Through a Class Darkly: Visual Literacy in the Classroom

Deborah L. Begoray

"Viewing and Representing in the Middle Years" was a two-year project to investigate visual literacy in the English language arts classrooms of three teachers. These teachers tried a variety of approaches and were generally optimistic about the benefits of the increased inclusion of visual materials. They did, however, report a number of challenges in using viewing and representing approaches as part of their curriculum. Teachers' previous experiences influenced their implementation of an expanded notion of literacy in English language arts, as did the influence of the university-based researcher conducting this investigation.

L'article porte sur la visualisation et la représentation dans les premières années du secondaire dans les cours d'arts langagiers en anglais. Trois enseignants ont essayé diverses approches. Bien qu'ils voyaient d'un bon œil le fait d'inclure davantage de matériel visuel, ils ont signalé plusieurs difficultés reliées à l'utilisation d'approches de visualisation et de représentation dans leurs programmes. Les expériences antérieures des enseignants, tout comme la présente recherche, ont exercé une influence sur leur façon d'implanter une notion élargie de littératie dans les arts langagiers en anglais.

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Educators implementing new English language arts curricula (Atlantic Provinces Education Foundation, 1998; Governments of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan and Yukon Territory, 1998; International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English, 1996) know that today's youth have to handle a world that contains multiple forms of literacy (Bean, Bean, & Bean, 1999; Berghoff, 1998; New London Group, 1996), many of which are not traditionally studied in classrooms. They observe that students are "increasingly able to comprehend the multiply layered visual and verbal information from television or computer screens" (Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 1997, p. xv). Teachers and curriculum developers, however, have shown some reluctance to embrace visual literacy in the classroom.

The Viewing and Representing in the Middle Years Project, described below, examined the instructional approaches and the reflections of three teachers (one each from grades 6, 7, and 8) in a Canadian middle school as

they explored what it means to include *viewing* and *representing* in their teaching.

Viewing is an active process of attending to and comprehending visual media such as television, advertising images, films, diagrams, symbols, photographs, videos, drama, drawings, sculpture, and paintings. *Representing* enables students to communicate information and ideas through a variety of media. (Governments of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan and Yukon Territory, 1998, p. 3)

My research question for this study was: What is the nature of middle-level teachers' experiences implementing visual literacy (viewing and representing) into their classroom teaching strategies?

NEW DEFINITIONS OF LITERACY

The theoretical conception of literacy is undergoing a metamorphosis. Where once it meant an ability to read and write, often to some arbitrary level (grade 4 perhaps), society now demands both more sophisticated ability in traditional print text (words on the page) and also the skills of other sign systems such as visuals.

In the 1990s, some researchers began to suggest that including other ways of knowing as equal partners with reading and writing would be beneficial for all students, "not so much as talents that some may have and others may not have [but] as potentials by which all humans might mean" (Leland & Harste, 1994, p. 339). Educators looked at other sign systems such as those used in music, art, or film that could be used by students in a variety of subject areas. As Rief (1992) reminded us: "I need to remember to give my students the opportunities to say things in ways they have 'no words for' " (p. 164).

Several theoretical traditions provide partial frameworks to guide investigations into visual literacy education. Both arts education (music, movement, art, drama) and mass-media education (newspapers, television) offer teachers ideas for including visual sign systems to increase ways for students to more richly respond to their worlds (Eisner, 1992). New ideas, however, need time to develop. Changing the traditional reading and writing focus of the language arts classroom will not be accomplished without efforts to develop teachers' store of instructional approaches. Sinatra (1986) reminded us that "[v]isual literacy is the active reconstruction of past visual experience with incoming visual messages to obtain meaning" (p. 5). It will be achieved only by engaging teachers and students in different approaches to learning.

NEW ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULA

New knowledge and risk-taking attitudes such as giving up some measure of control and certitude are necessary for teachers to help learners experience, understand, and create texts such as cartoons, films, photographs, videotapes, web sites, or drum dancing. Materials and approaches provided in curriculum documents and accompanying government-sanctioned workshops set the context for the development of visual literacy in the classroom. Research has indicated, however, that curriculum implementation is the most problematic step of instructional change (see, for example, Cohen, 1995). The introduction of a new curriculum that mandates viewing and representing across western Canada (Governments of Alberta, British Columbia, Northwest Territories, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Yukon Territory, 1998) offered me an opportunity to investigate what actually happens in classrooms and what teachers consider when asked to include viewing and representing in English language arts. The purpose of this study was to institute a long-term project, featuring extended fieldwork, which would serve to describe the expansion of language arts in three classrooms to include a broader view of literacy.

