

Listening otherwise: Rethinking early literacy and meaning-making in preschool

Oscar Björk



Meaning Across Modes: Social Purpose and Intermodality in Children's School Writing and Drawing

Sofia Hort¹ and Oscar Björk¹

Abstract

In primary education, children frequently combine drawings with alphabetic writing in their compositions, and research has shown that drawing can support early writing development. Building on existing research on multimodality and intermodality in early writing, this study examines how drawing and writing function together in children's multimodal compositions produced for diverse social purposes. The study analyses multimodal texts written by Swedish learners aged 7–8 years and explores intermodal relations between writing and drawing using a systemic functional, transitivity-based analytical approach. The findings indicate a predominance of word-led and combinatory intermodality, with alphabetic writing generally assuming a dominant role. At the same time, children strategically integrate drawing and writing in ways that vary according to social purpose, task theme, and the specific affordances of each mode. In several cases, drawing enables the expression of meanings that are less readily conveyed through writing alone, underscoring its distinct representational potential. The study contributes to ongoing work on intermodality in early school writing by demonstrating the analytical affordances of transitivity for examining multimodal meaning-making, and it highlights the

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¹Department of Social Sciences and H

Corresponding Author:
Sofia Hort, Department of Social Science
Västerås, 72123, Sweden.
Email: sofia.hort@mdu.se

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Towards a multimodal dialogic understanding of early writing development in school

Oscar Björk

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Beyond words: Teachers' conceptual negotiation of multimodality and early literacy in Swedish preschool class

Oscar Björk¹, Sofia Hort¹ and Daroon Yassin Falk²

Abstract

This article investigates how teachers in Swedish preschool class conceptualize and make sense of multimodality in relation to children's early literacy learning. While multimodal perspectives have become increasingly influential in literacy research, emphasizing that meaning is made through multiple semiotic modes, such as image, gesture, movement, and material manipulation, less is known about how teachers themselves understand and value these modes in classroom practice. Drawing on a qualitative interpretive research design, the study is based on semi-structured interviews with sixteen preschool-class teachers across seven schools in Sweden. The analysis, guided by a social semiotic and social constructivist framework, identifies four interrelated themes: (1) multimodality as familiar yet conceptually elusive, (2) multimodality in practice: rich enactments and epistemic tensions, (3) modalities as tools, supports, and values, and (4) navigating constraints and possibilities. Findings reveal that while teachers' everyday practices are deeply multimodal, integrating drawing, song, movement and digital media, their understandings of literacy remain predominantly anchored in an alphabetic and linguistic norm. Multimodality is enacted intuitively but seldom theorized, often positioned as instrumental support for writing rather than as an epistemic mode of knowing and meaning-making in its own right. The article argues that this conceptual underdrescores the need for a shared professional metalanguage grounding teachers' lived nego

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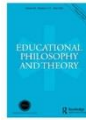
Intermodality in practice: understanding the roles of drawing and writing in early school compositions

Oscar Björk, Sofia Hort, Charlotte Engblom & Maria Westman

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Listening otherwise: Rethinking literacy through the multimodal child

Oscar Björk

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The dialogism of 'telling': Intertextuality and interdiscursivity in early school writing

Oscar Björk^{a,*}, Radha Iyer^b

^aDepartment of Education, Uppsala University (Uppsala), Sweden

^bSchool of Cultural and Language Studies in Education, Faculty of Creative Industries, Education & Social Justice, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

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1. Introduction

Although research on early school writing has been undertaken in recent years, there is little research acknowledging heteroglossia and textual dialogism and how students draw on lived experiences when writing in early school years (5–9 years). In this article, we study, through a Bakhtinian understanding of the text as dialogic and via analysis of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, how previous experiences of the world are being operationalised by primary school students to 'tell' about a given subject. This study examines the Swedish context, where mother tongue instruction (L1-instruction) has gone from being a school subject concerning skill-orientated aspects of writing (such as motor skills, spelling, and punctuation) and studies of literature (Bergqvist, 2005; Löfdahl et al., 2017), which aligns with international foci of L1-education (see, e.g., Davis, 1975; Herndl, 1994). During the last few decades, other aspects of writing have, however, seen greater attention, such as how to write specific types of texts (see, e.g., Gibbons, 2000) and attention to the specifics of the discipline (see, e.g., Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). In more recent years, research has further shown the importance of adhering to functional aspects of writing (e.g., Shar et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2020), while few studies have

focused on how students' experiences become evident in early school writing. Our interests were activated when one of the authors examined young students' writing narrative texts and became aware of the multiple layers of meaning-making they were engaging in during writing (Björk & Iyer, 2021). The students could draw on the varied resources often associated with different genres, and their texts often disrupted our expectations of what subject-specific writing and writing for a specific purpose can be. The purpose of this study is to provide deeper understanding of how dialogism is at work in primary school writing and thereby to provide insight into how intertextual and interdiscursive elements may be made visible.

