actual reading or understanding of the story. This book jacket, however, becoming significant to those who are curious enough to find out what the lion is looking at, allows readers to discover a relationship that foreshadows the story that is to come. This book jacket can significantly alter or affirm a reader's perception about the two main characters before any words are read. This design feature allows readers to explore how the semiotic resources connect with each other, how they potentially offer excitement, and how some resources may offer more challenges than others. How Pinkney enables readers to expand their levels of understanding while deepening their interest in the text is a reading lesson that can be learned because of the interaction that he purposefully made possible with the book jacket.

Colour and attention to fine details can subtly inform readers and influence their ways of thinking. For the book jacket Pinkney used an off white colour to highlight the lion's lower eye lids and the same off-white colour, along with a light blue, to create shadow and depth to the lion's face above the eyes. His eyelashes are almost non-existent and the few that are drawn in are slanted to the right. These lines and colours give the illusion of raised eyebrows and wide eyes. Although the lion's presence is well established on the book jacket the colours in the aforementioned details that Pinkney chose to feature in the lion creates an animal that does not appear menacing or ferocious. In fact, the powerful lion might even be regarded as looking nervous or surprised. Pinkney placed the lion's head squarely in the middle of the page yet through clever use

of lines and highlights was able to show movement. Pinkney drew the left side of the mane using wavy lines and colours the mane with a mixture of bright oranges and reds. The right side of the mane was coloured with more dull earthy tones and appears to lie more flat against the lion's head because Pinkney used larger curved lines while drawing. This gives the illusion of the lion moving away from the left, which is where the mouse can be seen when looking at the back and front book jacket simultaneously. This raises questions about the lion's attitude and feelings towards the mouse: Could a lion really be nervous or startled by a tiny mouse? Does the power that the lion hold diminish when the mouse is revealed?

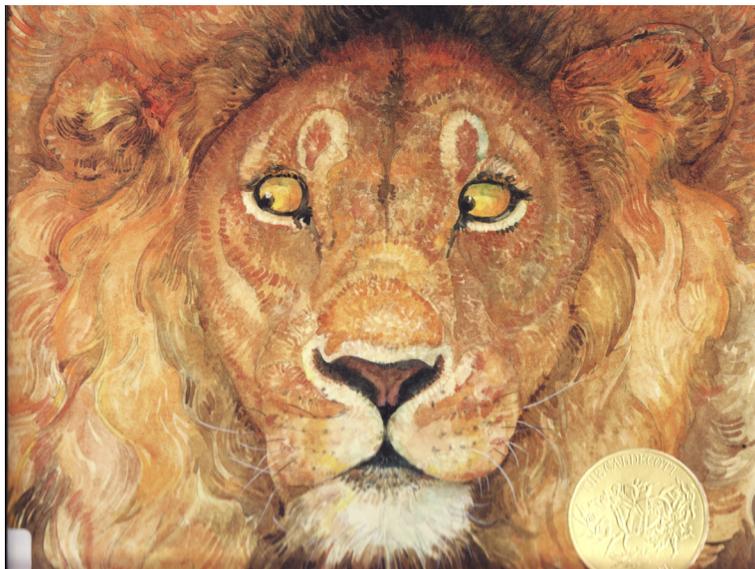


Figure 1. Book jacket cover from *The Lion & The Mouse*. An image from *The Lion & The Mouse* (Pinkney, 2009).

Pinkney's attention to detail is not missed in the few words that he included in his text. The written text that portray the sounds of the animals in the story enhance the reading of the text and play a vital role in how the story can be interpreted. When the lion captures the mouse by picking her up by her tail the lion lets out a "GRRR" while the mouse is only able to get out a single "Squeak" (p. 8). The "GRRR" is displayed at the

top left hand corner of the page; this is where the eye naturally travels to first upon viewing something. Pinkney's use of font size for the lion's growl once again reminds readers which character holds the power. The lion's roar is not only in large capital letters but is coloured with bright oranges and yellows and is set against a white sky making it very pronounced. How the lion's roar is coloured made me wonder about the volume of the lion's growl. Do the intense colours indicate an intense volume? Is the "G" darkly coloured to signify that the roar begins very loudly? Are the "R's" slightly lighter than the "G" to signify that the roar ends on a quieter note or that the volume begins to fade? The tiny calligraphy style letters that spell out "Squeak" are coloured white and are written into the lion's fur (p. 8). Pinkney's decision to layer the illustration under this specific word allows the readers to further interpret and analyze its significance to the power struggle these two main characters are engaged in. The tiny font size and lack of colour used to display the voice of the mouse certainly makes her seem pitiful and the illustration of the mouse's hands covering her ears adds to this interpretation.

After the lion allows the mouse to be set free the mouse is shown with nine other mice. The lion appears in the far distance of the page. The principal mouse is on top of a pile of rocks and is looking down towards a nest of mice. Nine black-coloured "Squeaks" are present on the page, which creates a barrier between the principal mouse and the rest of the mice (p. 13). In order to make sense of this "conversation," readers must imagine who the mice are and what they are saying. Questions that I began to ask myself included: Are these mice friends, strangers, or family? Is the near-death experience being told? Do the listeners believe the seemingly tall tale? Who do the "squeaks" belong to?

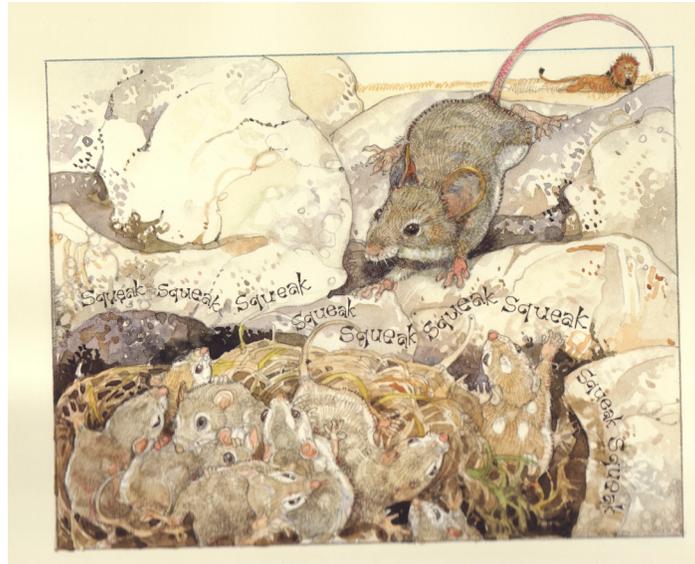


Figure 2. Principal mouse on a pile of rocks. An image from *The Lion & The Mouse* (Pinkney, 2009).

The story continues with what looks like poachers setting up traps. The poachers, seen on multiple pages, are either drawn as silhouettes or have their faces hidden by their hats. Their tools and their oversized motorized vehicle stands out from Pinkney's drawings of the lush green environment. Their trap, of course, captures the lion and all at once the nameless and faceless predators take his power away. The lion can be seen dangling in the sky, caught in a rope trap. Bright yellow wide eyes help the lion to look panicked and surprised. His mouth is opened wide and his razor sharp teeth are exposed. His claws are bared and Pinkney highlighted the claws with white to make them glisten and stand out. To colour the trapped king Pinkney used more red than ever before. The red colouring was used throughout the lion's mane as well as near the claws. The colouring evokes fear and anger. The "ROAR" that is let out by the lion was also highlighted in red (p. 19).

The colouring and facial expression of the lion helped me as a reader to make sense of his emotions. The red colour choice allowed me to identify with the lion. I

associate feelings of anger or embarrassment with brightly coloured red cheeks. I also associate becoming surprised with a drop of the lower jaw and wide eyes. Making these personal connections to the main character allows for readers, like myself, to work through the practice of sense making as they explore the images and text's language. Bringing in prior knowledge and applying and reflecting on it gives the readers an opportunity to connect with the semiotic resources that Pinkney chose to showcase this story's climax.

The last page of the text requires readers to make connections to their previous interpretations. The last page shows the principal mouse surrounded by nine other mice. Are these the same mice from the prior illustration? She (the principal mouse) has brought back a souvenir from her latest adventure. On a previous page, readers see this mouse saving the lion by scratching and chewing on the rope trap that the lion is caught in until it brakes. The lion then falls onto the ground and is freed from the poachers' trap. On the last page the principal mouse now allows the other mice to look and touch the part of the rope that she chewed and brought back with her. If the readers, like myself, interpreted any prior "squeaks" of the nine mice as them needing proof that the principal mouse and the lion had a precious connection then the saved souvenir becomes a concrete piece of evidence that can help to settle that argument. If the principal mouse had lost all sense of credibility and power after her story about being set free by the lion was told (and then disregarded by the other mice) then this last page can be seen as one that is dedicated to showing that her power and integrity has been reinstated.

The principal mouse, now surviving two meetings with a lion, has become a force to be reckoned with. She seems powerful by the sheer size of her body compared to the

other mice. Pinkney made her at least triple the size of the other mice. Readers may be surprised, astonished, or impressed by what was once regarded as a tiny humble mouse. It seems that her newfound power has encouraged her to advocate for herself. The rather large principal mouse lets out a giant blue coloured “Squeak” above the other mice (p. 31). The mice now chatter away and let out nine “squeaks” under the principal mouse. Their squeaks, once coloured in black in previous pages, are now shown to be multi-coloured. The coloured squeaks may represent excitement and happiness. The colours used for the sounds could also be seen as the mice showing public support for the giant mouse. These mice, perhaps now seen as passionately advocating for the “lion-mouse relationship,” please the large mouse and so she looks down to them and smiles.

Reflection. In the third chapter of this thesis I wrote that even young children could and should work on becoming more aware of social issues. Many social issue topics, such as those concerning bullies, the rules of friendships, and acts of kindness, are suitable for children in elementary school. *The Lion & The Mouse* presents a number of social issue topics. Since I understand reading as more than merely decoding, I believe that *The Lion & The Mouse* is a wonderful text that allows learners to identify and work through concerns and feelings that they might have about certain social issues as they interpret the illustrations and construct their own versions of this classic fable. Through carefully detailed illustrations Pinkney gives his readers the chance to see themselves in the characters, give dialogue to the characters, and place importance on the scenarios that matter most to them.

