

---

READING:  
THE BLENDING OF THEORY  
AND PRACTICE

Volume III

CO-EDITORS

Marie A. Ice      Marilyn A. Saunders-Lucas

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Marilyn B. Joshua-Shearer  
Barbara E. Pugh  
Barbara A. Schaudt

California State University,  
Bakersfield  
1995

## Abstract

*This article focuses on some of the issues connected to recognizing culturally specific knowledge of our students. It draws on the author's experiences in her first grade classroom, and in her research about pre-literacy learning in the United States and China. Four interwoven strands are described that have helped her recognize students' cultural knowledge. They include some givens about working in multi-cultural settings; the weaving together of theory and practice in the classroom; research related to preliteracy in the United States and China; and putting into practice, in the classroom, the knowledge that much of another culture is unknowable to us.*

*Nancy Pine  
Mount St. Mary's College  
Los Angeles, CA*

## RECOGNIZING STUDENTS' CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

We in California and some other portions of the United States live in a decidedly multiethnic, multilingual world. This universe of cultural perspectives provides us an unusual opportunity. Few places on earth bring together people of so many ethnicities and mother tongues in the small space of a classroom five days a week, seven hours a day. Such classrooms hold within them the potential for creating equitable, multi-cultural learning communities. As educators in these classrooms we are located in a critical place to help multi-ethnic groups of students interact productively with the curriculum and with each other while maintaining their self-esteem and drawing on their home knowledge. The students in our classrooms, however, often come from cultures quite different from the ones in which we ourselves were raised. We therefore have the responsibility as well as the opportunity to both recognize and define our own cultures and values, and to devise means for our students to cross cultural boundaries while valuing their own ways of knowing.

Basic challenges come with this status of being innovators of processes seldom if ever implemented on a large scale. We not only have an incredible opportunity to learn, but we must work in a world where there are no tried and true answers. Few people are experts, and there are no absolute solutions. I believe, however, that if some of us with multicultural, bicultural, and cross-cultural experiences begin to narrate them in public forums and with a willingness to be challenged and an openness to the incredibly complex learning that is required, then others will step forward in other forums—in weekend institutes, conferences, school faculty rooms—to share their experiences and open themselves to challenging discussions. In doing this we need to take risks and build trust among us. We need to ask ourselves why we do not understand what a student is doing or why a student does not understand a concept we are teaching. If we can do this it will be quite a change from proceeding down the line of least resistance which in my own teaching experience has often meant blaming the student for not doing things my way.

Four strands run through this paper in order to explain how I have worked toward development of my multiethnic awareness. The first strand describes some of the givens about working in multi-cultural settings. Without these givens it is possible to fall into the dominant culture's current trend to

to equate “multicultural” with people of color, while excluding European Americans. The second strand explores my experience of weaving together theory and practice in my first grade classroom as a way to learn more about my students’ reading and writing knowledge. This process eventually led me to study reading and writing in a non-alphabetic writing system (Chinese). My U.S./China research has led to a third strand—the usefulness of viewing my own culture through comparisons with another. Work in China has helped me look at English literacy in new ways. Finally, a fourth strand has emerged—an increasing understanding that much of another culture is unknowable. We can only guess at it (Regan, 1989). This leads to the puzzling question of how to help students about whose cultures we know very little or nothing.

### Some Givens about Working in Multicultural Settings

A critical element in a multi-cultural world is to recognize and define our own cultures. This is perhaps most difficult for a member of the dominant culture (in the case of the United States, European Americans) because it is hard to think of that culture as anything except the normal way to do things. Our culture involves everything we have learned from our environment—how we were held or not held as infants, what sounds we have heard and the things we have seen since birth, what mother tongue we learned. It includes our sense of time and personal space, our values and ways of interacting with others, and our discourse patterns (Cole & Scribner, 1974; Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1976). It includes how we construct meaning from specific events and actions of others, including our students. A few of our cultural characteristics are obvious to those from other cultures—language, holidays, food dishes. These are the things that Enid Lee (1991) defines as the first or beginning stage of multiculturalism, and Banks (1988) has called the contribution approach. Despite the obviousness of these features, most of our cultural knowledge lies below the surface of our consciousness, invisible to ourselves and others (Díaz-Rico & Weed, 1995). Our own culture is usually unseen or unrecognized by us. It is so automatic, it is “just the way we do things around here.”

