CHAPTER 9

Conclusions: Cultural Literacy in Action

Abstract In this chapter, the authors emphasize how even very young children can deal with complex and abstract ideas and emotions through creative practices and how the differences between people are not an issue for children. The analysis indicates that children have a multifaceted capacity for empathy. The authors stress that image-making is an important mode of communication through which children and young people shape their understanding of the world. This is a constructive and dialogic process of thinking in action. It allows children and young people to develop their imagination, emotional responses, personality, and position in the community, in relationship with others, and with the external world. The “dialogic chain of thinking” occurs not only in linguistic, but also in visual communication.

Keywords Chain of thinking · Repetition · Dialogues · Thinking in action · Storytelling

REPETITION AS CREATIVITY, DIALOGIC CHAINS OF THINKING, AND MULTIMODALITY

The artifacts analyzed in this book range from simple pencil drawings to multicolored collages, and from three-dimensional sculptures to videos.

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Despite this diversity, the data includes many artifacts that recall each other in detail or which directly borrow scenes, visual elements, events, and points of view from the picture books and films that were used in the Cultural Literacy Learning Programme (CLLP) to stimulate discussions. Are these artifacts based on repetitive copying rather than reflecting a creative process? Children's visual expression often involves copying ideas, scenes, and events and imitating visual elements and patterns from cultural texts around them, such as those familiar from television, movies, cartoons, and social media. Adults have sometimes considered this kind of repetitive image-making as a less valuable and passive practice that does not involve imagination and creativity (Dyson 2010; Mavers 2011). However, scholars have pointed out that copying is a semiotic process that often includes selective borrowing: The repeated visual elements, ideas, scenes, and techniques are evaluated and transformed from the existing source in a process of reinterpretation, recontextualization, and reconfiguration into a new design (Dyson 2010; Mavers 2011; Deguara 2015). In this process, children typically link their own experiences, emotions, and understandings to the borrowed elements and thus extend their existing meaning. As Deguara (2015, 67) notes: "Copying should not be considered as a haphazard or effortless act, but rather as a process of reselecting, redesigning and reproducing meanings which are transformed to supplement, extend or diversify a text into another." Based on our analysis, we claim that repetition and copying in children and young people's creations should be perceived within a broader context of meaning-making and as essential for a creative process of grasping the world.

In this book, we have emphasized the role of dialogue and creativity in cultural literacy and discussed how students cocreated meanings through dialogic creative practices in the CLLP. We consider borrowing elements from the picture books and films used, as well as from the artifacts created by their peers, as a form of visual dialogue and thus as an intrinsic part of students' cultural literacy learning. Instead of passive copying or repeating, the similarity of the artifacts to others within a small group or class or to elements in the picture books and films can be perceived as the fruit of active dialogic negotiation. Maine (2015, 88) explains the mechanism of dialogic negotiation as follows: "When faced with visual texts the children create verbal stories and more visual imagery. They move beyond the frame of the text to contextualize what they are experiencing, and this is true for both the purely visual and the multi-modal text types they encounter." In the CLLP, the students received influences, inspiration,

and stimulus from both the books and films and their peers. They also mediated and transmitted influences and inspiration to their peers and thus participated in “dialogic chains of thinking,” as Maine (2015, 55) calls a linguistic meaning-making process in a similar pedagogical setting:

Analyzing the dialogue through looking at the chains enables us to see how the children use co-constructive moves to develop their thinking, and how their dialogue ebbs and flows as ideas take form and are either developed or discarded by the respondent.

Children and young people’s visual expression is shaped by a similar dialogue, illustrated by Fig. 9.1. In these two artifacts, students from the second age group explore what home means to them. In the first group, all students have pictured the interiors of their rooms with similar furniture, for instance three include a lava lamp. The caption for the artifact reflects a dialogic chain of thinking and meaning-making about home, repeating the same items, emotions, and activities (underlined by the authors). Three of the students in this group explain their artifact as follows:

Fig. 9.1 Two groups of students in the second age group from the UK explore what home means for them

I drew my bedroom because I feel happy there, I dance to songs from my Alexa and then lay on my bed. I relax for a bit [;]
 I did my bedroom and added a few more bits that I wanted to and that make me happy. My TV, a sofa and my gaming stuff [;]
 I thought about my bedroom with some of my favourite books, relax and have fun with games

Both the artifact and the caption indicate a dialogic interaction within the group, which distinguishes their chain of thinking from the meaning-making processes in other groups. In the second group, all students have depicted the exterior view of the house where they live. Three of these drawings simultaneously show students' family members and some furniture inside the house. The form of the houses is identical. Four students' lines in the caption express similar ideas of home with similar vocabulary (underlined by the authors):

I drew my family because they live in the house with me and I think of them when I think about home [;]
Home is somewhere safe where you can have fun [;]
Home is where your [you are] safe and where you stay for most of your life, I drew my house [;]
 I drew my house and my family in the living room and playing games on the switch

The dialogic chain of thinking led the first group to discuss and draw their bedrooms, including things that are fun, make them happy, and can be done in one's own space. The dialogic chain of thinking guided second the group to explore home as the house where one's family lives and where one is safe.