One particular reason why I chose this text is because of how multiple images that are confined to one or two pages reveal a sequence of events. My young students often

want to share every detail about daily adventures through their picture stories. In order to do this they usually need help learning how to focus their thoughts, how to tell a short moment in time with a beginning, middle, and end, and how to refine a story by adding details. To help my students in this learning process I bring in work from a variety of text producers that design multiple frames to explore, in greater detail, a small scene. I believe that Pinkney's text would be a great mentor text to show my students an example of a small "how-to" story. The mouse, for example, shows the readers how she frees the lion in three easy steps. This is quite similar to how my kindergarten students create their own how-to stories. They choose a small personal story that they would like to share and break it up into three parts. They then draw three pictures to depict each "step". Because of the similarities between my students' own interests and learning goals and Pinkney's work, *The Lion & The Mouse* would be a text that my students and I would use to explore. We would examine and question the text to better understand the design features that allowed Pinkney to communicate to his readers major plot details. We would then borrow his techniques to help strengthen our own picture stories. Many of my students are usually interested in how-to stories and the possibilities I saw within this text for children to access and draw upon Pinkney's strategies moved me to choose this text for one of my language and literacy workshops.

Since Pinkney's version of this fable is almost completely wordless readers are able to use their own knowledge, experiences, and creativity to help tell the story. Another early years teacher that I know often uses this fable in her classroom. I loaned her my copy of *The Lion & The Mouse* by Jerry Pinkney. After she had a chance to read the text multiple times I asked her to read the story to me. While we both told similar

story lines there were some small and interesting details that each of us saw differently because of how we interpreted Pinkney's illustrations. This sense of power, telling our own unique story based on someone else's ideas and illustrations, inspired me to think of learning invitations that would help children feel the same sense of ownership and pride as I do when I read/tell this story. Pinkney wrote that his personal experience of living next to a nature preserve inspired him to add certain animal sounds to the story (Artist's Note, para. 3). The words, although sparse, enhance the picturebook. While many of the words are directly related to the visuals some of the words help readers to more fully understand the characters' surroundings. For example, the words "WHO Who whoooo" appear on a page where no owl is in sight (p.1). On another page a "RRROAARRRRRRRRR" is written across a double page spread where no animal except a modest mouse is drawn (p. 21-22). To help children recognize the importance of the selected written animal sounds a learning experience that I may create in the classroom would be to invite children to make an orchestra of sound. By studying the function of meaningful words/sounds children will deepen their understanding of Pinkney's text. I may ask the children how the sounds help them to understand the story/information and how the language used in the text helps them to extend their knowledge of the story. As we study the importance of sound in Pinkney's book we might investigate other wordless picturebooks and create our own sounds to connect to the visuals. Exploring how influential and powerful language can be and then designing ways to imagine and reimagine stories in this way allows children to create possibilities where they can use their positive agency to become part author.

I have found that children in older grades often forget to, or rather decide not to,

add visuals to their written stories. Pinkney's fable would be a great mentor text to bring into the classroom to help children assess and reflect on the strategies that he used to portray his story. Children may ask what in the story helps them to understand what they are viewing and how they could communicate their own ideas when they design a story. After studying authors, such as Pinkney, who have created picturebooks a learning invitation may be introduced to encourage children to create their own picturebook. By selecting from an assortment of effective strategies that help them to articulate their ideas children will be able to bring what they know about story telling through visuals into their own work. As an extension to the experience I may invite children to read a picturebook written by their peers to allow multiple versions of the story to be heard.

Although Pinkney's text may have begun with a powerful lion, I, as a reader, am left with a vivid (and surprising) memory of the humble mouse. Colours, lines, positions, and sounds were used in purposeful ways to help create an engaging story. Pinkney influences the readers and how the fable is told through his design elements but the reader becomes a powerful agent when interpretation and analytical sense making strategies are used to help compose and narrate the story.

Language and Literacy Workshop # 2: A Global and Culturally Diverse Text

Mama Elizabeti. Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen's (2000) time in Africa became the inspiration for the Elizabeti book series. Stuve-Bodeen volunteered in the Peace Corps in Tanzania, Africa, in the 1980s and that experience helped her to authentically and lovingly write the fictional story of an African child named Elizabeti. *Mama Elizabeti*, the second book in the series, sees young Elizabeti try to take care of her younger brother Obedi while her mother concentrates on baby Flora. Elizabeti feels confident with this

new job and knows just what to do since she had been taking care of Eva, her rock doll, for quite a while. Readers of this text learn about this family both through text and illustration. Stuve-Bodeen's time in Tanzania was captured with photographs and videos and became a reference point for the beautiful and realistic illustrations in this book series (Peace Corps Writers, 2009). Christy Hale, who portrayed this family through illustrations rendered with mixed media, helped to create this tender story. Her attention to detail allows readers to more fully understand Stuve-Bodeen's inspired story.

As a newcomer to this three book series the title *Mama Elizabeti* along with the front cover illustration may wrongly suggest to the reader who the story is about. The illustration on the front cover shows three children and their mother. The title *Mama Elizabeti* may have many readers guessing that the story is going to be about the mother depicted on the front cover. It is only when the readers start to read the text that it is realized that the eldest child (Elizabeti) portrayed on the front cover is known as "Mama". The title of mama gives Elizabeti quite a lot of power. Mama, usually a name reserved for women with children, is a title that can invoke adjectives such as wise, strong, and mature. Giving the title of mama to Elizabeti gives her power, as she suddenly needs to be seen as more than just a little girl. Mama Elizabeti needs to be viewed as a girl who can handle her title and all the power and responsibility that goes along with it. With this title Elizabeti suddenly comes into a position where she needs to be this grown, developed, and sensible woman. Stuve-Bodeen (2000) wrote "mama had to take care of the baby, so it was time for Elizabeti to take care of her brother Obedi" (p. 1). Ready or not Elizabeti must become a powerful member of her family.

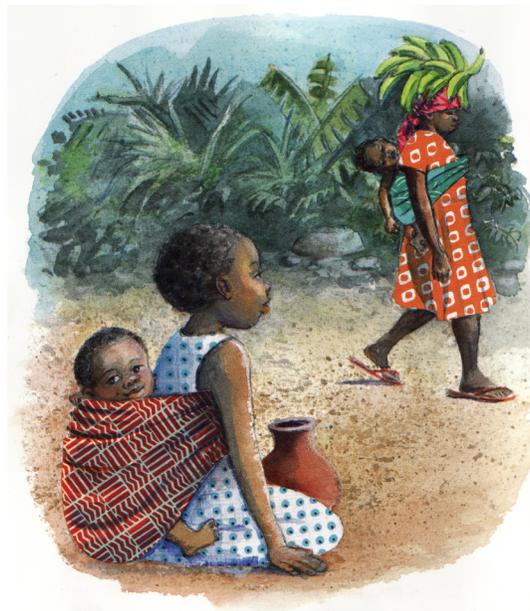
Readers quickly get a sense of how important Elizabeti's role is to the family by

the absence of the other characters. Through the written text, readers learn that Elizabeti's mother is to concentrate on taking care of the newest member of the family, Flora. On the first page of text the mother was drawn with great detail and takes up a large space on the page. She wears a bright red patterned headscarf and a striped shirt. Her presence is easily noticed. After the mother is introduced readers do not get to see her again until the end of the story. Readers are then introduced to Elizabeti's father through both text and illustration. It may come as a surprise to readers that Elizabeti even has a father. The front cover shows the family in loving embrace but the father is not a part of this picture.

Through written text readers learn that the father, known as Baba, must leave the house after breakfast in order to go to work. Readers do not have a chance to learn much more about Baba through the illustrations. Only a small glimpse of him is caught as he was drawn with his back turned towards the readers. While leaving for work he was drawn to seem at a far distance from the reader and the image is too blurry to make out any defined features. Baba is not seen again for the remainder of the text. Elizabeti, it seems, may have to take on a powerful parental role by acting as both Mama *and* Baba to her brother while he is in her care.

In order for readers to fully enjoy and participate in this text they need to explore two modes—the text-illustration relationship—to help them comprehend the new vocabulary that they come across. The word “kanga,” for example, is one that most Manitoban children will not have ever come across before reading this text. While not described or defined, the word “kanga” is thrown into the story very casually. As the main character Elizabeti starts to take care of her brother Obedi, she is shown from the side with her arms tucked under and supporting Obedi as he is held in place on her back

with help from a piece of bright red patterned fabric. This illustration spreads over two pages, while the text on the bottom left hand corner hardly takes up any room. When readers pay attention to both text and visual they can make the connection that the red patterned fabric piece is a kanga. This connection helps readers to make sense of what they read and view. This connection is one that readers can make again when later on in the story Elizabeti watches a woman walk by who also is carrying a baby. The woman that Elizabeti sees is able to have her hands by her side because the baby is wrapped up on her back in a piece of fabric similar to the one that Elizaeti sports to hold Obedi.



*Figure 3: Elizabeti's kanga. An image from *Mama Elizabeti* (Stuve-Bodeen, 2000).*

In order to further extend the readers' newfound knowledge of the word kanga, Hale shows the readers, through illustrations, what else a kanga can be used for. Readers have the opportunity to see a kanga as something more than a fabric that is meant to help carry a baby, as attention is given to how Elizabeti's uses her bright red fabric throughout the story. Elizabeti uses her kanga as a blanket to cover her rock doll in the beginning and at the end of the story. She also spreads out her kanga on the ground so that Obedi is able

to lie on it. Readers see that the kanga, while shown flat on the ground, is a giant rectangle. The fabric is not sewn in a specific way that would only allow it to have a single purpose. Throughout the text other characters are seen using fabrics, similar to Elizabeti's, as dresses, shawls, and skirts. At one point in the story Elizabeti is seen laundering many pieces of rectangular fabrics. These images help readers confirm that a kanga is very versatile and functions well in many roles.

Near the end of the story readers must again use the visuals to help them work through the practice of using language as sense making as readers learn new vocabulary. Stuve-Bodeen wrote that Obedi walks near a thorn tree. While descriptive in its name, readers can confirm or alter their image of what this tree may look like by reading the visual that Hale provided. The curved branches and the absence of bright green leaves greatly differ from the lush trees that were shown as Elizabeti and Obedi walked through the village. Hale used light and earthy colours (brown, green, and violet) to draw and shade in the tree. Readers have only one chance to see how Hale depicted the thorn tree as, unlike the kanga, the thorn tree is not mentioned or portrayed in the written text or in the illustration again.

