“I’m a writer. But I’m an artist, too. Look at my artist’s notebook”: Developing Voice through Art and Language

I’m a writer. But I’m an artist, too. Look at my artist’s notebook.

In this declaration, we learn that Rebecca is developing a sense of self beyond the given (i.e., ‘I am a girl, I am a second grader, I am someone’s daughter’) and that keeping an *artist’s* notebook as compared to just an ordinary notebook plays a role in her sense of self as *writer*. That children find support for writing in drawing is not surprising (Dyson, 1986; Ernst, 1994; Oshanksy, 2008); that children like Rebecca discover a sense of self in their writing and drawing pursuits is, however, noteworthy. Important, because in experimenting with ways of meaning on the page, children like Rebecca can discover forms (e.g., dot, line, shape, value, texture, color, space, movement) that make sense to them and use those forms to make sense of their ideas in unique ways.

When schools privilege language over other ways of knowing, like art, a verbocentric ideology prevails (Arnheim, 1974; Eco, 1976), the belief that language should be privileged over other ways of knowing and verbocentrism, the practice of privileging language. Historically, K-12 schools have positioned language as the sole channel for learning, privileging linguistic abilities over all others. From a more contemporary perspective, this climate can still be seen today through a steady diet of worksheets and workbook activities despite research that shows what can happen when we redefine school literacy to include the arts (Cown & Albers, 2006). What that means for children is that the pencil (or keyboard) has been privileged over the paintbrush. By so doing, verbocentrism has limited not only how children respond to the world, but also limited the world’s understanding of ways of knowing, how those ways are used to communicate, and why they have import. The gap between the current literacy landscape and US policies on literacy, whether through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), is perhaps wider than ever, the tension no more easily felt than in classrooms. As such, there is little support for K-12 teachers “to stretch the literacy curriculum beyond words” (M. Siegel, personal communication, October 18, 2013).

In my dissertation study, I sought to understand “What happens when art and language are ways through which children construct meaning?” I closely followed three children as they represented diverse relationships among themselves, art, and language though they represented all the ways of responding in the classroom. For the purpose of this article, I focus on one of those children, Rebecca, a writer who discovers visual art as a way of knowing, and, through drawing, develops a greater appreciation for her love of writing.

Art and Language: Ways of Knowing

Relevant research on ways of knowing (Berghoff et al., 2000; Leland & Harste, 1994; Short et al, 1996; Siegel, 2006) provide a lens for this study. All ways of knowing are cultural and personal channels through which meaning is constructed and shared. A multimodal approach to learning encourages children to contemplate meaning construction through more than one way - through drama, music, art, mathematics, and language. A flexible perspective on literacy learning is one that recognizes that each communication system, like art and language, has its own meaning potential to communicate particular ideas (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988). As Eisner (2002) maintained, not all knowledge can be reduced to what can be said. The

expression of some ideas lends itself better to modes of knowing beyond the limits of language. But it is only through authentic experiences with multiple sign or communication systems can we come to know how a sign system works and how to express particular ideas through meaningful use of signs (Harste et al., 1988).

Though research on multiple ways of knowing confirms that children naturally make and share meaning through more than one mode, the research is not new. Researchers (Dyson, 1986; Harste et al., 1984; Rowe, 1986, 1994; Siegel, 1984; Whitin, 1993) have found that children's encounters with literacy are, indeed, multimodal. In the early 1980s, Harste et al. (1984) examined the complex processes of learning to read and write among children ages three to six years old. They studied young children's literacy learning from a semiotic perspective in order to fully understand children's ways of constructing meaning. What these researchers discovered was that young children took on new perspectives in their learning when they explored expressions of language, like writing, in concert with communication systems, like art. A multimodal approach to learning allows children to access and build on their knowing. It is not hard to see that an emphasis on conventional representation, in art or language, communicates to learners that there is a right and wrong way of knowing.