2. A Bakhtinian theoretical and methodological framework

For this study, a Bakhtinian understanding of the text as dialogic enables us to differentiate the two ways textual dialogism operates: through intertextuality and interdiscursivity. These concepts capture, as we will show, the different ways in which texts, or utterances, communicate with other utterances and writing practices and, as such, serve as a primary point of departure for the analysis of how students' experiences become evident in their writing. This section will also provide information on the analytical procedures of the study (see Section 2.2 below).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: Oscar.Bjork@edux.se (O. Björk).

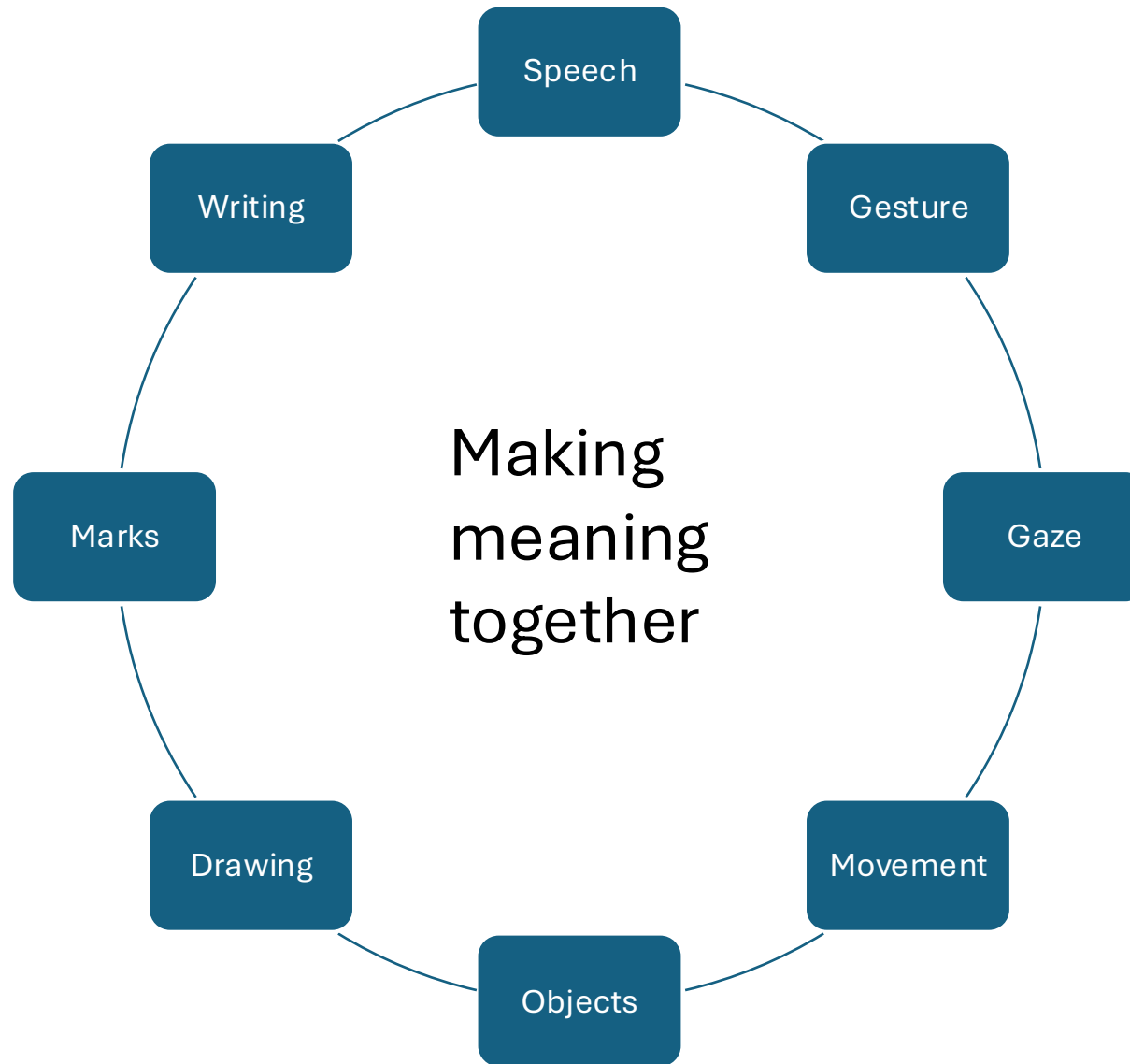


What are
we
listening
for?