Through the use of small and detailed images, readers are invited to connect with Elizabeti and learn more about this particular African village. Hale designed many small and intimate scenes for readers by concentrating her images in the middle of the page. These images fade ever so gently into a wide white boarder that encapsulates the picture. Readers have the chance to envision what the rest of the image might have looked like if Hale had designed the image to cover the entire page. Many of the images are designed in a circular shape. I believe that the purpose of this design choice is to draw readers in and

focus their attention. Readers can allow their eyes to settle on the small image and explore what it all has to offer instead of trying to concentrate or analyze an entire double-page spread. For example, while Elizabeti and her brother play, readers have nothing to focus on except for the small scene that portrays the characters and the simple background. Without many design features to focus on readers have an easy time noticing that there does not appear to be any toys, furniture, or materialistic goods in the house. In this same illustration, readers see the father leaving the house. What is unusual is that he is not walking through a door. Baba walks through a large hole in the wall which serves as an entrance and exit for the house. The design of these undersized illustrations allows readers to closely examine the picture while uncovering new ways of thinking and learning about rural village life in Tanzania.

While the visuals become a mode that allows readers to get a glimpse into what Hale imagined and what Stuve-Bodeen remembered Tanzania to be like, effective sense-making strategies will have to be employed in order to make sense of the text. Readers need to connect to prior knowledge, ask questions, and make connections between the text and the visuals to contribute to their growing knowledge of life in a particular village in Tanzania. Stuve-Bodeen wrote that Elizabeth wraps Obedi onto her back as she prepares to do her daily chores. As Elizabeti starts to work readers are invited to reimagine what effort and methods goes into accomplishing certain chores. Stuve-Bodeen wrote that Elizabeti sweeps the floor, prepares rice, does laundry, and gets water. If only reading the text readers may envision a slightly different image than the one that Hale provides. For example, readers may imagine a broom to be a brush made out of stiff fibers, such as plastic, being attached to a cylindrical handle. Hale, however, drew

Elizabethi sweeping the floor with what looks to be a bunch of curved branches gathered together at the top to form a handle. The floor that is being swept looks no different than the dirt road that can be seen outside of the home. In fact, there is no separation of colour that represents the floor to the outside ground.

The continued list of chores that Elizabethi needs to do provides readers with opportunities to practice sense-making strategies. The next chore for Elizabethi may be one that readers are not familiar with. Elizabethi is to sift rocks out of the rice. Readers may question how the chore is to be done. Again, reading the visual helps readers gain an understanding of the tools that are required in order for rice and rocks to be separated. The illustration of Elizabethi doing the laundry is another chore that will cause readers to refine and broaden their view of how this chore can be accomplished. Elizabethi can be seen sitting on the ground while holding a piece of fabric over a large pail of water. Pieces of fabric are being hung to dry on a clothesline behind Elizabethi. Even the simple chore of fetching water seems to require a great deal of effort for this child. Elizabethi and other children are shown carrying jugs of water on their heads. Elizabethi makes her way to the water pump and must, on her own accord, pump the water from a well into her jug. Throughout the story readers can reflect on both the text and visuals in order to make sense of the language and story line.

Specific language is used to help communicate to the readers the struggle Elizabethi endures as she completes her chores. Specific words like “slumped down,” “swallowed hard,” and “sighed” are negative and help show Elizabethi’s emotional state. The word “but” is also used to portray her struggle. Many sentences begin with a description of Elizabethi as she works on a chore and then the word “but” is used to create

a break in the sentence where Stuve-Bodeen can tell the readers how Obedi makes the task more difficult. For example, Elizabeti starts to sift rice “but” Obedi grabs at the basket and dumps the rice out. This writing pattern continues as Elizabeti works on her many chores. The word “but” is constantly used to create tension in the story and acts as a way to minimize some of Elizabeti’s power. While reading about Elizabeti working on her last chore readers may think they know what to expect. Elizabeti begins her chore and the word “but” makes its anticipated appearance. It is during this last chore though that the pattern breaks. Although the word “but” is used Elizabeti takes charge of the situation and does not let her brother negatively affect her. Stuve-Bodeen wrote how Elizabeti lovingly attends to her brother and is able to complete the chore. It is then that more positive words are used. Words such as “smiled,” “snuggled,” “laughed,” and “rested” are used. The descriptive words help express the feelings, conflict, and thought process of the characters. The language Stuve-Bodeen used helps the characters seem more life-like and ones that readers can relate to.



Figure 4. Elizabeti with rice. An image from *Mama Elizabeti* (Stuve-Bodeen, 2000).

While working on her chores Elizabeti tries to get help and advice from others on how to finish her work all while taking care of a very squirmy baby. No one is available to help her and Elizabeti gets frustrated. Elizabeti tries to complete her chores without taking care of Obedi. This decision unfortunately means that her attention is not on Obedi and this allows him the opportunity to wander off. After finding Obedi, Elizabeti turns her power into action to accomplish her goal. She realizes that she must act for herself and come up with a plan to bring home the filled up water jug while caring for her brother. Elizabeti decides to use the kanga in a new and inventive way. Instead of using it as a wrap that could help to carry a baby on her back she unfolds the fabric and creates a “rope”. She then ties one end of the fabric to Obedi’s middle and ties the other end around herself. This allows her to carry the jug of water with both hands while still being able to care to her brother in a safe manner. Elizabeti had a sense of agency, enabling her to make choice and decisions and influence the events in her world.

Elizabeti’s renewed sense of accomplishment, independence, and agency allows her to continue on in her role as a mama. Elizabeti, now able to portray herself as a successful protagonist, is able to be a mama to her brother Obedi in the same manner that her mother is able to be a mama for baby Flora. While her mother rocks Flora to sleep Elizabeti is shown taking the exact position as her mother. Both mamas are on the floor with their feet brought in close to their bodies so that their legs can be propped up to create a place for the babies to rest. Both mamas hold their babies with their arms wrapped around them. The babies rest on their chests. Elizabeti is shown to be the “spitting image” of her mom. This scene invites a sense of positive agency as part of Elizabeti’s identity.

Reflection. It was important for me to dedicate one of my workshops to a multimodal global and culturally diverse text as the surrounding school community where I work is incredibly diverse. In a previous chapter I had defined global literature as texts that were produced outside the reader's country of origin. Finding a text that would fit this criterion was not a problem. Out of all of the books in the public library I found only a handful that had the Canadian flag sticker attached to the spine of the book, notifying readers that the author of the text was Canadian. Shifting my focus away from Canadian authors I tried to find a multicultural text: texts that focused on aspects the lives of people who are of different nationalities and races. I found this to be a difficult task. Kathy Short (2009) warned that often when studying a culture only the "five f's" are focused on: fashion, food, folklore, famous people, and festivals. I found this to be true. Many of the texts that I read predominantly focused on these five aspects. I also found the writing in many of these global and culturally diverse texts to be didactic, dry, and, well to be honest, a bit boring. While discussing the six strands of English language arts and how teachers (and children) can often neglect or forget about the importance of viewing a friend recommended *Mama Elizabeti* to me. After borrowing and reading the text I found that I was happily surprised with the content; I found that both the text and visuals were engaging and informative. *Mama Elizabeti* is both globally and culturally diverse and works well as a teaching and learning tool, as it can support children as they read and view as part of the four ELA key practices.

I truly enjoyed how this text is able to explore another culture while telling an engaging and sweet story of a big sister trying to take care of her sibling. While the focus of the illustrations are on the characters, the muted backgrounds help extend the readers'

knowledge of life in the particular African village where Elizabeti resides. The illustrations of the huts, traditional garb, and landscapes were all beautifully rendered in mixed-media. The text can act to help inform readers about the similarities and differences between them and this family. The “text-to-self” connection can be explored as readers consider their responsibilities in relation to the chores, lifestyle, and concerns of a young school aged child living in Tanzania has (Routman, 2003, p.124). One academic goal in the division that I teach in is to help children understand how to make text-to-self connections. I believe that this text, having the main character of similar age to my students, having the main character complete simple chores, and having the main character become frustrated at a pesky sibling, would become natural talking points for children in kindergarten to grade 2. This text provides an opportunity for children to reflect on their own identities and encourages text-to-self connections to be made.

A learning experience that I may connect to the practice of using language as power and agency would be to look at the responsibilities that Elizabeti had. In order to create a text-to-self connection children could compare their own daily routines to that of Elizabeti. Children may then empathize with Elizabeti and start to wonder why she was not participating in other daily activities that they may consider routine, such as going to school. While being culturally sensitive, I may work with the children to explore the roles and responsibilities of girls in differing countries and cultural groups. This may lead to the children wanting to investigate more complex issues about gender inequities and injustices. Bringing in guest speakers or studying other multicultural texts can allow children to gather information from multiple perspectives. For example, I have a friend who lived and volunteered in Tanzania. I talked to her about this text and possible

classroom learning experiences. We decided that if I were to use this text with future students that I could invite her into the classroom to share her personal experiences about living in another country. She would be able to provide insight and work to further inform children about what a regular day was like for her. Her personal stories may provide children with alternate viewpoints concerning certain topics and enable children to recognize some differences and similarities from their own lives to her life in Tanzania. Additional information gained from guest speakers or meaningful texts may inspire children to effectively use their power and agency to recognize inequities and share their own stories to contribute another perspective.

After discussing the power and responsibilities that some girls may or may not have in differing countries I would want my students to use their power as readers and create their own sense of agency by talking back to the text. When readers do not simply accept the text but learn to talk back, to change, and to redesign then they start practicing using their own agency. Questions that may arise from such discussions may include: What was the author's intent? How did we interpret a visual? How did the words/visuals make us feel? How did we respond to the text? Allowing children to use language to question and interrogate the text enables them to use their power as capable, intelligent citizens to advocate for their ideas, thoughts, and understanding. I would also encourage the children to look critically at the text to find out if there was something about the text or visuals that they would have liked to be redrawn or rewritten. By saying that "I am not bound by this text" allows a child to ask, "what would we change and why?" Participating in these types of discussions gives children opportunities to use their language to influence others, reimagine texts, and explain how what they view and read

influences their thinking.

While my created learning invitations and workshop can help children to become more conscious of the use of the four ELA practices, I think that they specifically allow readers to practice using language as power and agency. While participating in such experiences, however, children can also practice using effective sense making strategies. The text and visuals “require them to connect with prior knowledge, make connections, [and] ask questions . . . in the ways that are effective for the text and purpose” (MAPLE, 2015b). These strategies help readers to make sense of the language and visuals that they encounter while reading and are parts of the practice of using language as sense making. It needs to be remembered that the four practices are to be intertwined and interwoven within classroom teaching and learning.