Following Harste (1984), Dyson (1986) noted that children naturally draw and sketch as a way to search and organize ideas for writing. She was interested in examining the drawing/writing relationship, because many regard it as "a deceptively simple one" (p. 381). Other researchers (Rowe, 1986, 1994; Siegel, 1984) have examined the simultaneous nature of literacy learning through multiple ways of knowing, as well as the social and psychological strategies children employ as they produce their own texts from self-selected literacy activities. They have concluded that children's literacy learning develops and deepens by: talking with peers and having access to peer demonstrations; making connections between personal and classroom experiences; and directing their own learning by paying attention to their own inquiry. With a resurgence of interest in this field, other researchers (Olshansky, 2006, 2008; Ray, 2010) agree that this kind of knowledge can equip learners to develop as sign-makers to explore a more expansive range of their communication potential (Harste et al., 1984). Olshansky, for example, maintains that creating visual images can drive narrative writing. As well, reading visual texts critically, argues Ray, is a way to enhance meaning in writing.

A second lens in this study acknowledges a model of learning where learning is social (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978), learning is functional (Halliday, 1975), and learning is transactional (Rosenblatt, 1978). Making meaning within a social, functional, and transactional perspective of learning supports the participatory and creative spirit of learners. In this model of learning, it is transformative, where voice (e.g., personal and creative imprints of oneself influence how one sees him/herself as learner) is possible, where the relationship between taking action and seeing the results of those actions (Johnston, 2004) is clear.

Context of the study. I have worked with second grade teacher Regi Matheny for four years. When we first met, she was a first year teacher and I was a candidate for the doctorate in search of a classroom teacher who was interested in collaborating with me in a yearlong qualitative research study on multimodal perspectives in literacy. Prior to the study, I had observed Regi's curricular moves once a week for eight months. At that time, her writing instruction, while process orientated, was not multimodal in nature. Children illustrated their stories, but drawing was not an integral part of the writing process. Still, she artfully demonstrated education as inquiry. I knew that I wanted to collaborate with Regi, because I saw in her an openness to expand her perspectives on literacy learning. To better

understand what literacy as multimodal looks like in a classroom, she was eager to tour two elementary schools with me that support artistic engagement in literacy. During the study, we read professional texts and discussed them together, reflecting on our invitations to learn and thinking critically about what our demonstrations communicated to children about what we valued as modes of communication.

Methods. There were 15 children in Regi's classroom, each of whom were invited to participate in the study, with all agreeing to participate. Three times a week during the regularly scheduled school day, children responded to a variety of class engagements (e.g., reading aloud, guest speaker, science lesson) through writing and drawing in their response journals (lined and unlined), sharing their work in four different contexts. In *group shares*, children shared their responses with their peers and asked each other questions and provided feedback; in *table shares*, children talked with each other during the response process in table clusters of four to five tables; in *guided shares*, children talked about their responses with Regi and me and we asked them questions about their responses; and in *independent shares*, children spoke privately about their work into a tape recorder in a quiet part of the classroom. These four contexts varied from week to week. Often, students chose which context they wanted on Mondays and Wednesdays. For example, "Can we do a guided share today because I have something to tell you." Fridays were ideally suited for group shares since students did not have guided reading, which meant we had more time for engaging group dialog about our responses.

Regi and I agreed that the word *response* was better suited for our study, given that it emphasizes neither writing nor drawing. Using a variety of writing/drawing media (e.g., marker, crayon, pencil, color pencil, pen, pastel, and paint), children decided whether to respond to engagements visually, verbally, or sometimes with both pictures and words.

Each context was audio taped, transcribed, coded, and analyzed, using the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding and analysis of data was done independently and collaboratively with Regi, allowing for cross-validation of findings. These contexts, including photographs of children working, transcribed interview data, and my field notes, collectively provided a rich lens for understanding children's ways with art and language in their response journals.

In the following section, I share selected examples from the data that show Rebecca's developing voice from four different contexts.