This book has emphasized multimodality as a key feature of cultural literacy learning. Multimodality characterizes the artifacts in our data and the processes through which students express meanings. Multimodality is closely intertwined with imagination: Children constantly select, transform, modify, and combine modes and signs to create new meanings (Kress 1997; Deguara 2015). Multimodal meaning-making and imagination are also key elements of play. Hence, scholars have approached children's image-making, particularly drawing, as a play process in which both the act of creating and its outcome, the creation, are embedded with storytelling. Storytelling had a central role in the CLLP, in which learning was based on verbally narrating the story of the wordless picture books

and films and visually exploring abstract themes and topics arising from the story. Our analysis of the artifacts and their captions showed that, in this process, verbal and visual expression are intertwined and may develop into play.

Previous researchers have perceived the entanglement of image-making and play to include different modes of children's engagement with their creation. Wood and Hall (2011) have conceptualized these modes as playing *in* drawings, playing *with* drawings, and playing *at* drawing. Our data can be interpreted to include all these forms of play. Playing *in* drawings occurs in the artifacts that include figures in various playful activities as well as their toys, games, and places of play. Sometimes the artifacts received the role of an object that students played *with* as part of the lesson. Playing *at* drawing can be perceived from the artifacts that continue the story of the books and films either by borrowing their narrative contexts, such as episodes or scenes, or by constructing a fully new narrative, as in Fig. 9.2. In it, a student in the second age group explores

Fig. 9.2 A Lithuanian student in the second age group explores the meaning of belonging

the idea of belonging. The student has drawn an archetypical house, his home, in front of which he stands. The common idea of one's house and own room as a place of belonging is broadened in the artifact by an imaginative story in which the student and the home are transferred a thousand years back in time to another world. In the caption, the student writes:

I live in a house. I like to be in my room. When I go outside alone, I imagine my house is a palace and the fence is the courtyard of the palace. I then go to war with the Vikings, with the Crusaders.

In the artifact, the house is surrounded by a massive fortress and a wide moat. The student has written onto the picture the same description of imagining his house as a palace but developed the story of going to the war only after creating the artifact when writing the caption. This example indicates the intertwinement of visual and verbal modes of expression in children's visual creations and the importance of interpreting them within the narrative context given to them by the children themselves (see Deguara and Nutbrown 2018).

ABILITY TO EMPATHIZE AND APPROACH DIFFERENCES

The CLLP was based on several themes varying from cultural attachments (belonging) to being part of a community (living together) and engaging more broadly in society (social responsibility). These themes were explored in the CLLP with subthemes of home, celebrating diversity, solidarity, equality, human rights, social/civic competencies, and sustainable development. The core attitudes for cultural literacy learning—tolerance, empathy, and inclusion—permeate all tasks and topics of discussion in the CLLP. Our analysis of the artifacts showed that these themes were closely entangled in children and young people's understanding. For them, belonging to people meant living together with them. Respectively, living together with others was related to social responsibility and taking care of others within one's community but also to helping those who do not feel belonging or are excluded. The three core attitudes are intertwined in our data into a set of empathetic approaches to people and their ideas and cultural features that may be unfamiliar or different. These attitudes were concretized in the artifacts and their captions, for instance, through sharing something of one's own, such as food or space, and doing things together, such as playing or having a party with others.

The COVID-19 task that was included in the CLLP in spring 2020 yielded artifacts in which compassionate empathy, solidarity, and care reached from individuals to a global scale: While the artifacts reflected the students' concern and care for themselves and their families, they also dealt with the pandemic as a phenomenon that can be solved only through broad, even global, collaboration.

Our analysis shows how even the youngest children are able to deal with complex and abstract ideas and emotions through dialogue and creative practices. They are also able to utilize cultural symbols and recycle cultural imageries. Creative practices functioned in the CLLP as a mode of thinking in action (Cox 2005; Deguara 2015), and the artifacts themselves served as spaces for the children and young people to reflect on the entanglement of their internal and external worlds. Through a dynamic creative process and the artifacts that were its concrete outcome, the students were able to negotiate with themselves and their peers and test their ideas about belonging to a place or a group of people; living together with others who may be different; rights and responsibilities as members of a community and society; and tolerant, empathetic, and inclusive attitudes toward other people.