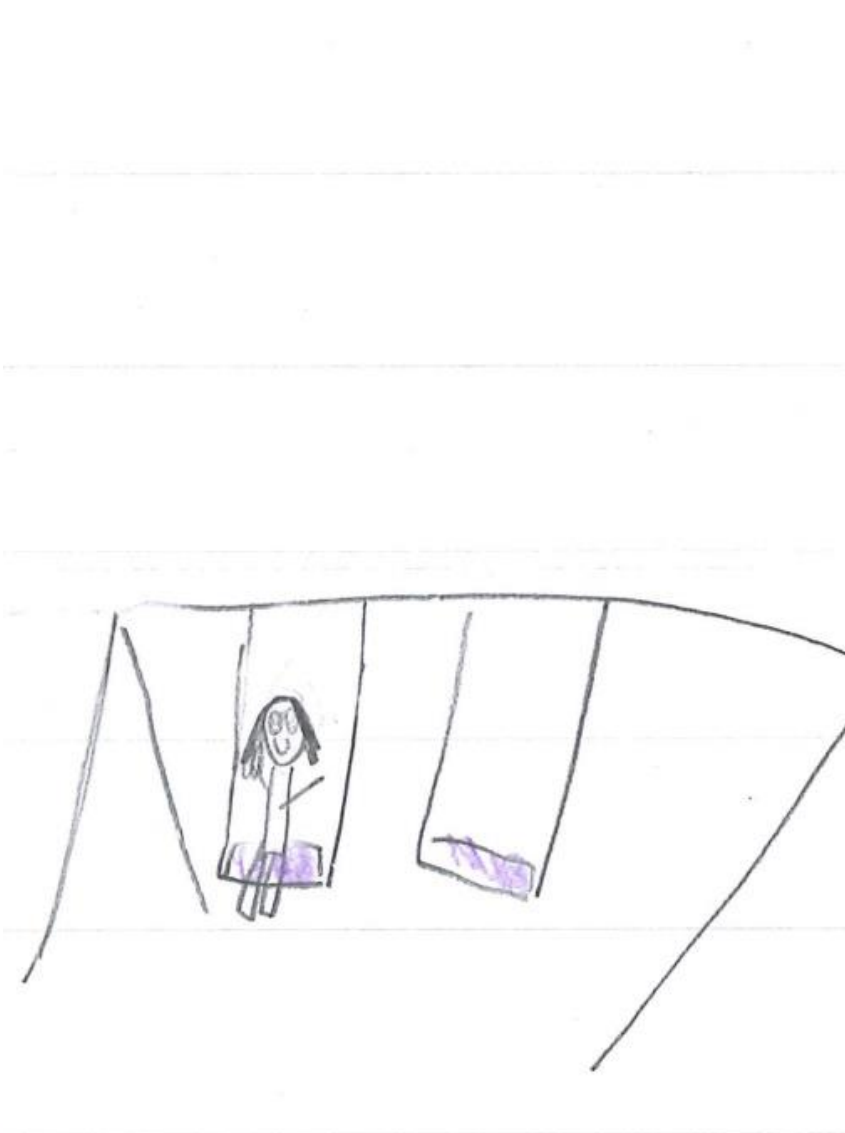
What do we hear when
we listen to a child?

What are we expecting
to hear?

What might we fail to
hear?



Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: the social interpretation of language and meaning*. Edward Arnold.



Meaning is not only in the sign

It emerges in the relations surrounding it



Not a chain of separate influences, but a living configuration of relations.

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Speech Genres and Other Late Essays

M. M. BAKHTIN

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Previous encounters



Present utterance



Anticipated response

Experience shapes anticipation
which shapes experience which
shapes anticipation which
shapes experience...