METHOD

The research conducted at Pickford Middle School (pseudonym) was an interpretive ethnography in which I explored the nature of teachers' experiences in including more visual literacy in their teaching. Ethnography, in common with all qualitative research, takes as its credo that "the nature of the social world must be discovered; that this can only be achieved by first-hand observation and participation in 'natural' settings and guided by an exploratory orientation" (Hammersley, 1992, p. 12). However, my presence as a researcher also influenced the practices of this particular school's culture. As in previous studies (Begoray, 1995), I discovered that establishing and maintaining relationships was a crucial part of the investigation.

Participants and Setting

The study focused on a newly constituted middle school (grades 5 through 8) in a new, middle-income suburban area in a mid-size Canadian city. The school division had selected a principal most likely to succeed in overseeing the birth of a new middle school. In turn, she selected a staff

through a special application process to ensure that all the teachers of Pickford Middle School believed in a philosophy of middle-years education as espoused by the National Middle School Association (1995). According to this philosophy, the teachers of Pickford Middle School focused on the needs of the transitional learner, rather than concentrating on subject disciplines that might be evident in a junior-high-school model. A middle-years approach to learning includes the integration of subjects (language arts with social studies, math with science for example). Teachers at Pickford Middle School were teamed in grades 7 and 8. In grades 5 and 6, teachers were responsible for all core subjects. The school also had specialists in art, band, and physical education.

I solicited teacher participants for this research at a school staff meeting and selected a research group of three teachers.

Sam (all teacher names are pseudonyms) was a grade-8, language arts and social studies teacher during the first year of the project. In the second year, his assignment changed to language arts only. Sam's students regularly won poetry contests, and he freely admitted that writing was the primary focus of his classroom. He had a Bachelor of Education degree and 28 years of experience in teaching. He participated in frequent poetry workshops with other teachers, worked on a provincial curriculum development group, and sat on the executive of the provincial English teachers' professional association.

Colleen was a grade-6 teacher in a self-contained classroom where she taught all the core subject areas to one group of students: language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. During the project, she was a first- and second-year teacher. She had had a year of short, temporary contracts prior to beginning at Pickford Middle School. Colleen had a Bachelor of Education degree and a keen interest in the fine arts.

Dennis, a grade-7 teacher of language arts and social studies, who had been teaching for 20 years, had a Ph.D. in Educational Foundations. He maintained an active research agenda during his teaching, and presented papers at conferences. Dennis was particularly interested in using English language arts outcomes to teach social studies content. He frequently served as acting principal. During year two of the project, Dennis was seconded to be the half-time teacher liaison in middle-years education at the university.

Researcher's Role

During the two years of this project, I undertook several roles as researcher. As a participant-observer in the school community, I regarded my research as ethnography, recording the classroom events and teacher thoughts, but

also becoming involved in the life of the school. Because the school was new when I began the project, I had little difficulty gaining access and being accepted as a member of the school community. Because this faculty was searching for an identity, researching their practice quickly became part of what teachers did at Pickford Middle School.

I was, in some ways, just another new face in year one. I began my work as a researcher gathering descriptive data on teachers' practice and concerns in the inclusion of visual literacy. As a professor of language arts methods, I was frequently asked to give advice on implementing the new curriculum. During year two, I met this request by providing books and articles on visual literacy and doing presentations for the staff on research findings. My use of videotaping to record and share lessons and interviews with teachers became a model for the teachers who recorded some of their own lessons in year two. Perhaps inevitably, my presence as a university-based researcher influenced the study.

