

The Freedom of Thought and Imagination and Opportunity for Learning of the Hundred Languages of Children

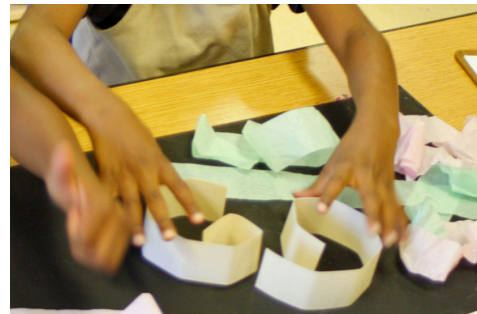
By Jennifer Azzariti

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"I'm writing E."



"Two 'G's."



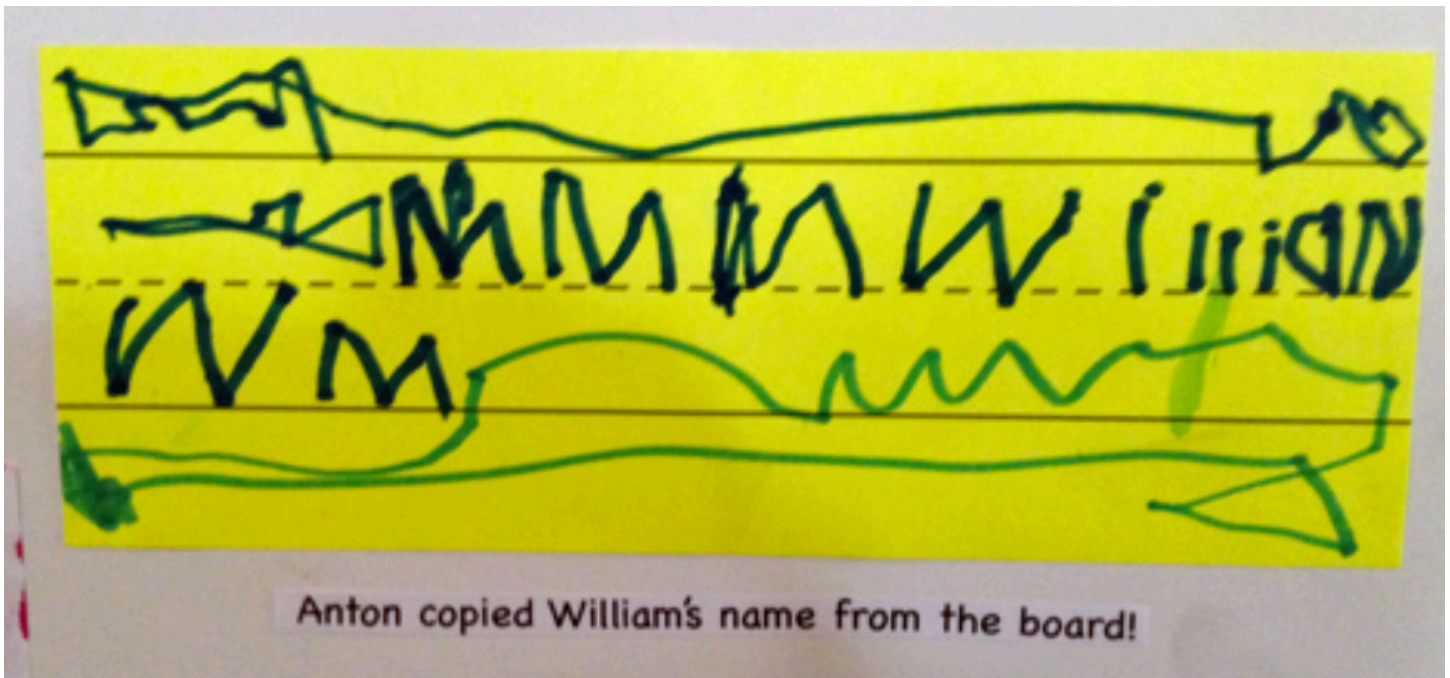
"It's the words on the board."

My work gives me the privilege of being in many different schools, each with its own unique identity and context. The diversity of contexts—public and private, religious and secular, small and large, urban and suburban, high income and low income—is a gift. It allows me to have the opportunity to experience "school" from many points of view, meet incredible children, families, and educators, and observe different ways of teaching and learning. I'm also able to compare and contrast.