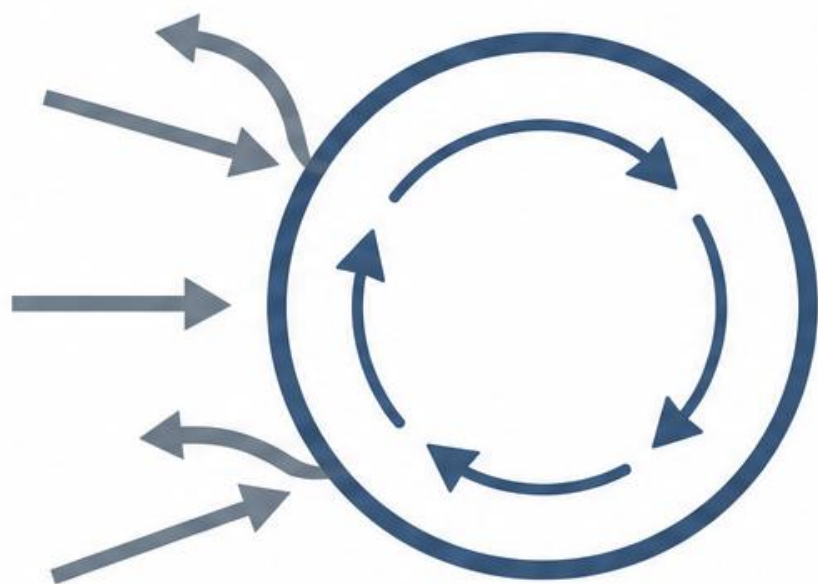
Friston, K. (2005). A theory of cortical responses.
Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B:
Biological Sciences, 360(1456), 815–836.

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Meaning perspectives organise what we notice and how we interpret it.