Imagine, for example, that fish have a culture. What would be some of the characteristics of that culture? Recent workshop participants have suggested that fish culture might include:

1. Knowing where to find food.
2. Taking care of the young.
3. Mating rituals.
4. Communicating with one’s own species.
5. Knowing how to negotiate currents.
6. Knowing how to avoid or trick enemies.
7. Learning the territory of one’s group.

And, of course, swimming and breathing in water would be essential. In other words, fish culture would include all sorts of knowledge related to doing well, and feeling at home in one’s environment, with one’s peers. Culture is not “good” or “bad.” It just is.

Secondly, we need to realize that we will never fully understand someone else’s culture when it is different from our own, because we view the other person’s culture from within our own cultural interpretation (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker & Mulderij, 1985; Darder, 1991; Hall, 1976; Sleeter, 1994; Manen, 1990). Bicultural individuals, who are able to negotiate two and sometimes more cultures (Darder, 1991; Hubbard-Wiley, 1995), are still left with little or no knowledge about a myriad of unfamiliar cultures.

If I were a fish I might assume that all creatures live in water, and I might never be able to perceive what it would be like to breathe air and walk around on the ground. How could I ever know, if I were a fish, what was involved in balancing on two feet? Or trying not to fall?

Another example is that I, as a European-American raised in an English-only family, can never fully understand what it is like to grow up in China in a family that speaks and writes Chinese. As one of my collaborators often says, it is as if we of one culture are standing on a wall, looking into the garden of the other culture (Regan, 1988). We can never get off that wall and walk around in that culture with an insider's view. We are always distanced from the other person's culture. That does not mean that we cannot be friends across cultures, or share many experiences. We just cannot know what the other person's cultural experience is like. I can, for instance, work very closely with an African-American friend, but I will never know what it is like to be an African-American in the United States even though I may learn more and more pieces of knowledge about that person's experience (Pine & Joshua-Shearer, 1995).

This outsider perspective brings me to the third point. An outsider's view can sometimes point to things in our own culture that we as insiders take for granted. Going back to the fish culture, a fish might assume that all creatures live in a watery substance. An outsider to the fish culture might be able to help that fish realize the uniqueness of its environment in relation to non-fish creatures. The outsider might be able to point out, for example, that not everyone lives in water or knows how to swim. My African-American friends can help me see that sometimes what I think is universal is in fact merely true for my European-American culture. Working collaboratively in China, we have been able to help each other (Chinese to American; American to Chinese) see the unique elements and strengths of our respective reading and writing systems.

### Theory and Practice in My Classroom

Let me now try to weave all this talk about cultural perspective into the theory and practice of everyday life in my classroom and into my recent research in China. There are means for learning about other people's cultural "ways of knowing," while accepting that our own knowledge will never be perfect. One method is to go back and forth between theory and practice, with one informing the other. When teachers observe their own teaching, be it in kindergarten or graduate school, and reflect on their own practice, they often end up with puzzles or questions about why this happened, why that did not work, what might be handled better (Canning, 1991; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Jones, 1993; Pine, 1994; Smith & Sachs, 1988). Looking at different theories can help us reflect on these puzzles and look at them in new ways. This in turn can lead to more observing and thinking and then more tapping into theory. In my experience, however, this is not a linear process that goes from A to B to C, but rather a weaving together from multiple points. It is the creating of a rich piece of cloth with much texture. This continuous movement between theory and practice has also helped me become continuously more aware of my own culture in relation to my students' experiences.

My experience in China of research with young children becoming literate is an example of this. The story began long before I went to China, in my own first grade, bilingual classroom. As I observed my young students beginning to write in Spanish and English, I was fascinated by their early attempts at writing down words, at their emerging writing skills. As a result, I began reading what other teachers were learning from the early literacy attempts of their young students (Clay, 1975; Goodman, 1980; Harste & Carey, 1979; Heath, 1983), and I began collecting samples of my students' developing work. I investigated learning theories about how children construct knowledge. I read about the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky (Cohen, 1973; Hawkins, 1969; Labinowicz, 1980), and I began asking myself how students came to some of their knowledge. Only after experimenting with the theorists' ideas in my classroom did I go back to the difficult task of reading their work in the original (Piaget, 1926/1955; Vygotsky, 1978).