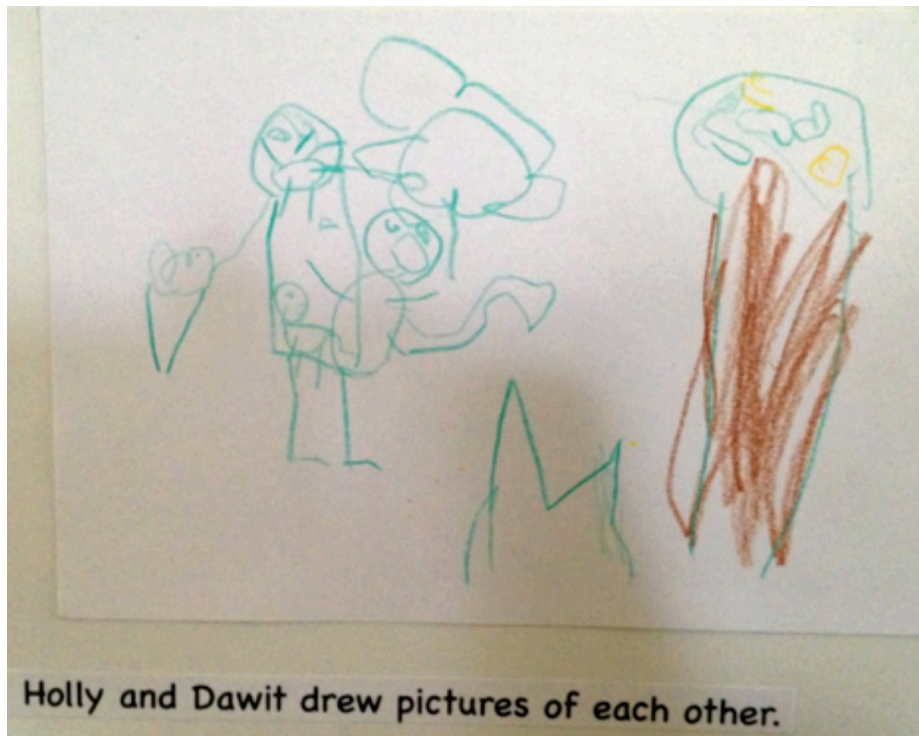
I have noticed that when children in low-income schools are introduced to materials (paint, clay, wire, paper) for the first time, they very often make letters or write their names. In middle- and high-income

schools, first encounters with materials most often evoke associations with animals, family, food, and other familiar objects. Abstract gestures and marks become metaphors and stories or are experimental, relating to the properties of the material itself ("Look, I did blue and pink and green."). This is purely anecdotal, but I have been a witness enough times to make me stop and think about why this happens and what it could mean.

I believe that children don't make letters and numbers because that is all they know but rather because it is what many teachers expect and desire. In my experience, in particular in low-income schools, teachers often give affirmation and praise to children when they produce a letter or write their name but not when they paint, say, a tree or their mommy. In the following example from a display of children's messages, note the exclamation point in the teacher's caption that seems to indicate her enthusiasm and excitement about writing.



Now look at the teacher's comment on the next drawing—she doesn't seem as excited about this form of representation.



What messages are we sending children when we only give value to the written language? I wonder and worry about the child who does not feel validated to imagine and think beyond letters. What can one do with the letter "G" without the capacity to think freely and creatively? As Ann Lauterbach states in *The Night Sky*, "If we lose our ability to make meaning—that is, to interpret—to find form in the raw materials of life—then we stand in danger of having meaning made for us." Who has the advantage here—the child who knows his letters, who can copy words from the board or the child who has the ability to make metaphor, one of the highest forms of intelligence? Aristotle writes in *Poetics*, "To be a master of metaphor is a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars."

There is so much rhetoric about closing the achievement gap for minority students. The strategies we have in place to do this are not meeting that goal. Instead, we are narrowing the minds and souls of children and limiting the potential for making meaning by feeding children a steady diet of decontextualized information. We can't improve test scores and graduation rates with a myopic attitude about what "those children" need. Low-income children, like all children, deserve and will benefit from freedom of thought and imagination and opportunity for learning using "the hundred languages."