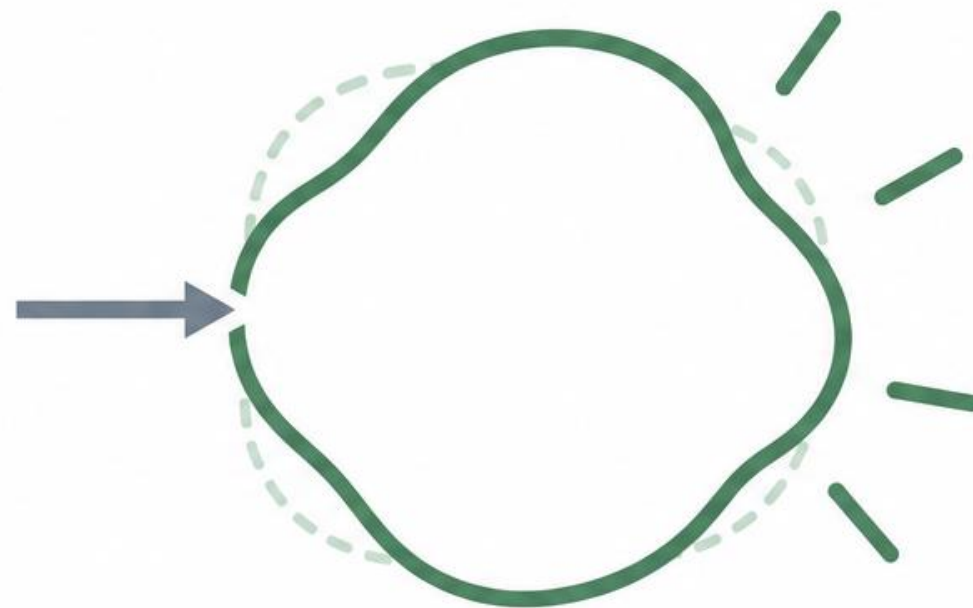
Self-sealing

Absorbs the unexpected



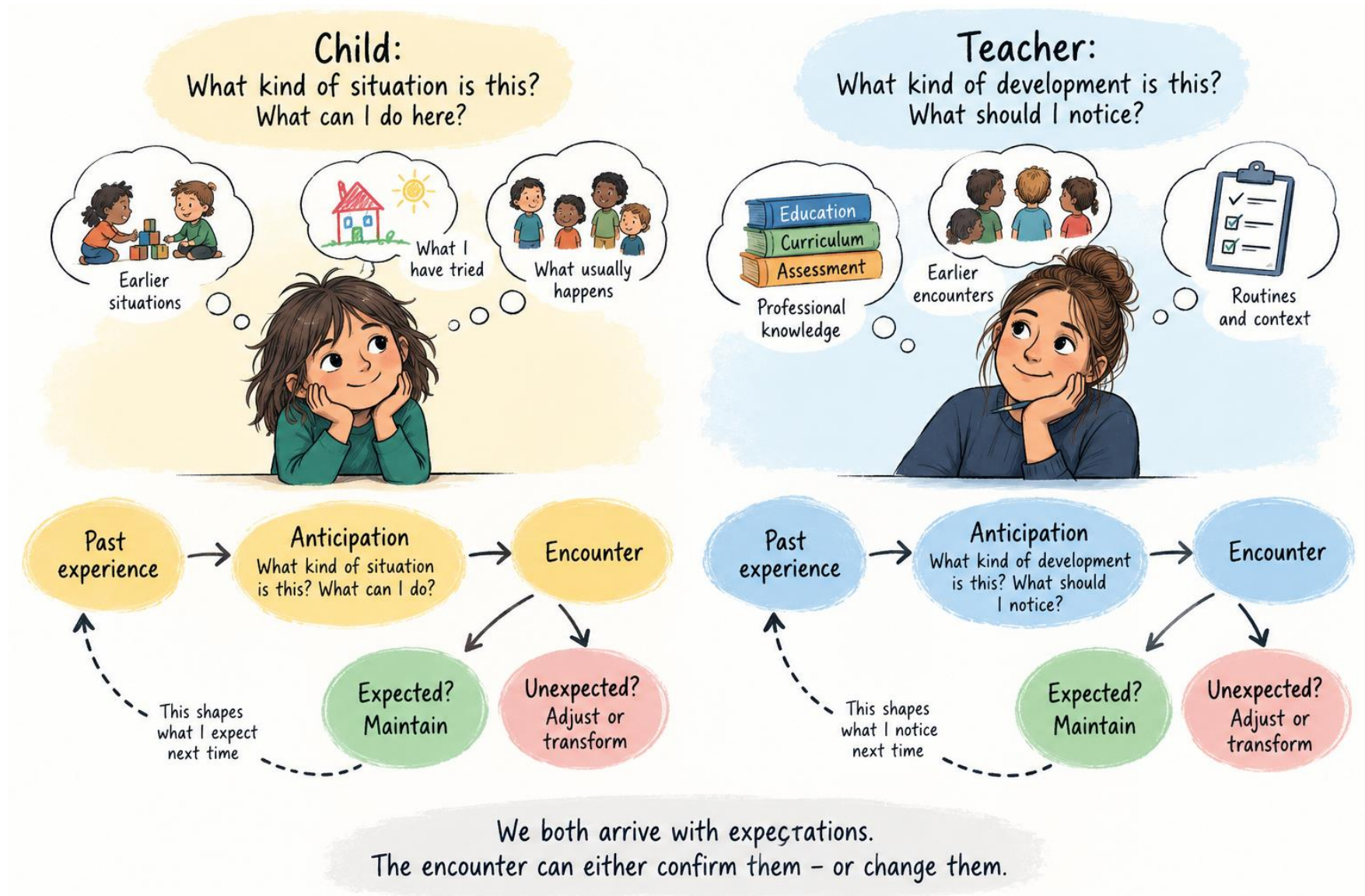
Dialogic

Can be changed by the encounter



-
- What can you identify?
 - What is the child doing?
 - What is the child doing with you/some other recipient?





2028: A changing boundary

- Preschool class becomes year 1 of compulsory school
- What does this change ask of preschool?