Language and Literacy Workshop # 3: A Nonfiction Text

Think of an Eel. Karen Wallace (1993), author of *Think of an Eel*, takes her audience on an adventure when she described the characteristics and life cycles of eels. In this informational text Wallace began the story by describing an eel’s birth and progressed through the long journey it makes towards its new home. Wallace provided accurate and factual information while allowing her audience to appreciate the beauty of the language she selects. Alan Marriott used his own distinct artistic ability to capture Wallace’s story when he provided the voice to the read-along and story-time recording of this text. Together, their artistic styles, alongside a track of music, allow listeners to explore, imagine, and enjoy this text with new appreciation.

Wallace employed the use of literary devices, such as similes, to allow readers to acquire information while being engaged. With the first few words that are read in the

text readers must make connections between familiar animals and their movements. Wallace noted that an eel “swims like a fish [and] slides like a snake” (p. 1). These similes guide her readers as they picture an eel. Wallace then stated that an eel “eats like a horse” and has “teeth like a saw blade” (p.4). These similes allow readers to draw conclusions about how important it is for a baby eel to eat and grow. Other similes such as “thick like a snake” and “looks like a shoelace” offer accurate information on the appearance of an eel in a poetic way (p.13). Wallace provided many similes throughout the text, which gives her audience opportunities to practice strategies within the sense making practice, such as drawing conclusions, visualizing, and making connections to prior knowledge. Most of her similes are straightforward and easy to understand so as to effectively communicate images that readers can use to comprehend the informational text.

The meaningful similes also aid readers as they work through the practice of exploration and design by uncovering new ways of thinking. Wallace began her text by engaging her audience when she asks them to “imagine an eel” (p.1). What is pictured when the word eel is said? As a reader I pictured an eel to be ugly or a threatening creature and while other readers may generate similar ideas Wallace redirects her audience’s mindset by quickly continuing on in her story as she provides readers with her own perspective and (unexpectedly) compares a baby eel to a “willow leaf” (p. 4). Later on in the text she again made reference to a non-threatening object and described an eel as looking “clear as a crystal” (p. 4) and like a shoelace “made out of glass” (p. 8). These similes, comparing the eels to harmless and translucent items, help readers to imagine, alter, and then reimagine their shape, size, and colour. Wallace continued to assist her

readers to keep this risk-free mental image in mind by affectionately calling a baby eel an “eel-leaf” (p. 4). She repeated these exact words at the end of her story, bringing her readers back to their first scaffolded image of an eel.

Alliteration is a literary device that Wallace utilized to create certain moods. She first set the tone of intrigue and danger by using many “s” sounds. While Wallace referred to a baby eel as an eel-leaf, she does not allow her readers to continue to romanticize about eels for long. On numerous occasions, starting with the third sentence of text, Wallace compared eels to snakes. With that image in mind Wallace repeated the “s” sound throughout the text. Phrases such as “slit-eyed and slimy” (p. 13), “squirms like a secret” (p. 19), and “swimming silently” (p. 20) showcase the “s” sound while reinforcing the snake-like identity for eels. Later in the text, and only for a moment, Wallace shifted from the “s” sound to the “b” sound; “eyes like black currants bulge into headlights” encompass the harsh and jarring “b” sound (p. 16). As Marriott read this line he emphasized the “b” sound. As a reader/listener of this text I interpreted meaning for these sounds. The “b” sound left me feeling discordant in the midst of this lyrical text. Playing with sounds and letter patterns aids Wallace and Marriott in the production of words that meaningfully communicate layers of depth and meaning.

Wallace used alliteration to create a lyrical effect throughout her text. Through alliteration, Wallace was able to generate a steady rhythm in the story, which is made even more apparent when listening to the recording of the text. The “s” sound is in constant use, in fact there are only a handful of sentences that do not have multiple “s” sounds running through them. This relentless sound creates a firm and fluid beat to the text. While the “s” sound creates a pleasant and rhythmic effect on the soundtrack,

listeners get to experience a beat change when phrases such as “he waits in the water” and “[his] winding body is worn-out and wasted” are narrated (track 1). Wallace used the “w” sound to slow the text down, which gives listeners a chance to absorb the language and information. The soft and slow sound of the “w” is given considerable attention while describing the death of an eel. Language explored in this way creates new possibilities for listeners/readers to find meaning.

Wallace used imagery in her work as a literary device to enhance the story. While she described an eel’s journey with great detail to produce effective visual images she also explored how language could work to play with her readers’ other senses. Awakening multiple senses allows for images and feelings to be experienced in an embodied way. An example of this type of imagery appears when Wallace (1993) described the eels searching for their new homes:

When spring
warms the shoreline,
the smell of fresh water
excites the glass elver.
Into the river
he swims like a mad thing.
He wriggles up rapids,
climbs rocks
around waterfalls. (p.9)

By utilizing rich language readers are taken alongside the eels as they search for their new homes. Kinesthetic, olfactory, tactile, thermal, and auditory sensations are ignited

and this sensory detail allows Wallace to keep her readers feeling the text and entices them to continue on with the story.

Certain conventions, such as vocabulary, which Wallace employed in her story allow readers to use the practice of language as a system as they gain a deeper understanding into the life of the eels. Through the use of subtle language and references to certain times of year, Wallace aimed to nourish her readers' understanding of the long and excruciating journey that eels make during their lives. Readers learn that eels swim three years before they reach the shore that will serve as their new home. The eels, though, must be patient and cannot search for a home in the river right away. Wallace stated that "the river's too cold, there's still snow on the mountains" (p.7). The vocabulary used gives readers a sense that the eels arrive at the shore during the wintertime. Wallace continued her story and noted that it was only when the water is warmer could the eels (now turned to elvers) swim through the river. Again, clues in the vocabulary help readers determine that it is with the arrival of the spring season that allows the eels to swim towards the shore to find a new home. Readers of the story learn that the eels now are only at the halfway mark of their long journey because eventually they are ready to make the long journey back to their birthplace. They must first wait patiently "for a night that is moonless, when the rain from the mountains has flooded the stream" in order to start their return journey (p. 17). Again, the clues in the text hint that the eels wait for autumn before beginning their decent down the river and back to the Saragasso Sea. It is through the specifically chosen vocabulary that Wallace invites her readers to learn about eels in subtle ways, paying attention to their ecological contexts. Without using technical or scientific vocabulary such as relocation, or migration,

Wallace's word play allows readers to dig deep into the text to strengthen their understanding and curiosity about eels.

While Wallace provided the lyrical and informative text it is Marriott, the narrator of the text, who used his voice to add to the meaning and excitement of the story. By emphasizing key words and phrases and by pacing—speeding up or slowing down—his reading, Marriott is able to provide listeners with opportunities to connect with the text in new ways. Marriott explored relationships between word and sound that are important for meaning making. For example, when reading certain words such as “sinks,” “slides,” and “ooze” he lingered on the vowels; he was emphasizing the slow and drawn out process these words imply (track 1). In comparison, Marriott read words like “snaps,” “steal,” and “wriggles” rather quickly (track 1). The quick pace adds excitement and interest to the text. The pace at which Marriott read the words communicates meaning in a way that is not possible simply by reading the text silently.

Marriott used pauses at integral places to emphasize meaning, to add dramatic flair, and to create interest in the text. After reading the first sentence of the text, “think of an eel,” Marriott paused (track 1). This allows listeners to connect with any prior knowledge they might have about eels. This technique is observed again when Marriott paused after he read the word “elver” for the first time (track 1). Listeners have a chance to imagine and question the text before Marriott goes on to read Wallace's description of an elver. Marriott understood how the use of pauses adds to the listeners' learning experiences. He used pauses to allow listeners to connect and become interested in the text. Twice in the text Marriott read the word “secret” (track 1). After reading the word “secret” Marriott paused just slightly (track 1). For me these pauses created interest and

added to the excitement of Wallace's story because, as a listener, I had no choice but to wait until the story continued to find out what happened next.

The sound effects used in the soundtrack provide another source of meaning to add to Wallace's story. Throughout the narration sound effects are faintly heard in the background to emphasize certain key points in the story. While Marriott describes the Saragasso Sea as "warm," "weedy," "soupy," and "salty" listeners can hear the sound of waves (track 1). These sound effects add another potential layer of meaning that prompts listeners to think back to any memories they may have about the sea. Sound effects are used in this way multiple times throughout the text. For example, the sound of sea gulls are heard while Marriott reads Wallace's description of the birds, and the soft sound of falling water becomes the background noise as the story of how the elvers become excited by the smell of fresh water is told (track 1). The use of sound explored throughout the text contributes to the text's meaning potential and accordingly to the listeners' enjoyment and learning experience.

Readers/listeners can use the music that accompanies the verbal story on the sound track to help construct meaning. Before any words are spoken there is music that starts to play. The steady low-pitched beat accompanies chimes and exaggerated higher pitched tones. Throughout the text this music continually fades only to reappear. This ever-lurking music may be considered sneaky or secretive. This adds to the character of the eels and gives listeners another semiotic resource to ponder when the narration has subsided. This same music is again played at the end of the text after all narration has stopped. The lingering music that is heard when there is an absence of narration allows listeners time to reflect on the ideas and information presented in the story.

Reflection. In the third chapter, I wrote that multimodal trade books were valuable classroom tools when it came to informing and expanding children’s knowledge. Moss was a source that I turned to when researching trade books and she had stated that nonfiction trade books should not be overlooked when making final text selections. I initially reviewed this specific nonfiction trade book because Moss (1995) stated that Wallace used a “unique approach” to her writing in *Think of an Eel* (p. 123). I hadn’t read *Think of an Eel* before and so I needed to borrow the text from the library. Borrowing this book from the library made me a bit nervous since it was not only the book that I wanted to use for my workshop but its read-along recording as well. Previous students of mine loved to listen to books on tape and I wanted to pick a read-along text to give children a unique way to interact with language. While heading to the library I wondered if there was a point of borrowing and exploring a book if it did not meet all of my requirements? I did not realize that my loaned book from the library would come as a kit—complete with a recording of the text! After listening to the recording I quickly decided that the recording in concert with the paperbound book would act as the focus for this language and literacy workshop.

