

**Title**

Recognizing Hidden Literacies: Using Imagined Worlds to Expand Literacy Conversations Beyond Reading and Writing

**Purpose**

Much of the discussion surrounding literacy concerns the very basic question of whose literacies count in the academic world and in society in general. Seldom, however, does the conversation consider *which* literacies count. Can we even conceptualize other literacies not involving decoding alphabetic texts? In this paper, I apply the National Research Council's (1999) definition of fluency to other semiotic systems, systems which are tangentially considered in questions of more traditional literacies but systems which often are required to navigate the classroom, the workplace, and life in general. In so doing, I also apply the discussion surrounding equity versus plurality to particular literacies rather than to particular people. I accomplish both goals by examining the literacies depicted in the imagined worlds of three young adult novels: *Schooled* (2007), by Gordon Korman, which presents the social literacies involved in navigating the institution of school; *Feed* (2002), by M.T. Anderson, which ponders Lyotard's (1979) question technological literacy and the externalization of knowledge; and *The Janitor's Boy* (2001), by Andrew Clements, which considers the physical, mechanical, and spatial literacies used to maintain our physical infrastructure.

**Perspectives**

Carter (2009) discussed the “tensions rooted in liberal-democratic systems simultaneously guided by, on one hand, a democratic promise to support and protect equal rights for all citizens and, on the other hand, a liberal promise to valorize and support diversity” (p. 137). Such a society, Carter noted, “creates ‘the people’ by articulating an ‘us’ that can only exist through a simultaneous articulation of ‘them’” (p. 137). In particular, Carter discussed the “writing center paradox,” in which university writing centers—by extension, writing classrooms for students of all ages—struggle “with offering equity as the most valuable identification for writing center work or plurality as the primary goal” (p. 138). Equity—the underlying thrust of most literacy programs—assumes one proverbial playing field with one common goal and seeks to level that field teaching all players the same skills to reach that one goal. Plurality challenges the assumption of a common goal, tries to broaden the playing field to include multiple goals, but still teaches all players the same skills in reaching different goals.

This paper posits more than one playing field, with some playing fields allowing players to play in other-than-word-based literacies and those playing fields having their own rules and hierarchies of power, which may be completely independent of, completely dependent on, or interdependent with word-based playing fields. While each of us plays on multiple playing fields concurrently, one playing field—traditional conceptions of literacy—dominates academic discussions of literacy to the point that we either seldom consider or actively delegitimize other playing fields, other literacies.

Talk of legitimizing necessarily invokes Foucauldian questions of whose concept of, in this case literacy, dominates in a society. Foucault (1982) suggested such discussion must be based around both the “historical conditions which motivate our conceptualization” and the “type of reality with which we are dealing” (p. 778). Accordingly, through *Schooled*, I examine the social literacies found within a typical school but I also consider the historical conditions surrounding the legitimizing of public school education. Through *Feed*, I question the reality of

the idea that people learn—become fluent in various literacies—only through cognitive means. Through *The Janitor's Boy*, I examine the challenging of power structures represented by people fluent in physical, mechanical, and spatial literacies.

Imagined worlds offer an advantage when studying entrenched institutions, the ideological assumptions of which become so embedded that they lie buried under layers of habit, automatic response, and tradition. Crawford (1984) discussed Viktor Shklovskij's theory of defamiliarization as bringing "the vital to the fossilized...aesthetic perception to habitual recognition" (209), using poetic language to "break down the indifferent recognition of automatization" (210). Similarly, narrative devices in fictional works can present a familiar setting—in this case school and school-based literacies—in an unfamiliar manner, jarring the reader's mind out of its habitual ruts of thinking. Through the juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar characters, the use strategic use of point of view, a shift in time frame, and/or a shift in focus, Korman, Anderson, and Clements each portray an imagined world view of school that causes the reader to reexamine real-world underlying institutional assumptions about which literacies matter.

### ***Research Methodology***

For this study, I conducted repeated close readings of each of the three texts, flagging passages containing either narrative commentary or dialogue that challenged the established understanding of school and/or school-based literacy and passages that depicted, explicitly or implicitly, literacies in other semiotic systems. I compared such passages within each text, watching for patterns of thinking to emerge. I applied the National Research Council's (1999) definition of fluency to each of the other literacies identified, showing how characters "reformulate[d] knowledge," responded "creatively and appropriately," and "produce[d] and generate[d] information" (p. 14).

In addition to studying the imagined worlds, I also researched the topics of alternative schooling and alternative literacies raised by the authors of the fictional texts. Because the academic literature was, in some cases limited, I expanded my research to include organization Web sites, blogs, and other non-academic sources using a process similar to what Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) called snowball or chain sampling (p. 185); i.e., I found one source, then searched within that source for other sources, and so forth. Finally, I wove the two text streams—the analysis of the imagined worlds and the information gleaned from the study of "real world" texts—together so that each informed the other.

### ***Data Sources***

Data sources for this study included, as noted above, both academic and non-academic literature in both print and electronic format. The three fictional texts, purposefully selected, were published between 2001 and 2007, were written by award-winning male authors and feature male protagonists. While I am most familiar with modern American public, private, and homeschooled education, my reading of the literature suggests the issues raised by these books and the underlying assumptions are common to the Canadian and British public school systems, as well. Additionally, Gordon Korman, author of *Schooled*, was born and raised in Canada but lives in the United States. M.T. Anderson, from Massachusetts and the author of *Feed*, earned a degree in literature from Cambridge University in England. Of the three, only Andrew Clements, author of *The Janitor's Boy*, worked as a classroom teacher.

### **Results**

The findings from this study suggested that, whether education professionals recognize these hidden literacies or not, they exist. Multiple playing fields/multiple literacies are depicted in imagined worlds; knowledge gained from studying these literacies in imagined worlds helps us understand the same literacies as they exist in the “real” world.

### **Importance of the Study**

An understanding of literacy as not just the decoding of alphabetic texts but as fluency in the reformulation of knowledge in many areas is critical toward our achieving both equity and plurality in education. This study conceptualizes other literacies not involving decoding alphabetic texts and applies the National Research Council’s (1999) definition of fluency to other semiotic systems, systems which are tangentially considered in questions of more traditional literacies but systems which often are required to navigate the classroom, the workplace, and life in general.

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