Elliot Eisner (1998) wrote, “What cannot be conveyed or constructed in words is often possible in visual images or in music. Becoming literate in the broad sense means learning how to read these images” (p. 15). In this column, educators who study the arts and literacy review professional books that bring Eisner’s words to life by sharing resources that explore the potential and power of teaching children how to make and represent meaning across sign systems. We found these books inspiring because at their foundation is a call to go beyond pencil and paper tasks. Each reveals what happens when children act, talk, paint, draw, create, and think beyond the words on the page. In an era of high-stakes testing, accountability, and narrow definitions of literacy, a time when arts budgets have been deeply cut, these books help us, as teachers, to engage children in curriculum that promotes meaning making in its broadest sense; they also show us what is possible when the arts are integral to learning in general and literacy in particular.

The Power of Pictures: Creating Pathways to Literacy through Art, Grades K–6

Writing used to be hard for me, but now it is easy. All I have to do is look at each picture (I made) and describe some things I see. I listen to my words to see if they match with my story and they always do.

David, Grade 2 (p. 3)

Olshansky’s book opens with a vignette about a little fellow frustrated with his inability to write until he is taken down a new path of literacy instruction that uses visual text as a jumping-off point for written/verbal texts. Beth Olshansky’s book is filled with inspirational examples of children’s creative writing done within her unique picture/writing process. For over 20 years, Olshansky has been using this process to help children write and to love the process as well as the final product. Author, presenter, and director of the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy at the University of New Hampshire, Olshansky’s goal for this book is to provide teachers with an arts-based alternative to creative writing that taps into children’s right-brained thinking and inborn love for drawing.

The Power of Pictures is divided into two parts and is accompanied by a DVD that visually explores the process. Part One provides the reader with a foundation of visual art understanding, presenting visual and verbal text as parallel languages. Olshansky explores the challenges of today’s school systems, designed for the verbal learner, and offers visual avenues to enhance verbal learning. Referring to well-known educators such as Peggy Albers, Elliot Eisner, Howard Gardner, Regie Routman, and Katie Wood Ray, she connects these trusted authors to the picture/writing process, empowering classroom teachers who may feel...
uncomfortable using visual arts to build the confidence to write and draw with children.

Part Two takes the reader through the picture/writing process step by step. Using quality picturebooks from authors such as Jane Yolen, children are guided through “reading the picture.” They discuss what they see and predict what might happen. Children create word banks and develop rich, unusual, and descriptive words called “silver dollar words.” They create portfolios of their own paintings around a central theme and then repeat the process of reading the visual text, discussing what they see and orally constructing a storyline. With the help of peer-generated word banks, silver dollar words, and group discussions, the children’s minds tango between visual and verbal texts as they create their own picturebooks. Inspiring samples of children’s pictures and writing are peppered throughout this section.

Following a third-grade class, the DVD included in the back of the book documents the picture/writing process visually in a way written words cannot. In the first chapter, the viewer sees the Artists/Writers Workshop in action. The next two chapters lead the viewer through a watercolor on wet paper lesson and a crayon resist lesson modeled in a simple, step-by-step presentation that classroom teachers can easily follow and replicate with their students.

The Power of Pictures concludes with a vignette of a third-grade boy who is at the bottom of his class in reading; he gains remarkable success in reading and writing after going through the picture/writing process. Appendix A provides research results from standardized tests across the country that reveal significant improvement in reading scores among children who participated in Olshansky’s picture/writing process.

In the last paragraph in the book, Olshansky invites language arts teachers to join her in what she calls a quiet revolution where educators dare to break away from tradition and “uncover hidden talents in some of your most challenging students, as you explore with them the power of pictures and create new pathways to literacy through art” (p. 186). (NJ)
The book provides examples of effective dramatic integration, and Edmiston also focuses on the importance of building classroom community. He explains that building community is a necessity, and offers detailed methods, strategies, and authentic tasks that aid in the construction of community. “People in groups who have to be in the same place (like in schools) cannot even begin to become a community unless they feel safe and respected enough to collaborate on some activities with shared objectives they care about” (p. 72). In particular, Edmiston’s Continuum strategy, which highlights change in thought processes as a task is performed, and “hotseating,” a strategy where students critique and question a character’s viewpoints, are engagements that can aid in community building.

While Edmiston offers sound advice on planning for dramatic engagements, including the importance of utilizing the given, emergent academic, and social curricula, his greatest strength is his ability to highlight the importance of discourse and dialogue in the classroom as a tool for meaning making. “Dialogue is not optional if we want people to understand and thus learn” (p. 8). Throughout the book, he provides examples of skills addressed in dramatic fashion, suggestions for implementation, curricular design, pedagogical insights, and assessment. Collaborative assessment tasks, excerpts of texts used in performances, and photographs of students engaged in dramatic play are all used as sample assessment methods that teachers can employ in their classrooms.

Edmiston explains a variety of dramatic approaches that can be utilized within the classroom. His book’s message is enhanced by classroom photos and commentary boxes that elaborate on suggestions and strategies. While the approaches discussed can certainly be used across grade levels, early childhood and elementary school teachers will benefit the most from this book, due to the nature of the activities discussed and explored. This is an excellent text to include in a professional library. (RH)
social justice. In acknowledging the complex and interconnected world in which children come to be literate, the authors offer important and specific examples of art and provide text suggestions for teaching nearly every aspect of the art of teaching writing.