Data Gathering

I videotaped each teacher doing four lessons of their choice that they believed featured the use of viewing and representing approaches to learning. One lesson was recorded in the fall term and one in the winter term in each of the two years of the project. Teachers kept weekly written journals of their work with viewing and representing. I interviewed them at the end of each term in which issues arose in their lessons or in their journals. I videotaped these interviews. Teachers watched the opening five minutes of their lesson as part of the interview, and then, during their response to questions, often referred to their journals. The teachers had the opportunity to read and modify transcripts of interviews. I also recorded viewing and representing approaches that the teachers used in taped lessons, recorded in journals, or mentioned during interviews. During year two, I interviewed students for their reactions to lessons taught with a viewing and/or representing focus.

Data Analysis

I handled data analysis as an ongoing process during the two years of the project. After conducting interviews, I transcribed them and used transcriptions as the primary source of data. Teachers' journals were also a source of information as were my own observations. I asked informants to view or listen to tapes of their teaching and to comment on instructional events during research meetings that were held once per term. Teacher

participants at these meetings read and revised transcripts; their comments during member checks became part of the data.

I examined and coded transcripts of the interview tapes, journals, and field notes with reference to my research questions. I then reviewed the original data to discover emerging themes and patterns. I refined themes as data collecting and analysis continued in year two (Huberman & Miles, 1994). I also drew comparisons between findings from each year of the study.

To ensure trustworthiness of data, I undertook a prolonged engagement at the research site and with my data, and used member checks to assist with the validation of the data. Nevertheless, it must be noted that I set out on this study believing in the importance of visual literacy. I am also a writer of provincial curriculum documents based on the Western Canadian Protocol (Governments of Alberta, British Columbia, Northwest Territories, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Yukon Territory, 1998) and therefore well entrenched in a point of view on viewing and representing. Thus, my "findings constitute a perspective rather than truth" (Patton, 1990, p. 482).

FINDINGS

During this two-year study, I observed, or teachers reported, more than 70 different viewing and representing approaches. Perhaps not surprisingly, teachers reported that using viewing and representing in lessons seemed to positively influence student learning and their ability to assess that learning. Students' comments reinforced this view. However, teachers all reported a number of challenges in teaching visual literacy, such as coping with student attitudes, lack of time, and their own general ambivalence about implementation. In the following discussion I review each of these areas — approaches, benefits, and challenges. To illustrate my discussion, I have used quotations from the interviews. Comments from Sam, Dennis, and Colleen revealed the complexities of integrating an expanded notion of literacy into the English language arts curriculum.

Viewing and Representing Approaches

I began the Viewing and Representing in the Middle Years Project with the purpose of describing what teachers included in their lessons to help students develop ability in new ways of knowing. Although I initially intended to discuss with teachers the viewing and representing approaches they were already using, the project inevitably raised teachers' awareness and caused them to attempt more approaches during the project period (20 weeks spread over two years): "I think just by becoming involved in

this project it's heightened my awareness of the fact that there are these two extra strands [viewing and representing] to the language arts programming and we need to address them" (Dennis).

Some of the approaches reported during the project are clearly *viewing*, that is, analyzing, appreciating, and criticizing visuals such as a lesson about looking closely at photographs to determine emotional reactions to news events. Other approaches are obviously *representing* in that students were creating visual texts.

The teachers often integrated viewing and representing activities. Just as they used writing to teach reading, or listening to strengthen speaking, they frequently taught viewing and representing together. This tendency to integration was markedly greater in year two where viewing and representing had become the focus of many projects that involved two or more subjects (Begoray, 2000).

Dennis' classroom. Dennis, who frequently integrated language arts with social studies in grade 7, used mainly viewing activities in his classroom in year one of the project. Dennis was particularly interested in news reports and was in fact researching his students' response to the idea of a news cycle (the rise and decline of interest in a news event). His traditional emphasis on print text of a news story began to change with the beginning of my research project. His students began to examine newspaper photographs for extra information. In Dennis' classroom, students read newspaper stories with special attention to the effect of the accompanying picture on the viewer: "to help [students] locate details of their stories or issues . . . visuals were able to communicate particularly the emotional aspects of their stories" (Dennis). For one project, students created collages of the pictures that accompanied two news stories, one on Hurricane Mitch and the other on the founding of Nunavut, and compared the emotional impact (rage and grief, pride and happiness) of the new visual texts.

