

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*“A complex process may be clarified, but never simplified.”*  
–Carolyn Burke (2005)

What follows is a culmination of nine years of research with my own children:  
Emily, Tristan, and Simon

Emily is a Post Modern Writer<sup>1</sup>

We

Sit  
Interviewer  
Interviewee  
We analyze  
Discuss

I

Question  
Probing  
for answers  
to my own  
questions

Emily

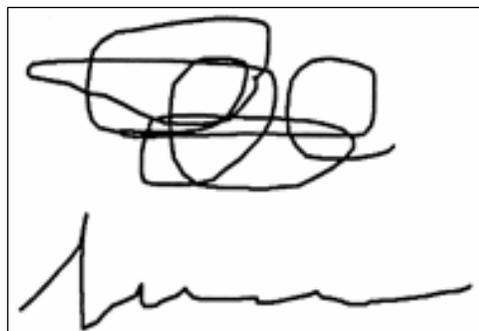
Sits  
Writes  
Patiently  
Explains  
that

which I cannot understand

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<sup>1</sup> To help me understand my own thinking and make sense of the world I often write poetry. Throughout this study I have written poetry, some of it to make sense of what I am learning from my children, some of it reflecting on events, others exploring my own thinking and reasoning. As such they constitute data and I have decided to include some of this poetry throughout this paper. All of it is personal and, for me, it represents my thinking, understandings, and beliefs more clearly than any amount of writing.

My personal journey into researching literacies began when I read Glenda Bissex's book Gnys at work (1980) in 1995. This book changed my life; the way I viewed children's writing and the way I viewed Emily (age two and a half), my only child at the time. I began to see her as literate and I started to see the marks she was creating as writing; not as pre-writing or something less than adult writing. About this time, she came running up to me with a piece of paper and read it to me "Papa is a shipper." (see figure 1) I was amazed: "my daughter is writing!"<sup>2</sup> This was the beginning of a new journey for me. I saw Emily's writing as writing and I wanted to learn how all children learn to write, and how they become literate. It was not until much later that I understood this question as flawed, because I now realize that children are literate; it is just that I did not recognize or understand their literacies. Children are in many ways born as literate beings; it is the way we, as human beings, learn, interact with, and understand the world. We are symbol makers and users, motivated to make and understand meaning. Literacies are the ways we interact with the world and make sense of it.

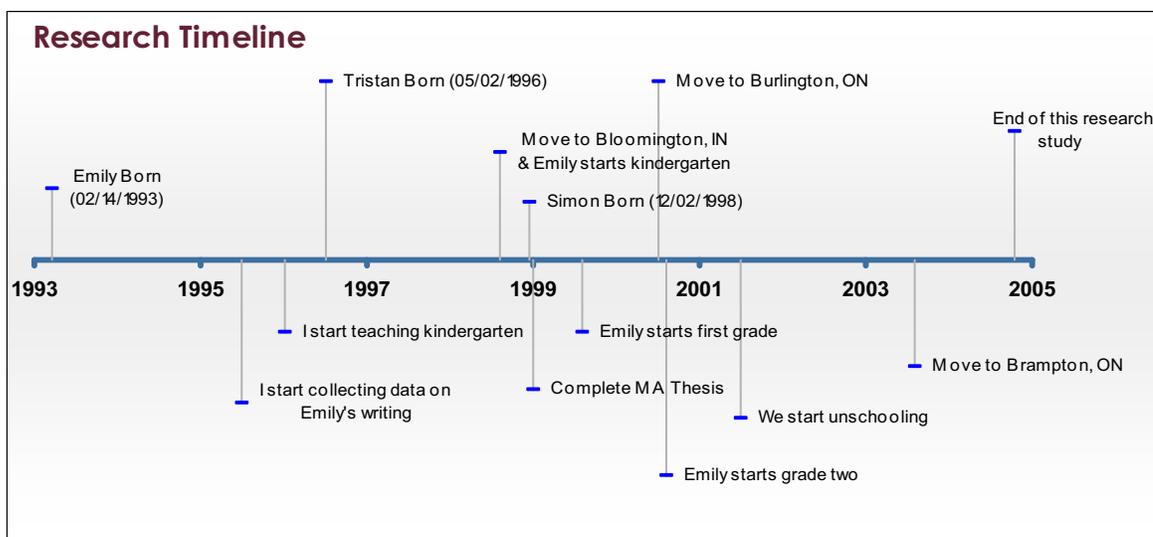


**Figure 1: "Papa is a Shipper"**

My children have taught me much about life, research, and literacies. It would be impossible to discuss all that I have learned; I am sure that I am not even conscious of it all. However, this is my attempt to share some of the most significant aspects of my learning from my children.