The authors provide readers with important research drawn from rural, suburban, and urban K–8 classrooms as they create opportunities for students to understand concepts through multiple sign systems. The authors also include important class descriptions for using diverse methodologies, some of which include multicultural and international children’s literature, choral readings, narrative pantomime, collage, mask making, readers theater, story dramatization, storytelling, drama, art conversations, gaming, photography, finger painting, animation, and video to engage students in multiple symbol and meaning-making systems. By coupling art and literacy, the authors assert that innovative instruction can yield creative and new understandings that are essential to literacy in the twenty-first century. (KH)

**Breakthrough to Meaning: Helping Your Kids Become Better Readers, Writers, and Thinkers**


The authors of this text provide new teaching strategies and experiences through multiple literacies as they identify methods to support their students so that they might become competent readers and writers. As a community of learners, these teacher-researchers implement what the authors label as subtext strategy into their classroom teaching. Exploring this strategy and its variations, not as a single teacher but as a collective group, is an important hallmark of this text and offers an impressive research method for the reader to consider. In fact, this flexible strategy can be used in a cross-level, cross-disciplinary manner to encourage empathy, play, multiple literacies, and a combination of semiotic sign systems.

According to the authors, the subtext strategy enables students to reflect critically on texts and writing by delving deeply into their own thoughts and feelings as they consider the situations of characters. Such reflection gives the students an entryway to reading and text that is at once sensitive and informing. The authors suggest that the subtext strategy reaches for the essence of what triggers emotion and feeling, and subsequently asks students to think about stepping into the shoes of another.

The impetus for implementing this strategy came about when the authors stumbled upon an art criticism strategy for young children. While in an art museum, they observed a museum educator working with children to read the subtext of a painting. The museum educator’s strategy required the participants to embody the artwork and look for the subtext of the characters, the artist, the situation, or the concepts. After thinking about the art criticism strategy as reading a painting, they imagined using the same approach for reading text and writing with young children.

At its core, the subtext strategy relies on a student being able to draw on one or more of the five senses: sight, smell, touch, taste, or hearing. Langer (1962) suggests when this access to feeling reaches a critical pitch, the process reaches awareness or consciousness. Perceiving through the senses is foundational to how infants first learn about the world. However, as children develop and move into a more verbocentric and mediated world, the senses often are not accessed as much for learning. The subtext strategy helps children return to their feelings and perceptions; in so doing, they are more likely to find empathy and the underlying essence of what it means to be human. Toward supporting their assertions, the authors provide convincing data by way of case studies.
throughout the writing. In individual chapters, the authors discuss using the subtext strategy as a way to develop narrative, to craft text, to reach everyday goals, and to revise multimedia texts.

The authors also provide a unique approach for practicing with standardized tests. The students demystified the people who created the tests by drawing a picture of what they might look like and inventing personalities for them. Creating subtexts for the test makers changed the way students approached the test. Instead of feeling as though the test was something that was forced on them, students used the subtext strategy to understand what the test makers might have gone through in order to make a test. They analyzed what questions would be fair, how the test makers might have organized their ideas, and ultimately what would make for good questions on a test. This empathetic stance toward test taking helped students move away from passive learning and more toward learning as an active and caring process reminiscent of what Noddings (2011) suggests is essential to authentic learning.

The authors are convinced that the subtext strategy makes sense for their learners. Although scores for standardized tests reflected the daily work of the students, the teacher-researchers believed that the strategy helped their students to demystify the test and to emote feelings of confidence that helped them to better navigate the tests. (KH)

**Thinking and Learning through Drawing in Primary Classrooms**


**Thinking and Learning through Drawing in Primary Classrooms** explores six dimensions of drawing that provide powerful clarification on drawing as a process for learning and thinking: 1) drawing to play; 2) drawing to mean; 3) drawing to feel; 4) drawing to see; 5) drawing to know; and 6) drawing to design. By using the term dimensions to organize these chapters—a word that captures the labyrinthine ways of learning—Hope emphasizes drawing and, by extension, thinking as exploration.

Each chapter is written with the teacher in mind, carefully explaining some of the functions of drawing, providing examples of student work, and addressing salient ideas within each dimension. This last point is particularly important for the classroom teacher who is seeking to better understand the communicative and generative potential of thinking visually. For example, a teacher may provide children with different drawing tools but be unaware of how drawing with one tool over another can enable children to explore affective meaning in their work. A teacher may encourage concept mapping to develop story ideas and relationships but may not think of how socially and intellectually empowering this is for young children to experience. Similarly, a teacher may read picturebooks to her students and encourage them to use both pictures and words to tell their own stories but be unaware of how text and graphic interactions really work or how to talk about them in a way that supports transmediation. **Thinking and Learning through Drawing in Primary Classrooms** offers short sections within each chapter, all infused with research in an easy-to-read tone, to help extend teachers’ thinking about particular dimensions in drawing.

“Drawing,” explains Hope, “is a powerful and accessible yet frequently under-utilized means of enabling children to learn and understand the ideas of others and to effectively generate, develop, draft, express, expand, and communicate their own wonderful ideas” (p. 14). Drawing is not simply, “Can my students draw?” but, more appropriately, can they use drawing to support, generate, develop, and expand their ideas? In this text, the author provides a hopeful starting point for educators by inviting them to think about how they utilize drawing in their own classrooms and why this
matters. While this text focuses on drawing in the primary school, the principles that can be gleaned from the six dimensions of drawing can be applied to older children as well. As society becomes more visually aware, and as the inextricable and complementary ties between the visual and the verbal become more transparent, Hope’s invitation seems ever more timely. (RL)

References

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