Techniques Dennis might have used before, such as showing a video clip, became more purposeful as he considered the necessity of teaching visual literacy:

Many of the students said "I would never have had that understanding without seeing the rage of the people and understanding why are they so upset." It's kind of difficult to do that with a textbook or just, even a newspaper article. Really difficult to do that — to see how disasters and major world events affect people on the street. This was a good example of how a video [-taped news report] would do that. (Dennis)

Students in Dennis's class were intensely interested in the reaction of ordinary people to a natural disaster, a response that came alive during

the close viewing of a video clip. This viewing activity also led them to collect words to describe the scene, and to represent it by creating word webs, a combined text using print and visual sign systems.

During year two, Dennis's research interests turned to Socratic seminars and he began to investigate the use of videotape to evaluate student participation. He used his tapes as a record of students' learning activity for use in their self-assessment. Dennis's interest in news events continued with the examination of the visual language of editorial cartoons such as representations of bombs used as bars on a graph to comment on war in the Middle East. This lesson led to a more focused look at many types of graphs: how they are used to represent information, or how they are abused (for example, to make a small change look very large on a line graph by using wide spaces between numbers on one of the two axes).

Colleen's classroom. Colleen was a first- and second-year teacher during the project. She emphasized representing activities in her approach to visual literacy. Before she joined this study, she had filled her room with pictures, posters, models, and costumes. Much of it was student work, some was commercial, and some of it was created by Colleen. Her students did elaborate art and drama projects as part of their day-to-day lessons. Colleen was a very enthusiastic research participant in both years. During year one, she was eager to gather more ideas and frequently asked me for suggestions, reactions to her lessons, or copies of articles and books on visual literacy. She especially loved drawing, and began immediately to demonstrate its use during taped lessons when I introduced the project. She was very pleased with her grade-6 students' responses to representing:

After [reading] about the first 50 pages [of a novel], I noticed many students looking around the room, playing in their desks, and even sleeping! Many students were lost. . . . I began the novel all over. This time I asked them to picture what was happening in their heads, to make a movie and picture the scenes. . . . The students sketched away as I read. . . . They didn't want me to stop reading. (Colleen)

Such early forays into representing led quickly to a series of lessons on cartooning that included students looking carefully at models, creating an original cartoon character, or summarizing a story as a cartoon strip.

By year two, Colleen was more self-confident. She sought out colleagues such as Sam to learn more about book illustration. She teamed with the physical education teacher to teach her students to create games. For example, the students used their new knowledge in small groups to write rules and demonstrate their understanding of the movement of Loyalists from the United States to Canada using a variety of gym equipment (bean bags, field markers, hoops). During the game, Colleen's students reported

positive affective and aesthetic responses to information and higher-order thinking skills (especially synthesis/creativity). One student commented, "I think that doing a game is better [than copying notes or reading], because you have to make it up, so you obviously have to know more things about this topic to be able to make up a game." Another added, "This way [by creating a game] we can actually like get involved in what other people think about how the Loyalists and Patriots traveled."

Sam's classroom. Sam was an eager participant in year one of the research study. Over the two years of the project, his classroom featured a balance of viewing and representing approaches. I had heard about Sam's work before we met because of his students' remarkable performance in poetry, winning provincial writing contests year after year. We eventually met during a curriculum-writing project and later served together on a provincial association of English teachers. Taking the ideas of Atwell (1998) to heart, Sam had implemented writing and reading workshops fully in his classroom. He visited Atwell's classroom in New York and returned full of new ideas for helping his students to grow as writers.

During that first year, I watched small groups of his grade-8 students create elaborate visuals on large sheets of rectangular paper. Each group had read and written about a different novel. They created plot lines around the four sides of the sheet by creating a series of pictures. They filled the middle of the page with pictures and words from magazines to illustrate the novel's themes. Sam and a student teacher worked in turn with each group on planning and drafting, revising ideas, evaluating, selecting, and placing images.

During year two, Sam embarked on a series of reading and writing lessons on imagery and also decided to try to involve all the grade-8 students at Pickford Middle School in a career inquiry project. He had saved videotapes created by previous classes when he had conducted the inquiry as an English language arts project and used these as exemplars. The production values of the model videos were very high — costumes, editing, quick cuts, and fades — capturing his students' attention and demonstrating the quality he was asking for in their own projects.