Rebecca's Developing Voice

I define voice the same way as Graves (1994) does. It is "an imprint of ourselves" (p. 81). An imprint can be personal, creative, and affective. Children can make their imprint known by how they describe themselves as meaning makers (e.g., "I'm a artist you know") and by a particular way of developing an idea through pictures and/or words (e.g., color choice, word choice). Voice, then, has two characteristics: stance and craft.

Stance refers to the stories children told themselves. Some examples include: "I'm bieracshel," "I'm a reader." "I'm a writer." "I'm a poet." "Did you konw that I'm intereste'd in the raineforset?" I'm going to be a scintist," "I'm going to be a praise dancer." "Someday I'll be an artist. I am relley good." Their comments helped me to understand how they were growing in their ability to make meaning through art and language. According to Gee (1996), children who are able to identify themselves in such ways position themselves to "develop expertise that would motivate them to practice it" (p. 86). In this study, that meant some children drew when they identified themselves as artists, while some children wrote when they identified themselves

as writers. Voice, then, influenced the development of self. How learners see themselves is "person building" (Stewart, 1994, p. xvi). Martin (1998) maintained, "The essential aspect of the development of voice is. . . the way in which a child learns to communicate to others his/her understanding of him/herself" (p. 52).

In this study, stance is a question of being versus acting a role. Children did not play the part of artist and writer; they were artists and writers by thinking through ideas in the way professionals do. They shared how they saw themselves in a variety of contexts outside of the four different shares, from independent reading, to science, to responding in their journals and writer's notebooks. Taking a stance as artist, for example, helped children to think like artists. This included using content vocabulary, such as *texture*, *perspective*, *flick*, and *style*. Many of Rebecca's peers used similar words when responding through drawing. Using art elements and principles of design, such as dot, line, shape, value, texture, color, space, and movement, to describe their responses allowed children to be specific about their intentions to construct meaning. As well, stance as artist included gesturing. This meant children who saw themselves as artists *acted* like artists. With hand on hip and finger to mouth, Rebecca, reviewing one of her journal responses, explained to me that she had seen guest artist Susan Lenz doing it in our class. "That's what artists do, Miss Rebecca and she [Lenz] would know!" Though Lenz did not hear Rebecca's remark, there is little doubt Lenz would have agreed on the importance of stance while critiquing one's work.

Similarly, taking a stance as writer helped children to think like writers. As part of this stance, children referred to writers discussed in class or authors from the classroom library. For example, Rebecca used words like "thou" and "thy," highlighting herself as writer, but also demonstrating that the various poems by Shakespeare that Regi had shared with the class were of value to at least one student. When some of her peers questioned the meaning of these words or why she was using them, Rebecca explained, "Because Shakespeare uses them and so do I." Children developed a sense of self as writer by attending to unique and different words in stories and poems. They paid attention to language, because they believed that saying that one is a writer means acting like a writer. As Rebecca explained, "I like the way that sounds, representia. I made it up, but I can do that 'cause writers make up words all the time." Indeed, writers play with language and meaning.

When peers made their stances as artists or writers known within the company of fellow inquirers, their artistic and linguistic demonstrations supported their peers to develop their own stance. Many developed a sense of self as artist or writer after carefully observing artist/writer friends respond in class. Children supporting each other in this way speak to the power of demonstration. Demonstrations are so important to the learning process, as they offer learners opportunities to nurture and develop a sense of self that is unique to them.

Children also developed voice through *craft*. Craft is how children used color or words, details, description, and/or organization in their drawing and/or writing in unique ways. Attending to principles of design and art elements, such as dot, line, shape, value, texture, color, space, and movement, afford children ways of fully expressing their ideas (Leigh, 2012) and afforded Regi's children ways of accessing their voice as meaning makers and gave Regi and me access to their unique ways of constructing meaning in art and language. In the following sections, I examine voice and craft from selected examples of Rebecca's work.

Developing voice in table share. In response to a video on the life of Ruby Bridges, the true story about an African American girl who attends an all-white elementary school in 1960s segregated America, Rebecca demonstrated voice in her descriptive use of color. (See Figure 1).