Even though the wordless picture books and films used in the CLLP emphasize themes of difference, such as ethnicity, migrant background, gender roles, size, or different habits or ways of living, and challenges related to being different, the students did not usually underline these differences or challenges in their artifacts. In them, different characters join in various daily activities and environments: They go to school, relax at home with their family, meet their friends, and spend time on hobbies. Even if the stories of the books and films often first depict differences through disagreement, nonbelonging, or exclusion, in their artifacts the students commonly focused on ways to strengthen agreement, belonging, or inclusion of the characters. The CLLP's instructions for the artifacts guided students to this approach but did not give advice on how to reflect on difference as such. Students often responded to the instructions by imagining episodes and scenes of happy living together beyond the story in the books and films. For instance, several students imagined how to save the lonely and sad Baboon from the Moon by bringing him by rocket back to the Earth to his family and friends—to a place he belongs. Others portrayed how bats and owls, despite their differences, play and have a party together after getting to know each other. In the captions,

the students could even celebrate diversity by underlining equality and togetherness.

The fact that in their artifacts children do not discuss specific differences, for example related to gender or ethnicity, does not necessarily reflect equality and acceptance of difference in those children's cultures: It may mean that some differences are ignored or not recognized (see e.g., Crenshaw 1991). Furthermore, projects such as this one need to be aware of the dangers of "superficial appreciations of cultural differences that reinforce stereotypes, instead of creating new understanding about cultural perspectives and global issues" (Arizpe et al. 2014, 309). That said, when differences are addressed in the artifacts, the children typically approach these as a normal and positive feature of everyday life.

In the CLLP, emotions were a key way of addressing the themes of living together, social responsibility, and belonging, as well as tolerance, empathy, and inclusion. The students interpreted emotions from the stories of the wordless picture books and films and were able to emotionally identify with the characters in them. In the captions, many of the students explained feeling sad or happy, depending on whether the characters in the books and films were interpreted as facing difficulties or positive turns in the stories. Our data, thus, indicates the students' multifaceted capacity for empathy: Many of them recognized and named emotions of the characters in the books and films, explained how they themselves feel similar emotions, and wanted to act to help the characters, make them feel better, and include them in their/our community. These forms of empathy have been discussed in the literature as cognitive, affective/emotional, and compassionate empathy (e.g., Ekman 2003; Maxwell 2008; Aaltola and Keto 2017). This finding supports the verdict of previous research that engaging with literature and art and their fictional characters may be useful for teaching empathy, as it evokes empathic responses (Lähdesmäki and Koistinen 2021). Moreover, our data indicate students' capacity for multispecies empathy: They can empathize with the emotions and experiences of animals, and they value and respect both human and nonhuman living creatures. In this sense, engaging with and creating cultural artifacts in the CLLP inspired the students to consider differences between species. In scholarly literature, multispecies empathy has been considered as a key to supporting and promoting biodiversity and environmental sustainability and as a step for acting more responsibly in ecological, economic, cultural, and social terms (Rosenberg 2020). Education that encourages multispecies empathy considers

all living beings as ontologically equal and thus promotes the interrelated wellbeing of animals, humans, and nature that is seen as the core condition for the existence of the Earth (Värri 2018; Rosenberg 2020). Nevertheless, the picture books and films used in the CLLP directed the students to consider their relation to wild animals rather than broader questions of domestic and farm animal rights including the students' own everyday choices, such as meat consumption.

We did not analyze the impact of gender on students' creative practices and exploration of the themes in the CLLP. The researchers and teachers who created the program did not want to emphasize gender as a factor of difference. Most of the artifacts were created jointly in small groups including different genders. We claim that the gender-focused analysis of children and young people's artistic creations may unintentionally produce gendered interpretations and understandings of visual expression, and thus continue and foster a binary notion of gender. This kind of analysis becomes even more problematic when the students themselves are not able to define their gender identity, but their teachers do, perhaps relying on binary notions. A broad body of literature has scrutinized how children's drawings link to surrounding popular culture and its gendered visual and narrative norms (Flannery and Watson 1995; Chen and Kantner 1996; Anning 2003; Anning and Ring 2004; Wright 2010; Deguara 2015). These studies suggest that usually boys (or male-typed children) prefer to draw action scenes with vehicles, weapons, monsters, and heroes, while girls (or female-typed children) focus on family scenes with houses, elements of decoration, and people engaged in social and harmonious relations. Girls' drawings have also been noted to include symbols interpreted by (adult) researchers as romantic, and beautiful natural elements (that have been interpreted as romantic symbols), such as hearts, flowers, butterflies, and rainbows. This gendered visual expression has been explained as reflecting the gendered social relations in children's social environment, as well as gendered messages emanating from media and popular culture that construct beliefs about girls' and boys' cultural and gender identities and positions in society.