Teachers' Experiences with Viewing and Representing

The number of viewing and representing approaches reported in all classrooms shows that teachers had many ideas for addressing visual literacy. Teachers were eager to try a wide variety of activities during the project and, indeed, there was almost no overlap between approaches reported or observed in year one and those in year two. There seems little

doubt that the project and the regular presence of a university researcher interested in visual literacy had an impact on the numbers of approaches tried by teachers.

Viewing activities in classrooms most often featured analysis (looking at details). Appreciation (recognizing quality and/or significance) and criticism (evaluation), although specifically called for in language arts curriculum documents, rarely occurred. Students occasionally evaluated their own work or the work of classmates. For example, the only time Dennis asked them to critique the work of a professional was when he asked them:

What goes on in photographers' minds when they go to set up a shot? They have to decide, I would imagine, ahead of time, what their focus is. Is it on the emotional side of the story or is it to communicate a wider message? (Dennis)

Benefits of Viewing and Representing

Viewing and representing approaches stimulate learning. "I can listen to him for a while, but then I'm sort of doodling and stuff, because it just doesn't keep my attention" (grade-8 student commenting on a lecture approach). Both teachers and students at Pickford Middle School reported more learner attention during lessons that featured viewing and representing, often resulting in greater immediate understanding. Colleen's use of the Loyalist game suited these young adolescent learners well, an approach that invited a greater variety of learners to participate in classroom learning. Colleen realized that her students had diverse talents: "If they are able to act out the concept 'point of view' this would demonstrate they understand. Some students may not be able to express this [concept] in their writing so it gives them an opportunity to express in a different form." Because middle-years students are still moving from concrete to abstract thinking, their use of visual representations seemed to enhance their learning.

Representations offer clear evidence of learning to aid assessment. Visual products concretely illustrate to both teachers and learners whether students have learned concepts. Instances of video recording by teachers and students as part of teaching and learning projects were reported much more widely during year two. The teachers in the project began to make much more extensive use of videotape in their own classrooms to archive moments for further analysis. Colleen used her tapes to analyze her teaching performance in much the same way as she had been recorded as a student teacher. All three teachers used videotaping to record student

work for sharing with future classes. Dennis used videotape to record student achievements to assess their level of performance during Socratic seminars and as an instructional aid:

It is clear to me that the use of videotape will not only allow me to evaluate each student more accurately because I'll be able to re-visit the seminar a number of times, but it will also allow me to use each seminar as a "teaching tool" for the next [seminar]. (Dennis)

However, he wondered about students using videotape for their own self-assessment:

My only reservation relates to the weaker students. Seeing themselves perform ineffectively can't be great for their self-esteem. However, I think seeing the contrast between their performance and the performance of stronger students should make it easier for these students to see where, specifically, they need to improve. (Dennis)

Challenges in Implementing Visual Literacy

This study's findings indicate continuing challenges for those seeking to encourage and implement viewing and representing in the English language arts.

Viewing and representing are often undervalued or misunderstood. Middle-years students sometimes see the use of visuals during class time as an opportunity to escape from work. "There's a few of them, I know that they're not focusing on the point of view of the story. They're just so excited about the play that they're overlooking what the main lesson was about" (Colleen).

Alternatively, students can become overly focused on visual representations as only artistic products that must look nice rather than as ways to investigate or represent learning. However, during the project teachers began to convince students that, for example, models and posters were not just for the artistically gifted: "They're really beginning to see how what they represent has to go in depth in terms of representing their learning, not just be pretty" (Sam).

Viewing and representing require more time to prepare and deliver. As with any new approach, the extensive integration of visuals requires teachers to do more investigation and experimentation. Whether it is simply the newness of these ideas, which is a passing difficulty, or whether viewing and representing will always be more time-consuming remains a question. The crucial point for teachers was the cost-benefit analysis: "I have to be more strategic in planning to include viewing and representing,

unlike reading and writing where I know from experience what activity would work best in a given situation" (Sam).