In a table share, Rebecca's peers talked and negotiated ideas while they wrote and drew in response to the video: Alex focused on capturing Ruby's hair; Gabby drew a picture of Ruby and wrote a few sentences about her; and Ronthea and Rebecca both drew a school they imagined Ruby had attended. Ronthea was the first at this table share to make a comparison, "I'm gonna make the windows dark as. . . her eyes." With some time to reflect on Ronthea's comment, Rebecca thought of her own comparison: "I'm gonna say the windows are as dark as Ruby." Unsure of what Rebecca meant by "dark as," I invited her to share her thinking with me.

Figure 1. *Rebecca's response to an All White School*

In an interview, Rebecca explained that the darkness referred to "how sad Ruby was." When I asked her if she noticed Ruby's sadness in the video, she explained that the conversation during table share is what helped her "kinda get what Ruby went through." Talk at the table helped her digest ideas and images. "I like table share because we can think about what we want to say. It helps me figure out what I want to say and like, how I want to say it. I get ideas about how to use tools, too." She further explained that by using a lighter color for the doors, she was able to convey what I interpreted as *hope*. She confirmed my interpretation in her comment, "It means one day all children can go to Ruby's school." She compared light colored doors to *one day*. Rebecca's comparison between the darkened windows and Ruby's life is an example of craft. The shaded windows show Rebecca thinking broadly about tool use and how to convey Ruby's sadness through color. Using oil pastel, she made a powerful comparison. An example of voiceless color is using black pastel for the windows, because it is the only pastel left in the box. Rebecca's decision to use black pastel is meaningful. Through color, she is able to evoke two feelings at once, helplessness and hopefulness, two very complex issues to tackle in writing. The table share with its emphasis on process supports Rebecca's voice in thinking broadly about her understanding of Ruby's plight and how she can use what she knows about writing/drawing media to best express her knowing.

Developing voice in group share. The group share is an opportunity for students to share not only their response with their peers, but to talk about and celebrate ways of using art and language to communicate their ideas. While some responses may be finished for the group share, completeness is not a criterion for participation. During a group share discussion on students' responses to the Ruby Bridges video, Rebecca demonstrated voice in her explanation for using pastel to show Ruby's plight. "I chose pastel because pastel makes me feel," she said, adding, "like when I want to get inside a character's head I can do that with pastel." Still unsure

of what this means, Jacob asked, “Whaddya mean?” Rebecca thought for a moment and then explained further, “The way it looks on paper. I don’t know, I guess just the way pastel colors look. I think about them more and what the colors mean.” Rebecca answered other questions from her peers about her response, such as why she selected landscape format “because I needed more space. I wanted to draw the school wide,” but many questions came back to her decision to use pastel.

Kamryn asked: “Does using pastel help you with writing? I mean, are you going to add a story?” to which Rebecca replied, “Yeah, I want to write inside the school, maybe something I think Ruby is thinking about” and drew her finger all around the school demonstrating plans to try concrete poetry writing. The classroom teacher, Miss Matheny, joined the conversation by asking Rebecca to share with her peers how pastel helps her think about words. “I think pastel makes you think because the colors are so rich and the texture is so creamy,” she explained, directing everyone’s attention to the blackened windows on her page. “Look, if you use a lot of it,” she said demonstrating with a pastel on her page, “you can get lost in it, like not lost I don’t know what I’m doing but my mind just gets full of ideas of what I can write. I can write about what happened to Ruby because I can feel my thoughts in the black pastel.” The group share with its emphasis on student as meaning maker/expert learner is a place for students to develop voice through their own demonstrations and explanations of visual and verbal ideas. In planning to write Ruby’s voice, Rebecca participates in the development of her own. The group share supports Rebecca’s voice by providing a nurturing context in which she can share her thinking about craft with others.