When teaching Grade 1 for the first year I often turned to the other Grade 1 teachers for support. We would often plan lessons or units together and sometimes we would combine our classes so that the children had an opportunity to work, learn, and play together. I remember collaborating with another Grade 1 teacher on an animal research project. The children had become very interested in animals after attending a nature preserve. My colleague and I had thought that we could encourage the children to pursue their interests by picking an animal of their choice to research and explore. I

believe that Wallace's text would have been a great mentor text for that project. Through the use of line breaks, visuals, and lyrical text she is able to present factual information in an engaging way. Wallace's text and accompanying CD could have been used to help inform students about an animal while giving them ideas as to how to use language to effectively communicate to others ideas, information, and knowledge. The connection I made to Wallace's text and Cd and my own teaching experiences was a factor in my choosing this text for a workshop.

I believe that it is through play that children have the chance to actively explore their understanding. By first giving children a chance to engage in drama exercises where they move like eels while reading Wallace's text they will be more comfortable and excited to create their own pretend underwater play worlds during classroom play time. By accessing the information they have about eels children will be able to use and build upon their understanding while in play. In my own classroom the students and I often create play centers around themes. While examining this text and sound track we may create a "wonder table" filled with shells, sand, and water to be explore. I may provide a sound track with water noises to be played while children perform skits. Puppets, costumes, and tools that connect to the eel theme may inspire children to make connections, ask questions, and to connect with prior information as they practice using language as sense making while engaging in play. Through play the children can work at developing and deepening their understanding of the information of Wallace's story.

As I thought about future children that I may teach I was inspired to create learning engagements that used this mentor text to provide children with examples of how to create an appealing yet factual text. In order to support my future students in

creating their own books with special narration and sound tracks we may begin by exploring texts that present facts in engaging ways. Wallace, for example, used many short sentences in her text. The short sentences were broken up so that in many cases each sentence was on its own line. This structure creates a lot of white space on the page and resembles a poem. Readers must pause at the end of each sentence and each pause seems to add tension and suspense for the next anticipated sentence. Wallace also used many similes and created a story that is filled with similar sounding words. When children practice using language as a system they begin to learn how language operates and how it can be used to enhance a story. Children may ask how they can use what they know about language and how it works in order to write their own information text. By exploring Wallace's text and the patterns, structures, and elements of design children can recognize and adapt certain language conventions to compose their own engaging, factual texts.

To help create a sound track for the children's narrative I may invite our "book buddies" into the classroom to work with the children. By working together children will be building a sense of community within the school. They will also realize how social the learning process can be. Children working in cross-grade groups will be able to learn from and with their peers. This type of learning experience requires the children to communicate to others their knowledge while showcasing their own expertise in certain topics when explaining ideas and answering questions. I have found that working with other classroom teachers is also beneficial for me. Not only do I have someone to lean on for support but also working with other adults allows for conversations and brainstorming sessions to occur. For this learning experience, working with a music teacher in particular

would be beneficial.

Through the use of many semiotic resources, I found that Wallace's informational text came alive. This multimodal non-fiction text gives a vivid and lively portrayal of the eel. The contributions that this text brings is multi-faceted: this text allows listeners to forge personal connections to scientific information as well as provides opportunities to appreciate language while giving value to non-verbal communication. The information, story, and music in this read-along text all play a significant role in my consideration of this text as being a rich resource.

Language and Literacy Workshop # 4: An Art Piece

Two Ovals. In 1919 Wassily Kandinsky painted a piece that he entitled *Two Ovals*. The 107 by 89.5 centimeter piece was painted in oil on a canvas. I have included a copied image of this painting into my paper, as it may be difficult to imagine this abstract piece through my description alone. Although the title, *Two Ovals*, implies that there are two main ovals that should be noticed or that were only two ovals focused on during the creation period, Kandinsky designed many ovals throughout the piece. Viewers have to decide for themselves which ovals, in this sensory rich painting, were the ones that inspired the title. Since Kandinsky's abstract painting is open to interpretation this workshop gave me a chance to explore my own interpretation, feelings, questions, and thoughts of Kandinsky's *Two Ovals*.



Figure 5. A copied image of the painting Two Ovals. An image from The Noisy Paint Box: The Colours and Sounds of Kandinskys Abstract Art (Rosenstock, 2014).

Kandinsky used many elements of art to create the building blocks of his painting. Line, a basic element of art, is represented in various ways throughout the piece. Thin black straight lines, for example, can be seen at the top left hand corner of the painting under a small oval. Similar lines can also be seen in the center of the painting under a large black oval. These numerous thin lines overlap and only allow small amounts of the background to be seen. These particular thin black lines are painted both horizontally and vertically.

Kandinsky used the elements of line in different ways throughout the painting. While many of the black lines near the ovals are thin and overlap one another, other black lines are thick and can be seen in the painting as being—hue, intensity, and value. Kandinsky used blue as the main hue (colour) in the painting. Towards the middle of the

piece, the blue is intense (vivid). Its high saturation provides a strong presence. This vivid blue then transitions into a cerulean blue which then either curved or wavy. Many of these curved lines are used as a border to surround other colours. I see the black lines in Kandinsky's painting as giving his text meaningful and purposeful structure. Without the black lines the other colours would mix together and seem more united and free flowing. The solid black lines help to define the space, break up patterns, separate the chaotic from the peaceful, and confine pieces of interest. How Kandinsky used black lines to structure the piece reminds me of the ELA practice of using language as a system. Students need opportunities to explore many aspects of language that are important for communicating and meaning making. I see structure being used in this piece as part of a communication system. The black lines give structure to the painting to help to communicate arrangement, layout, and position. Structure is one of the aspects of a system that learners need to understand if they are to compose their own meaningful texts.

Colour, another element of art, has three properties fades into teal, lavender blue, and finally lavender gray. The blues gradually go from a high value to a low value (brightness). This creates a gentle and soft effect to the edges of the piece. I feel that Kandinsky used the power of colour to influence his viewers. He is able to compel his viewers to focus on certain parts of the painting with the hues that he chose to use and the ways he chose to use them. The dark blues used at the bottom of the painting draw the eyes upward and towards the large black oval that is at the heart of the painting. The blue edges of the painting, being so light and simple, become non-existent and focus is once again brought into the center of the piece where harsh black lines and a variety of colours can be spotted. As a text producer, Kandinsky was able to use his artistic ability and

knowledge about colour in order to persuade viewers to look at certain parts of the piece and disregard others.

Attention is called to the circular shapes in the painting because of the sheer number of them. Brightly coloured circles and ovals are mimicked and repeated numerous times throughout the painting. Many of these circles and ovals are outlined in black, which defines the space and the shape. The circular shapes that are not outlined in black take up a lot of space as their colours are allowed to extend, connect, and become interwoven with other shapes and colours. I believe that the patterns created by these many rounded shapes established a visual beat to the painting. This beat gives viewers a chance to read the text over and over again as their eyes easily transition from one circle to the next. As a viewer, I started to feel that I knew the piece; I became more familiar with the piece with each viewing. The way that I effortlessly viewed the text and the way that my eyes naturally and fluidly moved between each circle reminded me of how skillful readers can read written words fluently by drawing upon language cueing systems. With so many circles throughout the piece I allowed my eyes to glide past the colours, trace familiar shapes, and constantly return to pieces of interest without feeling rushed. I repeated this process numerous times as the circular shapes continually lead to another cluster of circles and ovals to focus on.

When looking at and studying the painting, there were two ovals that caught my attention right away. The first oval that I noticed was outlined in black and placed near the heart of the piece. The second oval that I noticed was partly outlined with orange and positioned at the top right hand corner of the piece. These ovals take up a lot of space. Because of their powerful size, I connected these two ovals to the title name of this

painting. While describing these two ovals in this paper I suddenly discovered a third prominent oval in the top left hand corner. This third oval is very similar to the large black oval. Both are elongated on a slant and outlined in black. The similarities in these two ovals had me wondering, once again, which ovals inspired the title of the painting. I also wondered why there would be three main ovals when only two were recognized in the title. Being a viewer of this art piece gave me the opportunity to make connections and ask questions about the title and the text itself. These sense-making strategies were effective for helping to work at and make my own understanding of the text.

Kandinsky explored principles of art, such as contrast, when he designed the two ovals that are outlined in black. Their size is the biggest contrast that I first noticed; the large oval is at least four times as big as the small oval. Position is another area of contrast that I noticed; the small oval in the left hand corner is above the centered oval. Kandinsky also used contrasting values for these two ovals. The small oval is empty on the inside as it is atop of a very wide white brush stroke while the large oval is filled with varying bright, dull, and dark colours. The lack of colour in the small oval gives it a simple form contrasted to the colours inside the large oval that give it a complex form. The small oval seems whole and organized since its middle is almost all white. The large oval is broken up by many black brushstrokes outlining geometrical shapes; the many straight, curvy, and jagged lines running through the large oval makes it seem chaotic. By observing this principle of art I became better aware of what I was viewing and was able to articulate the ways that I engaged with the text. As I explored this text I uncovered new ways of thinking about it, which is a strategy in the practice of exploration and design. Articulating my thoughts helped me deepen my current understanding of the text

while also seeking ways to imagine and reimagine what I was viewing.

This intense painting, amongst all of the varying colours and movement of line, gives viewers a chance to find a moment of peace. Near the top right hand corner of the painting is a large white oval that is mostly white on the inside. The large white space the oval creates is called negative space. This gives the eyes a place to rest in the midst of a very chaotic and colourful painting. This resting place appealed to me as it allowed me to take a moment to reflect, absorb, and make my own meaning of the piece. I believe that the negative space was designed so that an exploration of the text could continue. As a viewer I used the negative space as a break where I took the time to communicate my learning and understanding of the piece without getting caught up in the fragmented and cluttered colours and lines found throughout the piece.

One practice in the new ELA curriculum is to use language as exploration and design. As learners explore a text they use their prior and new understanding of a topic “while also seeking ways to imagine and reimagine” (MAPLE, 2015b). While reading and enjoying *Two Ovals*, I found many figures and spaces of interest. I found a purple fish in the bottom right hand corner and a teddy bear wearing a red shirt in the center of the piece. I imagined the three bright cascading circles found at the very top of the painting to be fireworks and the circles coloured in black at the bottom left hand corner to be paw prints. Writing this workshop gave me an opportunity to use my language to communicate my understanding of this text. While communicating my ideas about this piece, I believe that I become an author myself. My feelings and thoughts inspired by visual art have been creatively transmediated into my own words (Suhor, 1984).