I then learned about Michael Halliday's work that focuses on "pre-speech" or what he terms "proto-language" (1979). From his work I learned that long before children are talking, they have learned the structure of their language. They invent communicative systems that parallel in "non-word" sounds and nonverbal gestures the adult language of their environment. Halliday developed theories of what was involved in these sociolinguistic systems. He wrote that "learning to mean" equals a continuously interactive and intensely social process. "From the moment of birth a child is one among others, a person among people" (1979, p. 181). Children absorb and interact with and put to use a myriad of cultural patterns. They learn subtle distinctions of voice tone and quality, and at an early age can distinguish between such words and phrases as just and just us, I scream and ice cream, pit and pet (Brown, 1973; Dale, 1976).

A young child has the underlying tone system down pretty well, before words ever emerge. Pre-speech sounds in Spanish have many sounds common to Spanish; pre-speech sounds in what we in the U.S. call Mandarin have many sounds—and tones—common to Mandarin. Very young children from birth on are learning what to attend to in order to be one among others in their culture. It is what they grow up with and consider normal. This human interaction and subsequent learning bind the child's active construction of knowledge to cultural, symbolic webs of knowledge—reservoirs of knowledge, you might say, that often vary radically among cultures.

As I taught my first graders, Halliday's ideas raised new questions for me. I began wondering whether "pre-writing" existed long before children wrote their first letters. Were there early hints of children's knowledge about writing? And if there were such a thing as "pre-writing" would it reflect the writing system of a child's culture?

I began chasing the parents of my students down the hall, asking them if they would give me samples of their pre-schoolers' "scribbles." They obliged, although they may have thought I was crazy! Looking at these samples, I saw what looked like early attempts at letter formations, but mainly I saw "scribbles" (see Figure 1).

Meanwhile I was still poking around in teachers' magazines and journals, and I came across an article by Harste and Carey (1979) that mentioned briefly what appeared to the authors to be culturally specific, emergent writing by a few four- and five-year olds. They had asked three children in preschool to write something in their home language. They were from Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Egypt, and their "pre-writing" appeared to reflect the shape of their respective writing communities.

These three samples peaked my curiosity. Since I had contact with individuals immersed in the cultures of China, I began to wonder what emergent writing would look like in China. What would two-year-old pre-writing look like? I first asked my contacts to collect samples, and later I went to China to collect my own data. I discovered that two- and three-year olds in China produce quite different pre-writing marks than their counterparts in the United States (see Figure 2).

In order to better understand this phenomenon, I went back to books and articles to find out more and to help me understand the phenomenon I was seeing. How could children at such a young age know so much? I searched for theory that might help me understand what children were developing. I could understand Halliday's ideas of linguistic knowledge, that children learned to construct sophisticated pre-linguistic knowledge patterned from the language they were hearing. But had anyone looked at what could happen visually? At what could happen if a child were seeing lots of print?

Could seeing adult writing in the U.S. (Figure 3) or in China (Figure 4) be associated with producing distinctively different prewriting in the two cultures??

In my hunt for theory on the visual I found the work of Rudolf Arnheim on visual processing (1969, 1986). Coupled with the theories of Halliday, his ideas created for me an entwined network that helped me think about how young children may learn or absorb visual material.

Arnheim defines perception as “the eminently active and creative grasping of structure (1986, p. x). Children’s pictures are not a depiction of what they see, but are a means for clarification. What he found went onto a child’s paper was the end result of “a long process of perceptual puzzling and wrestling by which the child’s thinking found order in the observed disorder” (1969, p. 259). “The simplicity of these visual concepts is relative ...[W]hat matters is that an object at which someone is looking can be said to be truly perceived only to the extent to which it is fitted to some organized shape” (1969, p. 27-28). Young children perceive a template of a visual shape and select the simple forms or dominant elements from it. According to Arnheim, learned networks of relationships and the influence of social processes shape graphical production at many points. I could therefore extrapolate that the graphical marks I had collected from the two- and three-year-old Chinese and U.S. children were not just scribbles. These very young children were reproducing the shapes of their respective writing communities. Arnheim reinforced, theoretically, what I was seeing, and gave me confidence to proceed with my explorations. Placing Arnheim’s observations alongside Halliday’s helped me develop a theoretical and empirical structure that gave fullness and dimension to the graphical marks of two and three-year olds.