Developing voice in independent share. In an independent share Rebecca’s voice continues to emerge, this time through stance as artist:

> Helloooo, this is Rebecca and this is a writing and drawing response. Well, I’m calling it *about me* actually, cause it’s about me! Um, you’re probably wondering why I call it a drawing response because there’s hardly any drawing! Well, there’s silly drawing on the bottom but the real drawing is in the marker. I love my words! I never use marker! I think that’s all I really want to share. If you want me to share some more you can ask me some questions tomorrow, okay? Oh yeah! I almost forgot, I feel like an artist today! I used marker in my response and I like the way it turned out. I picked red because it means love and I think this is a serious response. Okay, bye!

In the independent share with its emphasis on privacy, Rebecca found a safe, less intimidating space to share her growing sense of self as artist. In this example, Rebecca’s comment, “I feel like an artist today!” helped Regi and me understand her voice from the story she was telling herself. For Rebecca, being an artist meant trying new things, “I never use marker!” Being an artist also meant reflecting on her decisions, “I like the way it turned out.” Describing herself as an artist also communicated that being an artist means being intentional with visual content decisions, “I picked red because it means love.”

In being descriptive, she helped me access her voice as artist. For example, a *serious* response denotes a range of red marker and shows Rebecca thinking like an artist, thinking about how emotion can be expressed through color. By naming red “serious,” she offered a window on her construction of voice as artist and nudged me to think about what a serious red looks like. Because feeling like an artist was new for Rebecca, the independent share provided the necessary space for her to tentatively consider herself an artist, a feeling sometimes too personal, private,

and intimate to make public, yet too good to not mention on some level. The independent share provided that level (of comfort) for her. It also provided a physical place in which she could discover within herself a pathway to literacy through art by sharing her thinking honestly and reflectively without the interjection of others.

The independent share proved supportive in helping Rebecca deepen her voice as writer when she read "Beast," a poem about her cat:

Beast
You are a furry little
Beast for thou to die upon
My feet I dare cry my tears
On you for I will berry the[e]
And sob upon your grave
Nor never forget when you
Lay in deep sleep how never
Awake again I lay restless
In wonder?

Poem 1. Rebecca's poem Beast.

In the independent share, Rebecca emphasized how she was using words "differently" in her writing, as "something new," and how her love of pastel helped her to think about her feelings for her cat. She also talked about drawing her cat first to "find my feelings before writing." "I don't want to share this yet with the group," she whispered on tape, "I just want to tell you what I came up with. I think I used some really good words!"

In "Beast," Rebecca's voice is magnified through her descriptive use of language. The repetition of "I" in this piece through the words "I dare cry," "I will berry the[e]," and "I lay restless," organizes the writing in a way that pulls the reader closer to what the writer is feeling. The words allowed Rebecca to leave an imprint of herself in her writing. Inspired by Shakespeare, Rebecca often tinkered with old English in her writing. Her ideas about the furry beast quickly move into a complex issue—death--and then she slows the reader down with her descriptive words like *sob* and *deep sleep*, leaving the reader with a question, "I lay restless in wonder?" The independent share was a place for Rebecca to talk about taking risks with new words and how drawing helped her to access her emotions; it was a place for Rebecca to grow her voice as a writer.

Developing voice in guided share. In a guided share, Rebecca talked with me about her poem "Beast":

Rebecca: This is about one of my cats.
RL: Did one of your cats die?
Rebecca: No, this is if he died.
RL: Oh, I see, so you were imagining what that would feel like?
Rebecca: Yes.
RL: How did it feel? Or how does it feel, writing this piece?
Rebecca: Good. I really like it.
RL: What do you like about it?
Rebecca: Um, the way it sounds. Did you know this is a sonnet?

RL: I didn't know that, but I'm glad you shared that because that tells me how to read it. Have you written sonnets before?
Rebecca: No, we learned it in guided reading. Miss Matheny showed us
RL: I think your words "thou" and "the" work well here. Have you seen them before?
Rebecca: Well, I get inspiration from Magic Tree House books and William Shakespeare.
RL: I think that's wonderful, it helps to know who inspires us doesn't it.
Rebecca: Yeah, 'cause you can like get ideas from them.
RL: Absolutely.
Rebecca: In Magic Tree House books, they go back in time a lot and sometimes they do plays and stuff. That's where I get ideas for words.