Reflection. I believe that a reason why readers read is because they enjoy doing

so. I first picked up this text to analyze and study simply because I thought that young children would take pleasure in viewing it. This painting can be seen in the book *The Noisy Paint Box: The Colors and Sounds of Kandinsky's Abstract Art*, written by Barb Rosenstock (2014). The book is historical fiction and tells the captivating story of Kandinsky, the “father of abstract art”. Kandinsky experienced colours as sounds. He also experienced sounds as colours. Kandinsky, for example, described hearing a hissing sound when he mixed paint colours together (Artist’s Note, para 2). The book informs readers that Kandinsky wasn’t satisfied with painting “proper” pieces of art and found true pleasure while creating abstract art. At the end of the book there are four pictures of his paintings and one of these is *Two Ovals*. While already aware of Kandinsky’s work, the creative visuals and the imagery written in Rosenstock’s book played a huge part in my wanting to further investigate one of Kandinsky’s paintings for my workshop.

Art became a huge part of my life while teaching grade 2 and grade 3 children. After bringing a guest artist into my classroom the children yearned to become better artists themselves. The children and I decided to include art elements and techniques into our everyday school lives. Many academic subjects, such as mathematics and social studies, became connected with learning through art. While working on personal and social management skills the children were exploring different emotions. One particular learning engagement involved the children painting to music. They listened to the music piece several times before they used the painting tools to help explore their own feelings while creating. The music was then played while their parents came to view their art pieces during parent-teacher conferences. I wish that I would have known about Kandinsky’s paintings during those lessons. I believe that my students would have been

interested to learn about an artist who was actually able to hear music while painting. The children's interest and similar creative processes became the final factors that motivated me to choose a painting from this specific artist to focus on for my workshop.

After reading *The Noisy Paint Box: The Colors and Sounds of Kandinsky's Abstract Art* I was eager to try to "hear" the colours in *Two Ovals* as Kandinsky may have. A classroom learning experience that I would be excited to engage in with students would be to go through the book and keep track of the noises that certain colours made. Scarlet, for example, provided a ringing sound to Kandinsky (Rosenstock, 2014, p. 15). I would encourage the children to make those noises, to find instruments that made similar sounds, and to use the Internet and other technologies to create sound bites for particular colours. Then, when observing *Two Ovals*, the children and I would be able to pinpoint what sounds Kandinsky may have heard when painting. These learning engagements would help children become aware and communicate how they are participating with the text.

To prepare myself while imagining curriculum related learning engagements I reread the text multiple times and began to research the different colours that I saw in the painting. I then connected the colours to the specific sounds that are written about in the text. Finding out how much "shrill" Kandinsky may have heard while painting surprises me. Was shrill a pleasant sound to some? Why would one want to use that colour/sound so lavishly—was he having a bad day? While eagerly finding the sounds that connected to certain colours I had a better understanding of the importance of the large white oval that created negative space in the painting. This "ivory chorus" was a nice place to rest my eyes and ears as the stomping, thundering, and shrill points are forgotten for a while.

This made me wonder: What sounds would the children find comforting? Would any pieces of interest in the painting suddenly change when certain sounds were associated with them? What sounds would they think went along with colours that were not mentioned in the text? Making connections between the text and the painting, asking meaningful questions, and better understanding what is being viewed helps learners practice using language as sense making. By exploring the written text in concert with the painting children become aware of how valuable each source is to one another.

A learning experience that often occurs in my own classroom is comparing how visual texts are structured in relation to how language is structured. For example, in a painting the viewer is able to see the work in its entirety all at once while a reader must gather information as it is presented, since written texts are often designed in a more linear way. In the classroom this painting could be used to help children to think about organization, focus, themes, etc. Children could be invited to find pauses in the painting, the same way that authors use white space and language conventions such as punctuation to organize their thoughts. Children may also be encouraged to find themes within in the painting, perhaps through colour, size, shape, and sound in the same way that text producers who create written pieces of work create themes with characters, words, and colour. This painting might also be compared to a poem. Poems often use line breaks to structure ideas in the same way that this painting creates structure with line. Finding similarities and differences between multiple visual and written pieces of work enables children to examine, interpret, and articulate their knowledge of visual and linguistic conventions.

Before working on this workshop I allowed myself ample time to just enjoy and

view the text before starting any writing. It didn't take me long to start to notice patterns, bold colours and designs, and peculiar shapes. Studying the painting led me to write what I saw and what I imagined which in turn led me to be able to make connections to the ELA practices.

Summary of Workshops

This chapter was dedicated to answering my research question: With a focus on children in Manitoba's kindergarten to grade 2 classrooms, how might I use quality texts to support these children's use of the four central language and literacy practices identified in the new English language arts curriculum? In this chapter I used language and literacy workshops to examine written texts and illustrations. I drew connections between the four works and the practices stated in the new ELA curriculum. Reflections were provided at the end of each workshop. I focused the reflections on my personal feeling and understanding of the texts. This was done to stress that the workshops give only one, personal interpretation of the text even though there are many possible. I also reflected on how I could create learning invitations and experiences that I thought kindergarten to grade 2 children could participate in. These learning experiences were designed based on my personal experiences with children of this age group, my past experiences as an early years teacher, and imagined future endeavours in the classroom. These experiences are meant to help children more deeply understand the text while using the ELA practices.

The general thoughts that teachers can take away and consider from these workshops when making text selections with the new Manitoba ELA curriculum in mind are as follows:

- A text does not only refer to written language.
- Communication systems are not restricted to written or verbal language.
- Multiple forms of texts can be used to provide language and literacy lessons.
- Value must be placed on all six of the language arts strands.
- Written language and illustrations can be analyzed in order to allow readers to make sense of language, investigate how language works, notice how language was explored and designed, and understand the power that language can have.
- The four key ELA practices can be interwoven.
- Learning engagements may offer children opportunities to use many ELA practices at once.
- A variety of learning engagements can help children as they use the four ELA practices.
- Teachers and students can form learning partnerships as they co-construct knowledge
- Language and literacy learning can be a social process.
- Meaningful and authentic contexts can be provided when children's interests, culture, prior knowledge, and personal goals are taken into consideration.
- A teacher's professional judgment should impact text selection.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Participating in Reflective Practice

I consider reflective practice a way to engage the learner, the one who is involved in the creative work, in a process of continuous learning. This practice, which leads to insight, learning, and action, is valuable to utilize several times through the creation process. While writing this thesis I allowed myself many opportunities and time to reflect on what I had accomplished, how my current understanding of ELA had evolved, and what questions still needed to be answered so that my learning could be extended. During these reflective periods I had many “aha” moments. I would like to share some of these moments now that the scholarship I uncovered has been brought forward and my writing of this thesis is coming to an end.

Early in my work I had discussed a socio-cultural perspective on literacy education. It was important that my readers understand that children come to school with learning experiences that may be quite different from those of the teacher. Educators, taking into account that literacy is a social and cultural practice, can ensure that certain strategies, and the children associated with them, are not marginalized or disregarded. While writing out the workshop for Wallace’s text I realized that I might have allowed my own social and cultural practices to influence my work and in turn privilege certain language conventions. In my workshop I had stated that when Marriot paused while reading Wallace’s text that he was creating interest in and excitement for the story. I had implied that it was because of the pauses that listeners would be more eager to find what would happen next in the story. After rereading my work I wondered how much of what I had written was a cultural way of being. I also wondered if children, who perhaps did

not have experience with this sort of text, would also appreciate the dramatic pauses as much as I did? Would the pauses seem annoying? Would they add to the story's excitement or just slow the story down? This aha moment made me realize how important it is to not assume that the ideas that I generate as a reader/learner will be the similar to those of the children. It is, therefore, important for educators to learn about and value the social and cultural practices and semiotic resources of the classroom children.

Through my research into multimodal texts it was important for me to choose a variety of text forms to concentrate on in my workshops. An aha moment came when I was reviewing Wallace's text and CD. While making sense of the written text I was also analyzing certain language conventions. Register, genre, and form are examples of systems of language that were effectively used to help contribute to my understanding of the text. While analyzing the CD I was interpreting the spoken language, integrating information from a variety of sources, and managing the information and ideas. While Wallace's written words are identical to Marriot's spoken words I was using strategies from different ELA practices to help me think and understand the language in meaningful ways. Identifying the strategies that I was using reinforced the idea that working with multimodal texts offers learners many learning benefits including offering learners multiple sense-making options to be utilized and giving learners a chance to consider how information can be represented in different ways.

Through the process of selecting four texts to analyze for this thesis I read (and re-read) many, many texts. Not only did I want to select texts that surpassed the researched standards for choosing high quality literature, but I was also trying to find texts that had something special in them, something that would entice readers to return to

for another read. In the many texts I read I found information inaccuracies and didactic storylines and so I continued my search. Text selection for my own classroom instructional purposes never seemed this difficult; I had to ask myself, had I established an unrealistic set of text selection guidelines? In the end I was quite happy with my four chosen texts but even so, I admit that in my selection of a global and culturally diverse text there were a few written and illustrative components that I wish I could have changed. For example, when Elizabeti lost her brother her first reaction was that of fear of what her parents would think of her. While reading the text with my nephew we had talked about how we had wished that Stuve-Bodeen had written Elizabeti as a character that worried about Obedi's safety, which in turn prompted her to search for him. A small change in the illustrations would have also made us happy. While researching the kanga my nephew, a grade 2 student, and I came to understand that the bright fabric piece would often have a border along all of its four sides. In all the kangas that were depicted in *Mama Elizabeti* though not one had such a border. By reimagining the text we were using our own constructive agency to talk back to the text, which inspired the workshop's learning invitation. The process that my nephew and I took to dig deeper into the text reminded me that ELA is about working with the students, co-constructing ideas, searching together for deep understanding, and appreciating students as knowledgeable beings.

One of my biggest aha moments came when I began to think more broadly about communication systems as going beyond linguistic systems. For example, I was not sure how I was going to analyze a painting in my workshops because of the lack of written language. I had a copy of Kandinsky's painting, *Two Ovals*, on my desk for weeks. I

reviewed, studied, and thought about how I was going to connect a painting to the four ELA practices. I had written a rough draft of the workshop describing what the text offered and what artistic elements brought me pleasure while viewing it. While writing another draft of the workshop I thought more deeply about the obvious connections between the painting and its use of, for example, line to create structures, as parallel to the use of sentences and paragraphs to create genre structures in language as a system. How had I not thought about such obvious parallels before? It was only when I took a critical stance when observing the text that I found elements within it that helped me connect the painting to the four ELA curriculum practices. My aha moment came when I saw Kandinsky's use of painting as a communication system. This helped me to realize that Kandinsky's paint strokes and lines could be analyzed and compared and contrasted with written language texts.