The Halliday and Arnheim theories combined with careful observations helped my colleagues and me recognize that children learning to read and write in China develop sophisticated visual processing and visual memory abilities that U.S. teachers from non-Chinese cultures would not expect, and generally do not realize are possible. Children in the U.S., on the other hand, appear to develop quite different areas of excellence.

### We Cannot Know Everything about Another Culture

The more immersed our research has become in the complex cultural web of Chinese literacy, the more complex we realize cultural knowledge is. We cannot say, for instance, that students copy complex figures very accurately because they have a complex writing system. Perhaps, it might turn out, the Chinese writing system is very complex because they can copy complex figures accurately or because of a multitude of other reasons (Regan, Stephenson, Pine; in press). There is no way to establish cause and effect, nor is there a need to do so. What we have found very useful, however, is to name or identify the myriad ways that Chinese interact with things related to literacy and to the visual in manners that we in the West find unique.

There are also many attributes of Chinese writing that we have had great difficulty even noticing. In our experience people who grow up within a Chinese-writing environment have developed, from the Westerners’ perspective, sophisticated visual acuity. For example, many children by age five, after viewing these five characters for ten seconds (Figure 5), can reproduce them without difficulty—a task virtually impossible for a Western adult or child raised in an environment where an alphabetic, phonetic writing system is employed. And our Chinese colleagues find it difficult to understand why we are so inept at this task.

In another investigation, we found that first grade students in China seem to be able to copy these characters perfectly, with few reversals. When 174 first grade and 83 second grade students copied these characters, none of them made any reversals (Stephenson, 1992).

In the U.S. this visual knowledge can be an asset to children in some areas of schooling, but can also create cross-cultural puzzles and misunderstanding. English and Spanish writing systems are phonetically based. The letter symbols have some connection to sound, and literacy teaching usually makes use of these attributes. Chinese, on the other hand, is a writing system which relies heavily on visual, rather than phonetic acuity. In China, the learning of Chinese focuses on the memorization of thousands of two-dimensional, geometrically shaped, meaning-bearing symbols that we often refer to as

characters. Learning phonics, therefore, can be a strange idea for a Chinese student. Some U.S. teachers, who are native-born Chinese, have lamented that their school districts insist they teach phonics to their Chinese-speaking students. They know that the students are not likely to use phonics to read English, but in the end they teach phonics because "district personnel don't understand" that their students would benefit from a different type of instruction.

We all need to learn that other people's cultures incorporate multiple galaxies of interactions with knowledge and symbol systems. My experiences have taught me that I must continuously teach myself to listen in new ways and to observe my students in new ways, rather than jump to conclusions that are seated in my own cultural perspective.

The bigger lesson involves the need to let go of "understanding" how and why another culture does something different from our own, and rather, just try to understand "what is." When someone says something unfathomable to me, such as "I can't write that person's name without seeing it" or "I don't know what you mean by reading," instead of judging that comment as "ignorant," I need to step back, take a deep breath, and ask "Why is that person saying that?" When a child cannot select "the figure that is different" in a test, I need to ask why. This happened often in China because the kindergarten children were attending to the micro-differences of imperfections created by the duplication process. In another example, English speaking teachers of Chinese children have been puzzled—and frustrated—that their students seemed to spell English words rather randomly (Regan, 1992). "Opportunity" might, for example, become "opperlasilp." The U.S. native English-speaking teachers, seated within their own cultures, were unaware that this probably is related to the visual appearance of the word. The child does not know all the exact letters, but has a visual template of the word shape. Rather than become frustrated with the student, the teacher could benefit from being able to step back and ask, "Why are the students doing this? What in their prior experience has caused them to do this?" "What good reason do the children have for doing what they are doing?"