As discussed in previous chapters, the artifacts in our data include visual elements—such as hearts, flowers, and rainbows—borrowed from the imageries of contemporary popular and children's culture. While these imageries may have influenced the artifacts, we have not approached their elements as gendered, but as symbols of positive emotions, such as happiness and joy. Based on our findings, we claim that children's

visual expression is typically based on intertwined iconic and symbolic communication (see Anning 2003, 4–5). Even though the artifacts often include images of concrete objects, these images commonly symbolize some event, action, environment, or emotion. The archetypical image of a house (see Figs. 9.1 and 9.2), for instance, is not only a sign referring to the student's own home but a symbol for a place affixed with various emotions and social relations related to the idea of home.

LEARNING CULTURAL LITERACY THROUGH CREATIVE PRACTICES

Our notion of cultural literacy reflects how the concept of literacy has transformed over the past decades. Literacy as a concept has extended from normative expectations about reading and writing texts to the idea of social practice and capacity for cultural communication and encountering differences (Arizpe et al. 2014; Maine and Vrikki 2021). Instead of emphasizing cultural or historical canons as a key for cultural literacy, as Hirsch (1988, 1989) does, or understanding it as a literary theory-based approach to cultural and social phenomena, as Segal (2014, 2015) has defined it, we see cultural literacy as an ability to encounter, communicate, learn, cocreate knowledge, and to live together through empathic, tolerant, and inclusive interaction with others who may be different from ourselves. In our view, cultural literacy learning can be stimulated by concrete creative practices, such as joint cultural or artistic tasks.

The effectiveness of the CLLP was measured in the DIALLS project by investigating the views of the teachers whose classes implemented the program in 2019 and 2020 (DIALLS 2020). The researchers and teacher educators interviewed teachers in each country after every lesson. They were asked to evaluate their students' cultural learning guided by the core themes of the CLLP. A broad majority (80%) of the teachers considered that their students had engaged with the cultural objectives of the program. Teachers saw engagement as slightly higher among children in the second than in the youngest age group. The teachers emphasized that respectful and inclusive interaction enabled a dialogic and democratic atmosphere where everyone was able to share their views. The attitudes guiding the CLLP—tolerance, empathy, and inclusion—are key to developing such an atmosphere. These attitudes were particularly pertinent with the challenges to schools and learning caused by COVID-19.

Our sociocultural approach to children and young people's art revealed that hierarchical relations between children and adults impact on the creation, reception, and evaluation of children and young people's visual expression. These power relations are part of adult-modeled cultural literacy learning practices. The hierarchical relations may hinder children and young people's agency to make meaning within the CLLP. In the program, teachers introduced students to various notions and values, following the ideas and ideals embedded in the lesson plans. Some instructions for the artifacts either explicitly or implicitly introduced the point of view from which students were asked and expected to explore the selected themes.

To develop cultural literacy learning through creative practices, we suggest strengthening the agency of children and young people in cultural encounter and within it, in dealing with difference. In their creative practices, children and young people should be able to initiate and test ideas dynamically: This would promote creativity as an ongoing process of seeking novel and useful ideas, points of view, and understandings. Instructions that explain what they should think or feel when creating artifacts may not encourage students to produce knowledge and engage in "dialogic thinking in action." In programs seeking to promote cultural literacy learning through celebrating diversity and respect for difference, teachers should be careful not to unintentionally create that difference. The difference which is real for adults may be meaningless to children and young people, who may not even recognize it. At the same time, it is important to encourage children and young people to open their eyes to various types of difference and the related inequalities. This requires careful balancing in education.

Artistic creation and image-making are important modes of communication through which children and young people can deal with and shape their mental images and understanding of the world in a constructive and dialogic process of thinking in action. As our analysis has demonstrated, this process allows children and young people to develop their imagination, emotional responses, personality, position in the community, and relationship with others and the external world. Our research indicates how dialogic chains of thinking occur not only in linguistic but also in visual communication. It is the task of future research to scrutinize the mechanisms of visual dialogue in such chains of thinking and to explore limitations and best practices, to enhance cultural literacy learning through visual dialogue.

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