While examining the texts and writing the workshops I made connections to the ELA practices and strategies that I was using. It quickly became clear to me that I was using multiple strategies from multiple practices all at once. An example of this can be found when in my reflection for the *Mama Elizabeti* workshop not only was I using the practice of language as power and agency, but I was also using many strategies found within the practice of language as sense making. Although the educational on-line forum where the curriculum document is posted urges educators to see the four practices as interrelated it was not until I started to plan and create possible authentic learning invitations for the classroom that I began to better see the opportunities for learners to use the practices in an interwoven way. This realization helps me to better understand how relying on the four practices to meaningfully engage in a text helps learners to experience

a text more fully.

I believe that the Manitoba Professional Learning Environment (MAPLE) forum (where the new ELA document is posted) was created in part to allow teachers to actively participate in the creation of the new ELA curriculum. I saw this forum as displaying a living curriculum, one where people were allowed to post their thoughts, ideas, and engage in conversations with other educators and with the creators of the document. Given that I had invested so much time and energy into becoming familiar with the new curriculum I felt that I had a responsibility to become more involved in the development process. My aha moment came when I realized that as I posted comments on the forum, provided feedback, and shared my experiences I was adding to the information that may be used and considered as edits are made to the document.

As I used my own agency to interact with the forum my next aha moment came when I realized how else I could contribute to the making of the new curriculum. I believe that my timely thesis could contribute to the curriculum by acting as a resource. Through my thesis I offered new ideas on how the practices could be interpreted, I produced learning engagements that other educators could modify for their own contexts, and I put forward research and scholarship that could help educators more fully understand the importance and significance of the four ELA practices. By acting as a professional who wants to contribute to the future ELA teaching and learning curriculum of Manitoba I can share my thesis, my example of practice, as a contribution to the dialogue with educators, like myself, who are already thinking about it.

Limitations

Incomplete document. In order to develop the ELA curriculum document,

Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning was constantly in a state of writing, revising, and refining. It was during that process that I wrote my thesis. I was able to gain access to the in-process document by becoming an on-line member of the MAPLE forum. I then joined the forum's on-line group entitled, *Reflecting on and Moving Forward with a New English Language Arts Curriculum*. This group was "designed to support educators in reflecting together on current understandings, research, pedagogy, and curriculum in English language arts" (MAPLE, 2015c). As a part of this group, I, along with other individuals, was invited to interact, converse, provide feedback, and reflect on the select pieces of the new curriculum that were made available.

Since the new curriculum was in its infant stage of development while I worked on my thesis I was not able to gain familiarity with the content in its entirety. The small selection of the document that I was able to view on-line was there to provide viewers with an overview of the framework. Although the selected document pieces allowed me to learn about the foundational underpinnings of what ELA in Manitoba is and how the key practices were to guide teaching and learning, I had no idea as to how the document would look in its completed form. Had the new curriculum been in its completed form while I worked on my thesis I may have better understood the goals, practices, and principles that anchored the document. Since many revisions and pilot programs were yet to be executed, I was not sure of the additional edits that would be made or the materials that would be provided as the process of developing the document continued. A limitation to this thesis is that I worked on a study that focused on the four key practices of Manitoba's new ELA document before a clear and coherent structure of the document was made available.

By joining the MAPLE forum I was given the opportunity to view the new document while in development. I was able to contextualize how the document might support, guide, scaffold, and lead ELA teaching and learning in Manitoba. However, with the document not ready for the implementations stage and with myself being on an extended maternity leave, I was not able to put the document into practice. Had I been able to put the document into practice in a classroom I feel that I would have better understood the four key practices and how they could be used to interpret and analyze quality multimodal texts. The real-life classroom experiences would have impacted my teaching and given me the chance to reflect on my practice. Through the process of reflective practice I would have been able to engage in a dialogue with other educators about the document and implementation concerns, attend to the children's successes and struggles, and analyze and expand on the effectiveness of the document. Thinking about my own practices and interacting and discussing them with others would have guided and provided insight when writing about the four key practices identified in the document, specifically in terms of how they could be taught in an interwoven way while using high quality texts to support learning. A limitation to this study is that I did not have an opportunity to implement any classroom teaching where the four key ELA practices guided the learning.

A personal journey. Throughout this learning journey I became empowered and confident. I began to learn how to navigate my way around the document and became more familiar with it every time that I referred to it. As I embarked on altering my thinking as to what constituted as a text, researching the four practices, and investing time into curriculum imagining I began to see myself in the document; I could imagine how I

might use the curriculum to better my own teaching and the possible programming structures that would allow my future student to use the ELA practices. My thoughts, questions, and ideas were put into words and shared throughout my work. A potential limitation to this personal journey is that these are the thoughts of one individual. While I did collaborate with other educators and professionals and recorded snippets of these conversations throughout my work there were also academic discussions that I made no mention of at all. Throughout this learning journey I engaged in dialogue with many educators about the new curriculum. Together we worked through the questions posted on the MAPLE forum, we shared our own curricular desires and needs, and we contextualized how the new curriculum could be implemented in the classroom. Not every conversation or question posed that influenced or moved my thinking forward could be mentioned. It was necessary to choose and highlight only the ones that seemed to flow naturally into my writing. This necessity could be viewed as a limitation of my work.

Research data. I am one of many educators who have access to the new ELA curriculum. The on-line MAPLE forum allows and encourages educators to reflect on the new curriculum, to answer posed questions, and to use the document to support professional conversations in the workplace. While most educators have the chance to slowly read through the document, plan with it, and see themselves in it, others had to leap into their learning quite quickly if they were part of the 2015 fall pilot program. A limitation of this thesis is that data, concerning the thoughts and opinions of others who actively used the document in the classroom, was not collected and analyzed. My own opinions, ideas, and feelings are at the centre of my work. While I was able to collaborate

with others during my learning journey the work and ideas portrayed in this thesis are mainly my own.

Limited experience. Before I became a Kindergarten teacher I was able to gain teaching experience in many different grades. While partaking in a University teaching practicum, I was mentored by teachers who taught grade 1 and grade 2/3 while I studied and taught in their classroom. I also participated in a practicum course in Thailand where I had the fortunate experience of co-teaching grades 5, 6, 7, and 8. And though I did not get to substitute teach for very long before I was hired on with the Winnipeg School Division, I did have a small window of time where I became a teacher of differing subjects and grades each and every school day. The wide range of classes and children that I taught allowed me to become familiar with multiple curricula and academic learning goals. These experiences gave me the confidence to choose the texts for this study and write their corresponding workshops. I feel that a limitation to this study is that my experience in other grades was not as vast as my teaching experience in kindergarten. More experience with children in higher grade levels may have encouraged me to expand my focus when selecting quality texts and when writing corresponding workshops.

Multimodality. After learning about the importance of using a variety of texts in the classroom, I wanted to include an assortment of texts for the workshops while still meeting the criteria that I initially established, such as exploring a social issues text. I included a fictional picturebook (with very few written words), a fictional book that presented written words and illustrations, a nonfiction book and an audio recording of that book, and a painting. While many other multimodality forms were not included in the workshops a researcher's role necessitates decisions about including some things and

excluding others. Workshops dedicated to finding learning possibilities in other forms of texts, such as wikis, blogs, dance performances, and/or sculptures, may have helped me to imagine and reimagine the four key practices of the new ELA document in new ways. Workshops written about other multimodal texts might have allowed me to see how different types of languages are used and how their particular ways of doing, thinking, and being can be represented and connected to the four key practices. A limitation to this thesis may be that many multimodal forms of text were not included in the workshops.

Further Research

Further inquiry questions and data. Gathering data could become a target for future research. This could be done in a multitude of various ways. Researchers may want to interview teachers who have used the new ELA document as a way of interrogating it. Questions researchers might want to consider may include: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the document? How are teachers planning for learning using the practices? What thinking and mind-sets did teachers need to change in order for the curriculum to work in their context? How is the new curriculum different from an outcome-based curriculum? Has the new curriculum impacted and improved practice? Future researchers may also want to gather data regarding the children's voices. Questions to consider may include: How do students communicate their ideas and knowledge? Are the students' learning needs being met? What experiences have students had with varied texts? Do students see themselves as text users and creators? Why/why not? To learn more about the opinions and feelings of the people who have actively used the new curriculum would be informative and could help provide leadership and direction for future revisions and refinement.

Grades 3 and above. The Manitoba ELA curriculum groups certain grades together in what is called a “grade band”. While the specific *grade level* that children are in provides teachers with a way of looking at the learning, teaching, and programming that is specific to the learner, the *grade bands* were designed so that educators could have a longitudinal view of the learning, teaching, and planning that would become an essential part of the classroom environment in the future. Grade bands help to support teachers as they plan and think about the learning that will develop and occur over time. I chose to focus my texts and workshops for children and teachers within the kindergarten to grade 2 grade band because of my experience within those grades. Future research may include workshops being written while focusing on children and teachers in other grade bands. Children and teachers in the grades 3 to 5, 6 to 8, and 9 to 12 grade bands would benefit from learning how the four practices can be identified, supported, and thought about while using more sophisticated and complex texts.

Multimodality. Learners need a wide variety of texts to engage with as they participate in an ELA program. Rich, varied, and complex texts should be available to children as they engage in classroom learning experiences that were designed around the specific ELA practices. Since my workshops were dedicated to four modes of texts, many multimodal texts were not discussed or analyzed. Future researchers may want to choose a wide variety of texts, such as poems, theatrical performances, videos, interviews, and photographs, to research and evaluate while writing language and literacy workshops. The future research into these varied texts and how they could meaningfully support children in their learning could provide teachers with examples of powerful teaching and learning possibilities.

Lenses in the curriculum. In the new ELA document four lenses—a personal and philosophical lens, a social, cultural, and historical lens, an imaginative and literary lens, and an environmental and technological lens—are provided to focus and support teachers and children as they explore and develop each language arts strand. I would suggest that future researchers use the lenses to focus the discussions of their own written workshops. Since all of lenses can be used and applied at each grade level each lens would provide opportunities for all learners to investigate, question, and examine issues and ideas from different perspectives while enacting the practices of ELA.