### Conclusion

Children learn implicitly from their environments without being explicitly taught. As members of their cultures, children absorb and put to work a myriad of cultural patterns. Some of these learned behaviors are readily observed by a teacher from another culture, others are very difficult to see, and still others can appear strange or even annoying. These are normal reactions most people experience when interacting with cultures different from their own. Our job as educators in multiethnic learning communities at all ages is to understand and learn more about these various cultural experiences and realities, rather than to react unconsciously to them. Weaving theory and practice together in my classroom, as well as collaboration with colleagues and lots of questions, led me along a track to uncover some culturally specific information about one particular cultural group. This adventure has opened up the possibilities of increasingly more diverse vistas to explore and think about.

The more immersed I become, the more complex the web appears and the more I am able to realize the need to accept that I can never "know" another culture. As educators in a multiethnic world we need to accept our ethnocentric boundedness and let it become an integral part of our teaching. We also need to allow for it so that we do not close out students' knowledge that was developed in cultures very different from our own.

Children grow up as "one among others" within the complex webs of cultural influences. In one instance they develop culturally specific graphical knowledge that leads to a culturally specific writing system. In another instance, they develop different spoken languages or, within the same language, different discourse patterns. They develop culturally specific nonverbal interaction systems and so on.

---

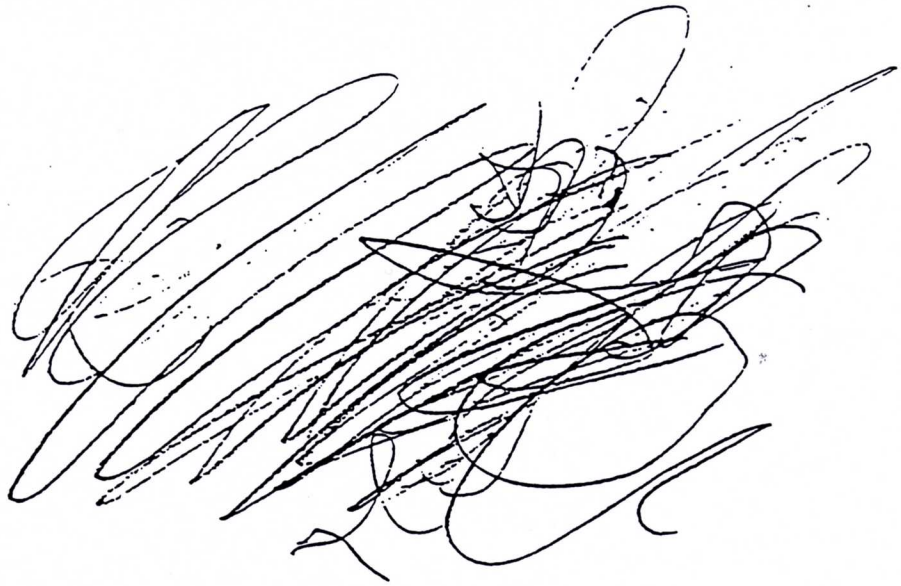
The educator has the challenge to find ways to let the unfamiliarities of different meaning-making systems have a presence in the classroom and school so that what is familiar to the children can give power to their learning. One of the challenges that lies ahead is to learn to create the opportunities for children to draw on their multiple excellences and world views so that these strengths can aid and support their learning.

{ The research described in this paper was supported in part by the Pettus Fund of The Claremont Graduate School and by The Emily Ann Horowitz Memorial Fellowship. }