Through guided reading, Rebecca had access to demonstrations of voice and meaning. Her comment, "You can like get ideas from them," suggested she was developing her voice through other writers, like Shakespeare. The guided share with its emphasis on what the student wants to discuss about a response allowed us to have a meaningful conversation. Through the guided share, I was able to understand how she was discovering her own voice, her own style of writing through Shakespeare and Magic Tree House books. Because the conversations in this share are often guided by the students themselves, Rebecca felt comfortable to ask me questions, such as knowing about sonnets. In so doing, her question let me know that she is aware of different genres of writing.

From the guided share, Rebecca helped me to understand how the poem is metamorphic (Wooldridge, 1996) where she puts herself in her poem. Rebecca *is* restless in wonder. She *is* mother cat, lying awake, preparing herself for her cat's inevitable death. The guided share is also a context in which she was able to discuss more fully a drawing of her cat that she did in preparation of writing the poem. "I never used to do that," she explained, "I used to just write, but I think my pictures help me with details. I kinda go back and look, like back and forth and make changes." Rebecca described a revision process that she applied to her drawing as a way to visualize details about her cat that she could use for her writing. The picture played a role in this metamorphic process through which her writing elicited images of sorrow, resignation, and friendship. Through this evocation in her writing the reader is able to participate vicariously in this preparation of loss (Eisner, 1985).

Lessons Worth Considering

What lessons might be drawn from Rebecca, a young writer who deepens her joy for writing through drawing? And from Regi, a classroom teacher who offers children more than one way of expressing themselves?

First, we know from this study that access to art as a complementary sign system to language allowed Rebecca to broaden her understanding of what it means to be a writer. In Regi's class, Rebecca had opportunities to discover the unique meaning potential of art and was therefore not relegated to create and express meaning verbally. Given Rebecca's interest in writing, she may not have minded expressing herself exclusively through language throughout second grade, though one must not forget Rebecca's limited view of writing at the beginning of the year. When students limit themselves to writing only what they know how to write conventionally, at what point do they lose interest in writing altogether? And at what point do we as teachers of writing tire of reading short, safe stories? Access to art casts a wide net for Rebecca, to maintain not only her interest in writing but also expand her understanding of language as a flexible, communicative tool.

Second, experiencing another way of expressing knowing positioned Rebecca to make choices in how to respond to a picture book story, a video, a guest speaker, etc. This kind of decision-making demonstrated her understanding of how to use color and line, nouns and verbs to communicate particular ideas through which she was able to develop voice. Therein lies a hope and challenge for teachers: to see how offering choice in response can affect how children see themselves as meaning makers and how resisting verbocentric curricula, perhaps in schools with strongholds to traditional views of literacy learning, is necessary in seeing children as beings capable of making sophisticated, highly complex decisions in their writing and drawing pursuits.

Lastly, Regi's openness to ways of knowing was an important contributing factor to Rebecca's growth in writing and sense of self as writer and artist. Without her support, one wonders if Rebecca would have felt comfortable to write poems like "Beast." Regi remained open to her assumptions about art and its curricular potential, moving beyond the limiting barriers of traditional views of literacy. In being open, she was able to fully participate in the literacy development of her students. In being open to multiple contexts in which students could respond, her students were able to fully participate in discovering their voices as artists and writers.

Not long ago, researchers Dyson (2004) and Siegel (2006) suggested that a multimodal view of literacy is in danger of becoming regressive and narrow. Teachers who privilege language in the classroom are unlikely to approach literacy from a multimodal perspective without deliberate support from the professional community (Eisner, 1994, 2002). Now, more than ever, all teachers are called to think about their literacy practices and examine what counts as effective (Olshanksy, 2008).

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