Three Purposes

Previously, I had identified three purposes for my thesis. My first purpose was to identify guidelines and strategies that could be considered when aiming to select quality texts. As I read through scholarship on quality texts I came across many guiding principles that helped me question, reflect, and further study certain elements of texts. While the scholarship helped to inform my choices when searching for texts of quality I believe that text selection also requires informed professional decision-making processes on behalf of the teacher. The decision-making processes of a teacher when choosing texts to help build literacy-rich environments is quite complex. Elements to consider may include the experiences that children have and do not have, curriculum relevance, purpose, complexity of the topic or issue, personal interest, and so on. I believe that the numerous factors that I considered when selecting texts all aided in how I discussed the issue of quality in my final four text choices.

The second purpose of my thesis was to explore the complexities of language and literacy learning. Chapter four was dedicated to this purpose. I dug deep into each of my

selected texts and as I read and re-read each text I began to notice small details that altered my perception, shaped my understanding, and led me to develop questions. As I viewed, listened to, read, and told each story I began to see the potential that each text had to enable learners to enact the four key ELA practices. In *The Lion & The Mouse* for example, I was keen on exploring certain colours and facial expressions. With almost no words to carry the story I part reader and part author was responsible for interpreting Pinkney's work. By analyzing his design choices and making connections between colours and feelings, I was utilizing the practice of multiple ELA practices all at once. Because the learning process of language and literacy are complex, learners will sense-make, use the systems, explore and design, and take power and agency as they engage with ELA. As a learner I drew on my full repertoire of literacy practices to fully engage with the texts. The practices became interwoven and aided in my understanding of each text.

My third stated purpose of this thesis was to interrogate and take ownership of the new curriculum. I believe that I took ownership of the new curriculum while I learnt about the four practices, participated in academic conversations, imagined future learning engagements, and reflected on how my newfound knowledge could provide guidance when planning an effective ELA program. This ownership has made me feel more comfortable to now interrogate the curriculum. As I interrogate the new curriculum I want to concentrate on two guiding questions: What thinking needs to be changed in order for teachers to see themselves in the curriculum? What are the challenges and opportunities the curriculum seems to present to teachers and learners?

Many educators are used to planning learning engagements around specific

learning outcomes. Educators might feel responsible for or required to have students learn specific skills, strategies, and attitudes to meet the goals from outcome-based curriculums. The new ELA curriculum, focusing on big ideas instead of specific skills, may come as a surprise to educators. After reading through and reflecting on the new curriculum, teachers may start to make connections between the big ideas and what goes on in their own classrooms. Thinking about and interrogating their current teaching practices and strategies may naturally lead them to consider the new curriculum as a way to improve student learning. If educators are open to beginning a dialogue about their own practices and the possibilities for change, the new curriculum may be seen as a resource to improve teaching effectiveness.

Part of the new structural design of the ELA curriculum is the inclusion of grade bands. These bands are to support teachers as they take a longitudinal view of children's learning and of their own teaching. The grade bands help teachers understand that learning develops over time and becomes more complex as learners become confident in their competencies. Since learning can cross multiple contexts over time, the grade bands also support teachers as they plan for assessment at various points along the learning continuum. With the introduction of grade bands teachers may have to change their thinking about the progress that they expect to be made by children. Teachers may also have to acknowledge that language learning can look different for different learners. These changes in thinking will ensure that as teachers assess children that they allow learners to show their learning at multiple times and through multiple ways.

I believe that the new ELA curriculum presents a number of challenges and opportunities for educators. One challenge that I would like to highlight is that teachers

might see the four discipline-specific practices as separate entities. While the curriculum explicitly states that the four practices are to be interwoven, teachers may not get a sense as to how the practices can naturally fit together. I invested a lot of time, energy, and reflective practice into getting to know the new curriculum. This allowed me to see evidence of ways that I engaged in the four practices in my own literacy events in life. I also dug deeply into multiple texts while making connections to the ELA practices. This enabled me to see how I could potentially create certain conditions in the classroom so that the four practices could be enacted and interconnected. I believe that if educators do not have the chance to become comfortable and familiar with the new ELA curriculum before being mandated to use it they may not fully understand how to use the four practices in interrelated ways while authentically building upon and deepening children's competencies.

An opportunity that I see in the new curriculum is that dialogue between educators is encouraged. Throughout the MAPLE forum questions are posed to assist educators as they reflect on their practices, engage in professional conversations, and voice their thoughts and ideas. Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning is also consulting some educators as the new curriculum continues to be revised and refined. Educators also have the opportunity to connect with others and post their views of the new curriculum through the MAPLE forum. The dialogue that is encouraged between teachers means that they have the opportunity to describe how ELA looks in their contexts. They can provide feedback as to what is working and what the challenges are. They can voice their opinions as to how they feel the previous curriculum supported their teaching and what elements they would like to see continue in the new curriculum. This

type of dialogue that has begun by teachers is already making a difference in the new curriculum. Various stakeholders of the new curriculum have already suggested that there be different entry points for teachers and that ongoing supports need to be in place for both teachers and parents. Because of this feedback ongoing consultation and supports are being planned.

One challenge that I see learners having with the new ELA curriculum is the sampling of descriptors and observable behaviours listed. These descriptors and behaviours represent the different ways that children may show evidence of their learning. I believe that some educators, especially the ones who are used to working with an outcome-based curriculum, may use the descriptors as a checklist. Children who do not exhibit the certain attitudes or behaviours that are listed in the curriculum may not be seen as improving or developing. While the curriculum explicitly states that the listed descriptions are not representative of the many and varied ways that children can demonstrate their understanding or practice in ELA, I believe that by providing any amount of descriptors will lead some to observe and assess children only by those standards.

An opportunity that I see the new ELA curriculum providing children is that they are to be seen as competent co-learners who should be working with their teachers to construct knowledge. This is evident in how the curriculum describes what ELA is and in the ELA conceptual framework. When describing what ELA is the curriculum states that teachers and children should co-construct ideas instead of having the teacher alone be responsible for knowing the learning purposes and expectations (MAPLE, 2013e). The curriculum also states that children should be appreciated as active learners instead of

being seen as passive vessels (2013e). In the curriculum there is a graphic that represents the relationships, environments, and views of the ELA curriculum (MAPLE, 2015d). Teachers and children are seen together at the center of the graphic. Around the teachers and children bigger circles are formed as the practices, assessments, texts, and learning contexts are identified. This simple graphic signifies that children are a valued part of the learning equation. I believe that the way the new ELA curriculum discusses how children are to be valued helps to create an understanding that all children are experienced language and literacy learners with developed competencies that should be welcomed and built upon.

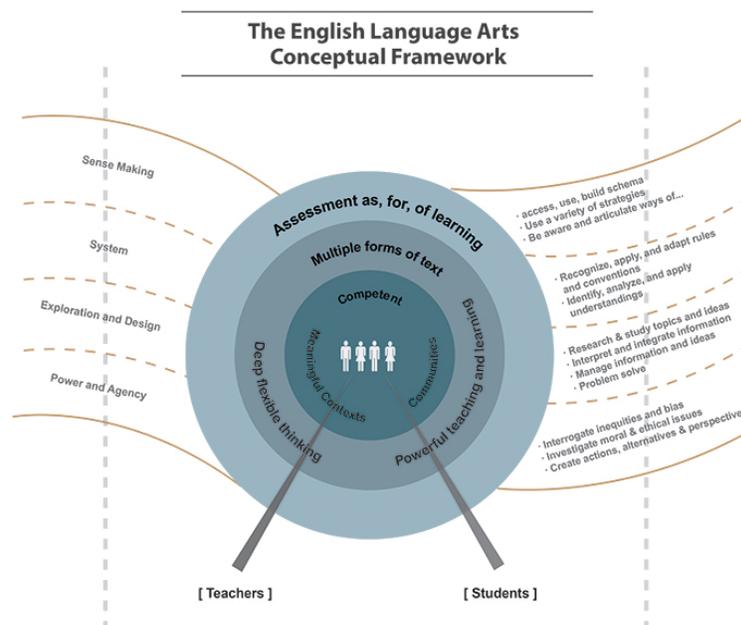


Figure 6. English language arts conceptual framework. An image from an on-line forum (MAPLE, 2015d).

Concluding Remarks

In my very first chapter I had written how the new ELA curriculum document is full of richness. By this I meant that the document allows for multiple interpretations and

multiple entry points for active learning. These elements give opportunities for teachers and students to create meaningful and authentic learning experiences that suit their needs and interests. While engaging in the online living ELA document I was forced to interpret the document for myself. I was able to use my past experiences, knowledge, interests, and creative thinking to aid me as I made sense of the material. The texts that I selected, the workshops that I wrote, and the learning invitations that I created stemmed from an open curriculum that invites educators to actively construct their own knowledge and meaning. This new ELA curriculum, being full of richness, is one that inspired and challenged me to think about what ELA could be and how it could look in a classroom setting when literate beings use interconnected practices to engage with text.

Writing this thesis provided me with the opportunity to work on making sense of the new ELA curriculum for myself. I considered related current scholarship and research. I also interrogated the ideas of others and of my own beliefs. From the ideas and research of others I was able to select, explore, and analyze texts that have the potential to support children in the early years in participating in the four key ELA practices. While creating learning invitations I was able to reflect on and question my own practices. While creating this thesis I entered into a dialogue with other teachers when I joined the MAPLE forum. I was able to reflect, ask questions, and participate in professional conversations with educators from across Manitoba. Again, the ideas, thoughts, and support from my colleagues helped shape my thinking and writing. Throughout the writing and research process that I undertook for this thesis I found that I was able to gain confidence and familiarity with Manitoba's educational system while considering possibilities for change. I have improved upon my teaching knowledge and practices and

will be in a better position to put my knowledge to use in future classrooms.

It is my hope that by observing how I used texts to highlight learning and teaching opportunities that other educators may embrace the new ELA curriculum and create their own learning opportunities that impact and improve school experience and classroom learning. It is my hope that educators take time to invest in finding quality texts to make sure that children have accurate, reliable, and enjoyable mentor texts that help them develop a solid understanding and use of the four key practices. But mostly, it is my hope that educators feel confident in their own professional judgment when they make the small and big choices that concern the future teaching and learning in their classrooms as they work to deepen and develop their students' competency in using language and literacy in their personal, social, and academic environments.

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