## References

- Arnheim, R. (1969). *Visual thinking*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Arnheim, R. (1986). *New essays on the psychology of art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Au, K. H. (1980). Participation structures in a reading lesson with Hawaiian children: Analysis of a culturally appropriate instructional event. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 11 (2): 91-115.
- Banks, J. (1988). *Multicultural education: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Barritt, L., Beekman, T., Bleeker, H., & Mulderij, K. (1985). *Researching educational practice*. Grand Forks, ND: North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation University of North Dakota Press.
- Brown, R. (1973). *A first language: The early stages*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Canning, C. (1991). What teachers say about reflection. *Educational Leadership*, March 1991: 18-21.
- Clay, M. (1975). *What did I write? Beginning writing behaviour*. Auckland, NZ: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1992). *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Cohen, D. (1973). *The learning child: Guidelines for parents and teachers*. New York: Random House.
- Cole, M., & Scribner, S. (1974). *Culture and thought: a psychological introduction*. New York: John Wiley.
- Dale, P. S. (1976). *Language development: Structure and function*. Second edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Darder, A. (1991). *Culture and power in the classroom: A critical foundation for bicultural education*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Díaz-Rico, L. T., & Weed, K. Z. (1995). *The cross-cultural, language, and academic development handbook: A complete K-12 reference guide*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goodman, Y. (1980). The roots of literacy. In M. Douglass (Ed.) *Claremont Reading Conference: 44th Yearbook*. Claremont, CA: Claremont Graduate School.
- Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1979). One child's protolanguage. In M. Bullowa (Ed.) *Before Speech*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harste, J., & Carey, R. 1979. Comprehension as setting. In *New perspectives on comprehension: Monograph in language and reading studies*. Monographs in Teaching and Learning. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, School of Education.
- Hawkins, F. P. (1969). *The logic of action: Young children at work*. Boulder, CO: Colorado Associated University Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms*. NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hubbard-Wiley, P. (1995). Personal communication.
- Jones, E. (Ed.). (1993). *Growing teachers: Partnerships in staff development*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Labinowicz, E. (1980). *The Piaget primer: Thinking, learning, teaching*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Publishing.
- Lee, E. 1991. Taking multicultural, anti-racist education seriously. *Rethinking Schools* 6 (1):3-4.

- Manen, M. V. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, Ontario: The State University of New York by the University of Western Ontario.
- Piaget, J. (1955). *The language and thought of the child*. Trans. M. Gabain. New York: World Publishing. (Originally published 1926.)
- Pine, N. (1992). Early traces of literate behavior: Graphical knowledge demonstrated by three-year-olds in the United States and China. In *The Eighteenth LACUS Forum, 1991*. R. Brend (Ed.) Lake Bluff, IL: The Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States.
- Pine, N. (1994). Teacher research: What it is, and what it is not. In N. Pine (Ed.), *Participatory research: Digging deeper into classroom realities*. Claremont, CA: Institute for Education in Transformation at The Claremont Graduate School.
- Pine, N., & Joshua-Shearer, M. (1995). Getting difficult issues on the table: A dialogue on violence, racism, and building trust. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Regan, J. (Ed.) (1989). *The Eye of the Dragon*. The Thirteenth Issues in Communication Seminar. Claremont Graduate School. Claremont, CA: College Press.
- Regan, J. (1988). Report on China study to the Durfee Foundation. Claremont, CA. Unpublished manuscript.
- Regan, J. (1992). Diversity and excellence: An exploration of parallel realities. Unpublished manuscript. Report for the John W. Kluge Foundation. The Claremont Graduate School.
- Regan, J., Stephenson, J., & Pine, N. (in press). Attention to microspace: Plotting the connections of a cultural theme. In *Festschrift for S. M. Lamb*.
- Sleeter, C. (1994). White racism. *Multicultural Education* 1(4):5-8, 39.
- Smith, R., & Sachs, J. (1988). It really made me stop and think: Ethnography in pre-service teacher education. In J. Nias & S. Groundwater-Smith (Eds.), *The enquiring teacher: Supporting and Sustaining teacher research*. London: Falmer Press.
- Stephenson, J. (1992). On the copying ability of young Chinese and American children. Presentation to research seminar, The Claremont Graduate School.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Edited by M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, E. Souberman from 1930-34 materials. London: Harvard University Press.