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<sup>2</sup> It was several years later that I reflected that she was most likely writing long before this and that this was just the first time I noticed her work as writing.



**Figure 2: Rough timeline of the major events included in this study**

Learning has come hard for me during this inquiry. I always thought I had the answers, I thought I knew what I was looking for. Through this study, my children taught me I did not have the right questions let alone the answers. As adults we rarely take the time to truly listen to each other and less so the children around us: the children we teach, the children we develop curriculum and theory for. The work we do as teachers and researchers we presuppose is for the betterment of the children we work with, yet how often do we really look at what they are doing or stop to really listen to what they are saying? We think we have the answers and we know how to help the children we are working with, but more often than not we do not.

I do not mean to say that everyone is like me; I have had the privilege of working with several educators who really listen to children and try to learn from them, but they are in the minority. These educators and my own children patiently taught me the importance of seeing and listening, and then they taught me how to learn from what I saw, heard and experienced. We need to take the

time to learn from children because they are far wiser and more intelligent than we can ever imagine. Children will show us what we need to know to help them; if we are willing to listen. Children have the answers to our questions; we only need to enter their world as learners.

### Background

I started my research with the question “How do children learn to read and write?” My children taught me that not only is this an impossible question to answer, but it is the wrong question to be asking. When I did my master’s thesis on Emily’s writing (Wood, 1998) I categorized her work according to current theories of Emergent Literacy (Teal & Sulzby, 1994). While I was writing, Emily started to show me that what I thought I knew about literacy could not explain what she was doing with her literacies use. However, like most grown-ups I continued to believe my understanding of literacies and treated what she was teaching me as an anomaly, and not central. I must admit that the anomaly she showed me: that my understanding of literacy developing through a fixed set of stages was problematic or incorrect was very exciting to me, but I assumed it to be a small nuance that I had not come across in my review of the literature. This of course was just the tip of the iceberg and no anomaly. It took several more years of learning from Emily, and then Tristan before I realized that what I believed I knew and even how I approached my questions was simply wrong.

It wasn’t until I started to do my Ph.D. course work that I was equipped or ready to begin to listen to my children and learn from them. I saw for the first time

what they were showing me. I am certain that what I am learning now is still being influenced by my tacit assumptions but I have had the opportunity to interrogate many of these assumptions and drag them into the light of what my children have been teaching me (see table 1).

<b>Past Assumptions</b>	<b>Current Assumptions</b>
Learning literacy is largely a factor of maturation	Learning literacies is a matter of experience
Literacy is reading and writing	Literacies are multiple and are any meaning making sign system
Sign systems are a support for literacy learning	Sign systems are literacies
Learners go through specific stages of literacy development	Literacies users entertain multiple hypotheses about literacies at any given time
Conventional literacy is the measure of success	The richness of the ideas being expressed with a literacy is what is most important
Literacy is something that takes place primarily in the head	Literacies are primarily social and cultural practices

**Table 1: Some of my key past and current assumption about literacies**

### About our Family

We are the Wood family: Simon (born in 1998), Tristan (born in 1996), and Emily (born in 1993), Christine (mother), and Jeffrey (father) the author of this study. We are a white middle class family and both Christine and I are university educated; on a whole, we are affected by the privilege of being white and middle class. I was a kindergarten teacher for much of this study and I have been a student for every year covered by this study. So, my children have always known me as a teacher and learner, both at school and at home. I guess that in many ways this makes the upbringing of my children unique, while in other ways it is

like the experience of many other families. As human beings we are all learners, as parents we are all learning from our children, the difference in our case is that my learning is slightly more formal and systematic than most; and I am trying to share that learning by writing about it.