Teachers' prior experience influenced their use of viewing and representing in the classroom (which was minimal, especially during year one). Comparing the reactions of Colleen and Sam to the idea of art as a way to respond to literature indicates that prior experience and attitudes vary widely. Colleen reported during an interview:

I love drawing. I do a lot of watercolour painting. I've done tons of sketching charcoal and pastel. . . . I don't see it as something you have to learn. It's something that we already know and it's just drawing it out of a person. (Colleen)

Sam admitted, "It's not my preferred mode. I can't draw a stickman." Dennis realized that today's middle-years students are growing up in a world different than that of he and his colleagues: "Overall, these kids are light years ahead of where we were at that age. They realize that there ARE other ways of communicating ideas besides through reading and writing." Teachers' attitudes influenced the willingness to be persuaded to implement viewing and representing.

My presence for two years as a researcher interested in visual literacy who used visual research techniques in my own research encouraged viewing and representing approaches at Pickford Middle School. Building on a background of research team relationships — sharing, trying, and discussing ideas — year two saw evidence of growth in the use of visual literacy from year one.

Year two, for example, marked the first three-teacher subject integration project (initiated by Sam), in which teachers asked students to investigate careers and represent their learning in a number of creative ways. During year two, Colleen used the expertise of others to help her to teach visual literacy (for example Sam demonstrated a lesson on examining picture book illustrations) but also became an equal partner in a social studies, language arts, and physical education project (the Loyalist game). Dennis developed and taught a series of writing lessons using a slide show and band performance on Remembrance Day that the art and music teachers had developed.

The teachers became more critical of approaches to teaching visual literacy. Dennis acknowledged that viewing videotapes helped both him and his students to assess their work; he later suggested that the use of such evidence must be carefully considered because it can prove threatening to those recorded:

The dynamics of the seminar were generally dominated by a small number of verbal boys. . . . Although initially I saw the use of video as an effective teaching tool, I wonder now if it might be discouraging rather than encouraging these girls . . . . is the use of video accentuating the power differences that already exist in the classroom? (Dennis)

He gave students more choice in their own representing work and they discovered that visuals can be more difficult to create than might be anticipated. Students discovered, for example, the challenge of producing videotapes and the ease of making overhead transparencies (which might be more appropriate for some representations of knowledge).

In year two, Colleen discovered that she could be both creative and critical of viewing and representing, whereas in year one she was mostly anxious to gather ideas that she could use directly in her own classroom. Sam, who began the project enthusiastically in year one as one who integrated viewing and representing into language arts and social studies, became much more ambivalent in year two. He reported that his teaching assignment, which had changed to language arts alone, did not encourage him to use viewing and representing (despite its presence in language arts curriculum documents). Ironically, observations of his teaching showed that he emphasized visualization as a way to improve student reading comprehension and writing ability. Sam did not see these approaches as viewing and representing until his interview in the middle of year two:

[Visualization techniques] really helped my weaker readers learn to conceptualize, learn to see pictures in their mind as they read. I never thought of it as a viewing and representing sort of thing. Adept readers do that naturally, and they don't even realize that those pictures happen in their heads when they read, but weaker readers tend not to have anything happening — they feel the meaning is all embedded in the text. (Sam)

By the end of year two, Sam was leading a multi-disciplinary project across grade 8 which featured viewing and representing activities. He reported that he had a picture of himself as a teacher of visual literacy "being dragged along, but with a big grin on my face."

DISCUSSION

Current shifts to a more postmodern literacy that includes print, oral and visual texts, and multiple perspectives contribute to a climate favourable for reconsidering traditional approaches and challenging the status quo in many language arts classrooms.

Bridging the gap between new ideas and practical implementation is

the next step. Eisner (1994), a long-time advocate for the diversification of meaning-making opportunities in the classroom, comments that "[r]econceptualization, although it is a necessary condition, is not enough" (p. 89) — we need to put those ideas into operation. Not only do students need opportunities to view and represent, but teachers need motivation to make these changes to include this new sign system in their teaching. They also need to have opportunities to build their own visual literacy supported, when possible, by other professionals. When teachers' traditional approaches to language arts teaching are challenged, as Sam's ideas were, teachers need to find ways to build on their prior knowledge of more established approaches to literacy. Also, Sam may have felt pressure from my presence to adopt strategies that made him uncomfortable and abandon those in which his expertise was acknowledged. University-based researchers must always be aware of power and control issues in their investigations.