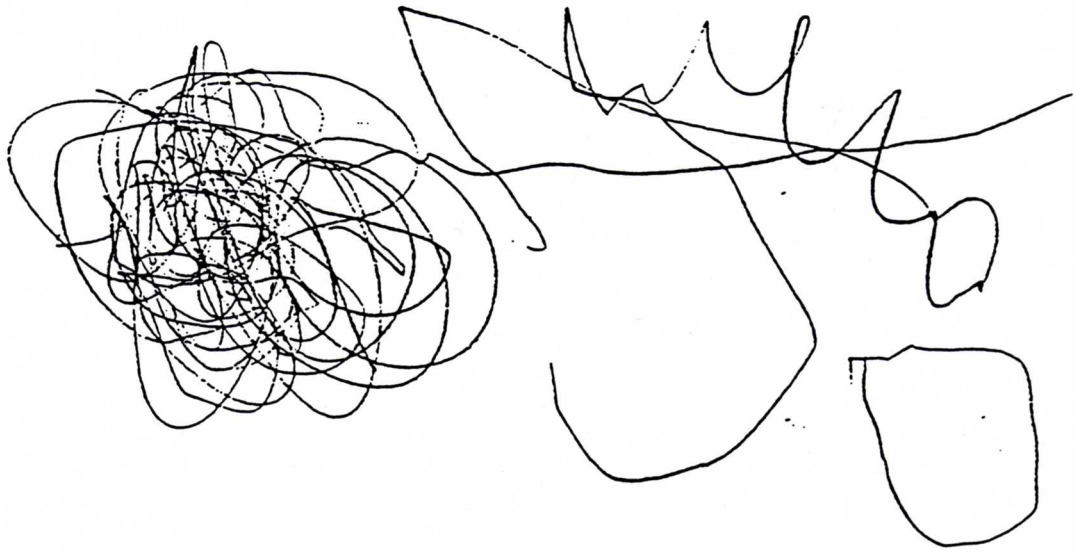


United States, 2:4



United States, 2:6

Figure 1 (2:4, 2:6, 3:2, 3:10). U.S. Prewriting. At the time, I considered these writing attempts 'scribble.' However, as I wove theory and practice together, I began to recognize these early graphical attempts as what might be called 'prewriting.' Age is represented in years and months. (Figure continued on next page)

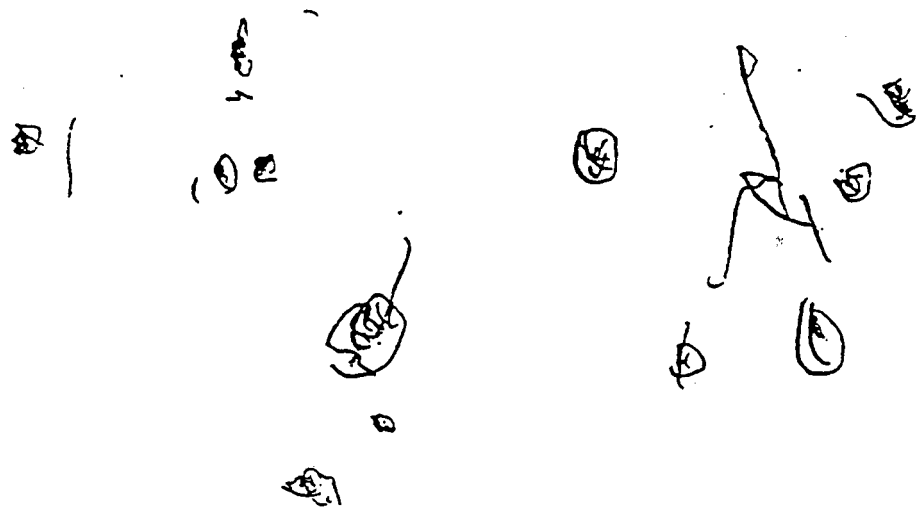


United States, 3:2



United States, 3:10

Figure 1 (2:4, 2:6, 3:2, 3:10). U.S. Prewriting. (Cont)



China, 2:5



China, 2:11

Figure 2 (2:5, 2:11, 3:1, 3:5). Chinese Prewriting from two- and three-year-olds. Age is represented in years and months. (Figure continued on next page)