### Research Problem

In her keynote address to the Researching and Teaching in These Critical Times Conference Debbie Rowe stated:

Future research needs to record literacy activities in infant, toddler, and younger preschoolers' homes and childcare settings – whether or not they are intended as opportunities for children to read or write. Ideally, early literacy research would begin to describe cross-contextual patterns and variation in these youngest children's access to observing and participating in literacy events, as well as caregiver beliefs and values about early literacy experiences. (2005, p.5)

Rowe went on to describe the need for an expanded research agenda into early literacy and that we needed to use an expanded theoretical lens for understanding children's early literacy participation. I have done just this in my research. For the nine years included in this study I collected data on my three children's literacies uses and understandings across various settings, including our home and various other sites. I have been observing and collecting data from my children in an informal way as an involved parent since 1995. I have

done this in an attempt to better understand literacy, and my children, as a parent, a researcher and a teacher. With Debbie Rowe's call for a renewed emphasis on early literacy and a need to understand children's complex understandings and participation with literacies I felt it was important for me to go back and reanalyze what my children have taught me and share it with a wider audience.

While my children come from a very specific family culture that values and intentionally supports their use of literacies, I think literacies use and learning are the same for my children as they are for many children. What I have learned up-close from my children I have also seen in my classroom, teaching urban youth. It is my hope, through this work, to add a positive voice to the discussion on literacies, a voice that shows that children are capable, powerful, and successful literacies users.

As I think about what I have learned through these years from my children, I am awed. They have taught me new ways to think about and understand literacies, how literacies are used and learned and how children approach them. What my children have taught me has fundamentally shifted my beliefs about literacy and, I think, suggested a new path for me to take in my learning. A path away from the prescriptive adult imposed world of conventional literacies toward a path that sees children as capable literacies users and as literacies producers not just consumers. This is not to say that this path has not been suggested by others, but that this data brings together many of the research and theoretical perspectives which mark the path more clearly; while at the same time

suggesting that many of the paths we have traditionally taken and many of our notions of literacies can not adequately explain the way my children used and understood literacies in today's rapidly changing and digital world.

### Research Questions

I used data I collected with my children from 1995 to 2004 to address the issues raised by Debbie Rowe; looking at the literacies activities my children engaged in across a variety of sites and over time; exploring the cross-contextual patterns and variation in my children's literacies uses and understandings. The specific questions I wanted to answer looking at this data were:

- How have Emily, Tristan, and Simon used literacies?
- What have Emily, Tristan, and Simon understood about literacies?
- What practices in our home have influenced Emily, Tristan, and Simon's literacies uses and understandings?
  - How have these changed over time and across various sites?
- How have the D/discourses (Gee, 1996; 1999) available to Emily, Tristan, and Simon, dominant and otherwise, influenced their literacies uses and understandings, as well as our practices as a family?

These are complex questions that in many ways overlap, creating greater complexity. But to truly try to understand what Emily, Tristan, and Simon understood about literacies and how they used them I needed to deal with the data in complex ways. Literacies are complex and while simplifying them makes them more manageable it also degrades the level of understanding that can be

achieved. Literacies are complex and need to be treated as such in our research and the analysis of data.

### Organization of the Study

I have been studying the literacies uses and understandings of my three children formally and informally; my master's thesis was an examination of Emily's writing (Wood, 1998) and I have completed numerous course papers through conducting research on the children's literacies uses and understandings. I have also observed them informally as a parent – always watching, interacting, and learning with and from my children. The researcher part of me kept records of these experiences through journals, writing samples, video and audio tape, photographs, and the collected stories about the children's literacies use from our friends. As such, I had a rich data pool to draw upon to write this dissertation. I wanted to go back and examine this data pool to gain further insights about how my children have used and understood literacies to understand better my own journey to my own understanding of literacies. To do this I closely examined the data I collected with Emily, Tristan, and Simon for the purpose of telling our story. The story I am sharing with you now.

This is a deeply complex journey; my beliefs and the beliefs of my children changed over time; their theories and uses of literacies too were not static but dynamic. This creates a rich and complex fabric out of which we all can come to a better understanding of how my children view and use literacy and ultimately

draw inference into how children use literacy and what types of understanding they might have about literacy.