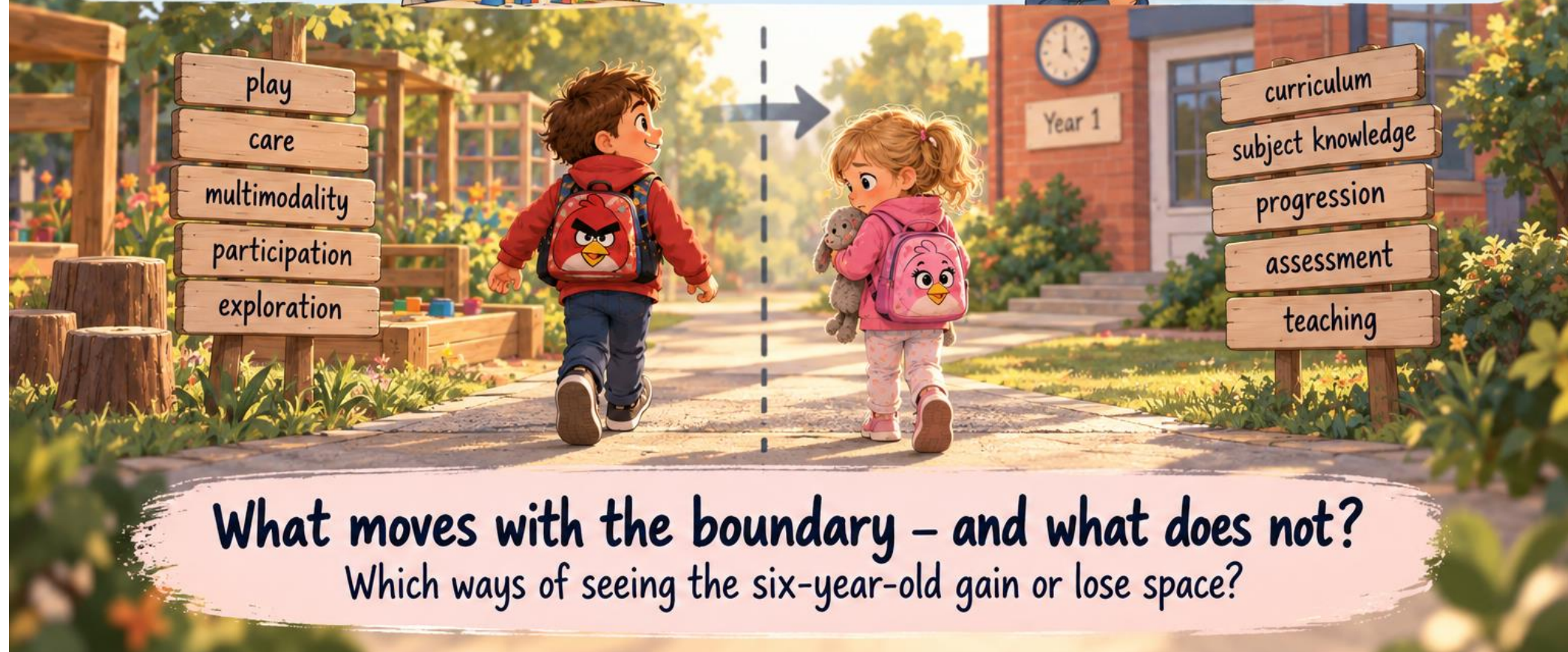


What knowledge moves with the boundary?

Institutional shift



Professional shift



What moves with the boundary – and what does not?

Which ways of seeing the six-year-old gain or lose space?

The reform direction for early literacy teaching

- Evidence based research
- Structured phonics
- Explicit and systematic teaching
- Gradual progression
- Early identification and support

Important resources, but not an exhaustive definition or understanding of literacy.

A group of children are gathered around a large sheet of paper, drawing various school-related items. The drawings include a large red school building in the center, a cross-shaped grid with numbers 1-9 in the top right, a girl's face in the top left, a boy's face in the bottom left, a boy's figure in the bottom right, a stack of books, a magnifying glass over the number 3, a calculator, a ruler, a paint palette, a lightbulb, a pair of scissors, a kite, a gift box, and a small table with a lamp. The children are using various colored pencils and markers to draw these items.

Does preparing children for school mean bringing school further down into preschool?

Or can preschool prepare children by expanding what they can notice, express, negotiate and transform?

Listening for

- Which letters?
- First sound?
- Correct form?
- Individual skill?

Listening otherwise

- What is the child doing with the marks?
- What is the child attending to?
- What response is being invited?
- What is happening between participants?

Both columns are needed!



Five questions for practice

1. What is the child trying to do?
2. What resources are being combined?
3. What has this expression responded to?
4. What response does it invite?
5. What in my interpretation could be wrong?

What kind of encounters are we creating?



Do children experience that their ideas can alter the activity?

"Let's build a bridge here instead!"



Are different modes taken seriously?

"Drawing, building, writing, moving ... all count!"



Do others respond and build on their expressions?

"Yes, and we can add this too!"



Is the unexpected worth exploring?

"Hmm ... I didn't expect that! Let's see what happens."



Can understanding change?

"Now I see it differently!"





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