The inclusion of visual literacy in the language arts classroom can be a democratic enterprise. Viewing and representing assist those students who struggle to say what they mean using linguistic sign systems. All learners, however, no matter what their propensities, need to develop their potential to represent their understanding of ideas in a variety of ways. Students can learn some concepts better through one sign system than another. In offering students more opportunities to participate in a variety of communicative arts, teachers offer them as well chances to say more.

Although I had the benefit of long-term involvement with a staff, I investigated visual literacy only within a single school, one that has a relatively homogenous student population. Some of these students, however, proved to be particularly eloquent about their support for visual literacy:

I find it — it like grabs people's attention. If I look around the class when our teacher's just standing up there talking about a whole lesson, a lot of people are just like — their heads are down on their desk or they have wandering eyes. But when I watched during the visual representing we did, a lot of people were looking and really paying attention to what was happening. (grade-8 student)

Other researchers could repeat this study at schools with a broader multicultural and economic background and with different age groups. Moreover, the teachers in this study were few in number and were volunteers drawn from a handpicked staff. More investigations with more teachers and students need to be completed to further understanding about how to implement visual literacy in the classroom.

Implications for Professional Development

Teacher-education and curriculum-support documents offer in-service and pre-service teachers assistance with methods, such as suggestions for viewing and representing, so that they might continue to improve their teaching. The presence of on-site advice and demonstrations (such as what I provided at Pickford) would also be helpful in building the necessary knowledge and skills. As a researcher, I found that teachers' ambivalent attitudes and lack of experience with visual sign systems was a challenge as was my influence on their school culture.

Sam, for example, had previously experienced tremendous success in his language-arts program with the use of Atwell's (1998) theory of teaching reading and writing. Despite volunteering for the viewing and representing project and personal acquaintance with me, the new ideas and, perhaps, my presence challenged his professional self-image. Of great interest was Sam's persistence in the face of less than salutary experiences with visual approaches in his past and his ambivalence, which may have resulted from these experiences. Sam was, nevertheless, an active teacher of visual literacy. His use of guided imagery during reading workshops pointed to the possibility that viewing and representing may best be connected to more traditional areas of expertise for experienced teachers to adopt their use. On the other hand, Colleen had more experience with the arts. Her challenge was to discover ways to introduce her knowledge to her students in language-arts contexts. She was a recent education graduate who was used to the presence of a university professor in her classroom. Dennis adopted a researcher's attitude to his teaching. His approach was to introduce new ideas and then reflect systematically on his students' responses to them. With his own doctorate in hand, he may have been the most secure in his own expertise when I visited his class. All three teachers, nevertheless, discovered ways to integrate visual literacy into their language arts curriculum.

As noted above, the teachers' use of viewing activities during this project tended to stress analysis and rarely introduced appreciation or criticism of professional work. In the same way educators teach students to discuss the significance and quality of literary works, they might also encourage a critical stance towards visual representations. Arts specialists can certainly begin to help their colleagues in the regular classroom to undertake this challenge. Film criticism and the assessment of mass media can also be used in the classroom. The alternative is to raise this generation of students to believe that if a film, cartoon, or web site, for example, has been made

public it must be good and truthful — or, on the other hand to imply that all visuals are manipulative and evil. Just as it is accepted that not everything in print can be believed and that opinions vary in evaluation of novels, editorials, and technical manuals, so there are discussions regarding quality surrounding all manner of visual representations.

FINAL WORDS

The viewing and representing project at Pickford Middle School was clearly only a beginning in understanding the teaching of visual literacy — we see through the class "darkly," making only tentative conclusions. Visual literacy, it seems, will only become established in language arts classrooms once both teachers and students have opportunities to adopt new strategies and attitudes. Only by building a store of background experiences can expanded theoretical notions of literacy become classroom realities. Challenges in researcher-participant relationships, nevertheless, seem likely to continue. The establishment of long-term research projects such as "Viewing and Representing in the Middle Years" can make possible the development of collaborative partnerships to effect significant gains in understanding for both teachers and university-based researchers on new approaches to English language arts.

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