### Procedure

In this study, I took a qualitative approach to the data collection and analysis. As I was primarily interested in the children's uses and understandings of literacy this seemed the logical approach to take. It afforded me the opportunity to analyze across use, learning, development, purpose, and function in ways that a quantitative study would not allow. Added to this, I wanted this study to be as non-intrusive as possible. I am the children's parent and I realize I have direct influence and responsibility over them. As such, I conducted this study from a naturalistic, ethnographic perspective, taking the stance of an involved participant in my children's literacies uses and understandings. As their parent my opinion is naturally skewed toward a positive interpretation of their work and abilities. I realized this, and tried to control for it by relying on the data generated (see chapter three), not just remembrances. I also realized that my intense interest in the children's literacies might have actually hindered their literacies uses and understandings, and as such I decided to err on the side of caution, choosing not to give them formalized assessments or interviews but instead recording our informal conversations about literacies. I collected their instances of literacies or literacies events (Heath, 1983, p. 93), whenever possible, and analyzed them for changes in use or indications that their understanding about literacies changed on an ongoing basis. These are both

above and beyond the regular formal and informal observations recorded about book handling, book choice, mathematics use, dramatic play, and other literacies events that occurred on a daily basis.

For each of my children the corpus of data was different in quantity, quality and time. For Emily, who was born in February 1993, I have the greatest amount of raw data. This is because she has been the most interested in traditional literacy (i.e. reading and writing) of all my children, and also because I studied her work the longest. However, since my earlier interest in her work was focused on writing development, the data I have before 1998 is focused primarily on writing and coloured by the lens of development, something Emily taught me does not do a good job of describing her learning and literacies uses. Thus, although Emily's data was the greatest in quantity, the quality of the earliest data is limited. With Tristan, who was born in May 1996, the data quantity was less, primarily because he showed less interest in traditional literacies than Emily. I also did not recognize Tristan's literacies use and learning until 1998, because his use was different from that of Emily and was not focused on writing but more focused on maths and games. I also did not believe that children engaged in literacies use until they were older, at least two years old. When I did take notice of Tristan's literacies use I collected a broader spectrum and had the knowledge of what Emily had taught me to help me see more and be more accepting in what I considered data and literacies. Simon, who was born in December 1998, has the least amount of data, primarily because of the timeline of this study, but his data was rich. What I considered literacies use and learning data was

considerably broader with Simon than with Tristan and Emily. Simon is a natural storyteller, and he regularly verbalized what he was thinking, giving insight into literacies learning which was far richer than was possible with either Emily or Tristan.

My analysis of the data was comprised of basic category generation (Creswell, 1994) and a form of initial meaning reconstruction (Carspecken, 1996). All the data was analyzed through the lens of initial meaning analysis to construct basic categories and to find anomalies. These initial categories were then developed into matrices (Creswell, 1994) to further analyze the relationships among categories; the information was coded across categories by child, site, time (both chronological and age), purpose, social setting, context, and other delineators that arose during analysis. From this analysis I then selected what I felt were representative stories that exemplified what I was learning from the children and represented how they understood and used literacies.

### Summary

This research is an attempt to look at Emily, Tristan, and Simon historically. I tried to reveal and explain their literacies uses and understandings of literacies over time and across contexts while treating literacies as a complex process. I approach literacies as 1) multimodal, semiotic and motivated; 2) involving specific social and cultural practices, while also recognizing that these practices are different depending on site, community, and time; and 3) as social.

Literacies are a complex process and to better understand literacies requires dealing with them in complex ways.

### An Overview of the Chapters

In chapter one I have discussed the historical contexts that led me to embark on this study; I have reviewed my reasoning and the central questions of this study. Chapter two addresses the theoretical framework I used to understand the literacies uses and understandings of Emily, Tristan, and Simon over time and across contexts. It also discusses some of my assumptions and the approach I used in this study. Chapter three deals with the methodological decisions I made in analyzing the data used to construct this study. It also discusses the framework I used to interpret and understand the data I have amassed from my children. Chapter four looks at Emily's literacies uses and understandings over time and across contexts. This chapter focuses specifically on Emily's use of writing as a meaning making system. Chapter five looks at Tristan's literacies uses and understandings and how he used writing, reading and videogaming to make sense of the world and create meaning. Chapter six focuses on Simon and his literacies uses and understandings. Simon has been drawn to Lego, writing and drawing as literacies for understanding and creating meaning in our family. Chapter seven shares a significant story from each one of the children illustrating how they have used literacies as multiple, multimodal, meaning-focused and motivated; as involving specific social and cultural practices; and as social. And finally the chapter presents an expand model of

literacies that helps to explain Emily, Tristan, and Simon's literacies learning, use and understanding. The children