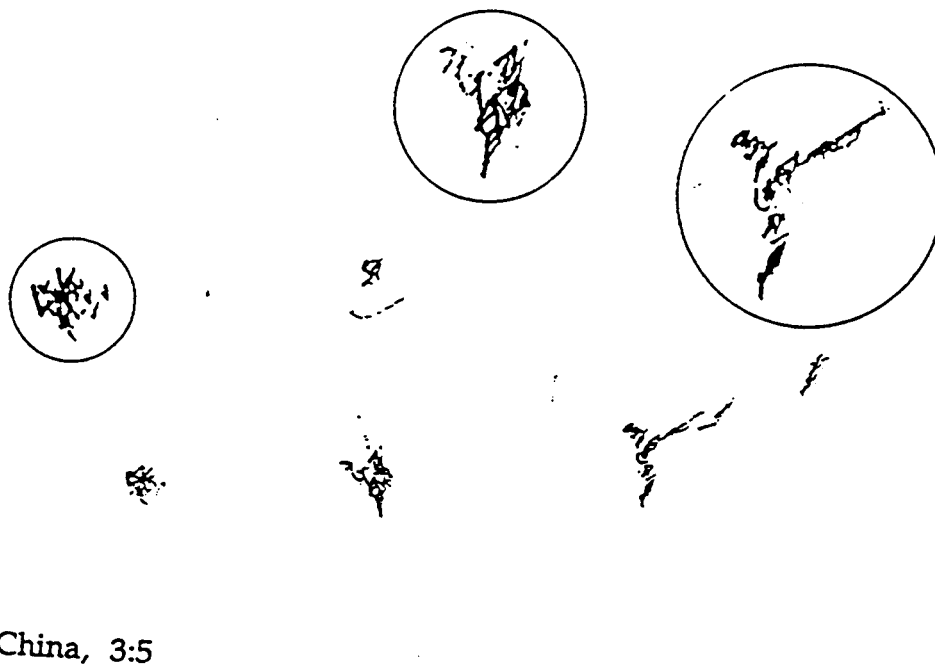
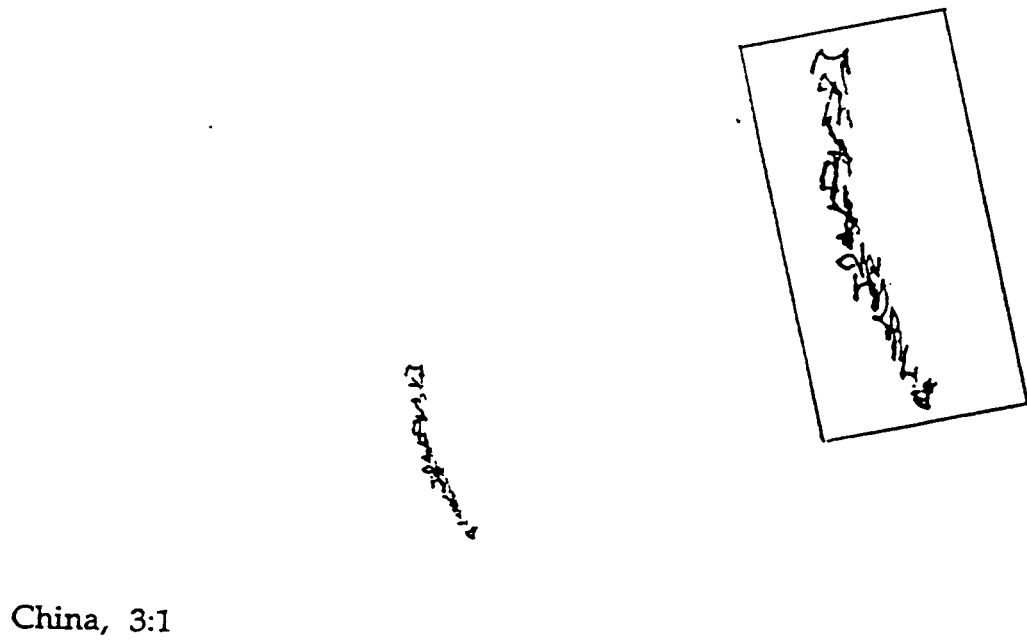


Figure 2 (2:5, 2:11, 3:1, 3:5). Chinese Prewriting. (Con't)

We went to the store the other day and saw  
 into our neighbors. They have been on vacation  
 for several weeks of camping and had a  
 great time. Mrs. Smith told us about an

Figure 3. U.S. adult writing.

我相院总记12次新。我幼于1989年5月  
 至6月间在南京南京市南京师范大学附属小学  
 幼儿园进行了为期二十天左右的关于汉语  
 文字的科学调查与研究。短期祖尚教的

Figure 4. Chinese adult writing.

历 芬 器 舵 渐

Figure 5. Five characters used in various tests given to young Chinese children.  
 The characters were selected because they are generally unknown to first-grade  
 children and below.