

Uncovering Literacy Narratives Through Children's Drawings

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Children's drawings about reading and writing have unrealized potential for helping uncover the literacy narratives students bring to school and use to make sense of reading and writing. In this article, we highlight how one boy's drawing about literacy revealed his interpretation of his school's policy on violence as a topic of writing, which tended to constrain his interest in writing. His drawing reinforced the importance of adopting multiple perspectives to interpret the various texts that students produce.

Keywords: multiliteracies, children's drawings, multimodal representations

Les dessins d'enfants traitant de la lecture et de l'écriture offrent un potentiel inexploité pour la découverte des récits au sujet de la littératie que les élèves apportent à l'école et dont ils se servent dans leur éveil à la lecture et à l'écriture. Dans cet article, nous mettons en relief comment le dessin d'un garçon au sujet de la littératie révélait son interprétation de la politique de son école sur la violence comme sujet de rédaction, laquelle avait tendance à restreindre son intérêt pour la production écrite. Son dessin renforce l'importance d'adopter des perspectives diversifiées lors de l'interprétation des divers textes que les élèves produisent.

Mots clés : multilittéracies, dessins d'enfants, représentations multimodales

Children come to school with many socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. As teachers seek to reflect the diversity in their classrooms in what they teach and in the questions they explore, they must also embrace children's multifaceted ways of knowing and representing knowledge (Stein, 2003). Children make metaphoric use of symbols that are available to them at any one time and endow these symbols with a variety of new meanings (Steedman, 1982). Drawing is one of children's many representational tools. It is a form of iconic representation that reflects the distinctive features of the represented experience (Bruner, 1964), a graphic image that represents what children know, not what they see

(Piaget, 1969), and a graphic speech that conceptualizes an internal representation of story (Vygotsky, 1978). The premise of this article is that drawings have unrealized potential for helping uncover the scripts or literacy narratives students bring to school and use to make sense of reading and writing (Gallas & Smagorinsky, 2002, p. 58). In particular, we highlight how one boy's drawing about literacy revealed his interpretation of his school's policy on violence as a topic of writing, and reinforced for us the importance of adopting multiple perspectives to interpret the various texts that students produce.¹

CHILDREN'S DRAWING: INSIGHTS INTO THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD

Children have many layers of representational resources available to them. In fact, long before they begin school, and throughout the primary grades, they are uncannily adept at interpreting the world through all of their senses (Berghoff, Cousin, & Martens, 1998). Play, movement, song, and artistic activity are but some of the means by which children learn to make sense of their world (Gallas, 1994). Kress's (1997) very detailed study of his own children's literacy learning was seminal in providing evidence of the dynamic and flexible nature of children's meaning making and their ability to move seamlessly from one sign system to another. In this research, we use a multimodal approach to learning, which assumes that "meanings are made, distributed, received, interpreted and remade in interpretation through many representational and communicative modes not just through language" (Kress & Jewitt, 2003, p. 1). In communicative practices, modes rarely occur in isolation. Instead, participants move effortlessly from one mode of communication to another, transporting information across social boundaries (Dyson, 2001). Rather than viewing modes of communication other than speech and writing as "add-ons" in theories of learning, a multimodal approach begins from a theoretical position that treats all communicative modes as potentially equal in their contributions to learning (Kress & Jewitt, 2003).

We also adopt Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory as the basis for our conceptual framework. Specifically, he viewed drawing as a way of knowing, as a particular kind of speech, and emphasized the critical role of drawing in young children's concept development, particularly because the drawing event engages children in language use and provides an opportunity for children to create stories. He argued that the transmission and acquisition of cultural knowledge such as literacy takes place on an interpersonal level between individuals before it is internalized on an

intrapersonal level within the individual self. The recursive relationship between the individual and the culture enables us to view children's individual meaning construction as embedded in the social and cultural milieu into which they are born. Vygotsky's (1978) formulation of spontaneous concept development also informs our analysis of the children's drawings. Spontaneous concepts develop, according to Vygotsky, from a child's personal experiences.

Assessments of children's literacy knowledge typically focus on what children know about schooled literacy; in other words, literacy characterized by the conventional practices and products found in schools (Barton, 1994). In classrooms, such assessments primarily involve responses to oral and written language tasks such as reading textbooks and answering questions, writing themed reports, or filling in worksheets. Unlike these conventional methods, the images of literacy that children construct in their drawings provide insights into their personal experiences of literacy, that is, what sense they have made of the complex world of literacy in their lives both inside and outside school. The drawings therefore provide a window on the children's spontaneous concept development in relation to literacy in a way that conventional methods of assessing children's literacy knowledge do not. Our definition of literacy goes beyond school-based literacies and incorporates the ability to use a variety of forms of representation, including visual images.

In eliciting children's visual representations of their literacy knowledge, we use a qualitative, interpretative research approach — specifically, that of image-based research. Only within the last three decades have qualitative researchers given serious consideration to the use of images to enhance understanding of the human condition (Prosser, 1998). Image-based research includes moving forms such as films and videos, as well as still images such as photographs, drawings, graffiti, and cartoons. Prosser asserted that images provide researchers with a different order of data and an alternative to the ways in which researchers have perceived data in the past. Specifically, he argued that image-based research is differently situated from other forms of research because visual images are different in nature from words in their allusion to reality and in the ways in which participants see themselves and can be seen by others. Individual images are artifacts that provide particular information, while cumulative images are signifiers of culture.

A limited number of educational researchers have used drawing as an alternative way to investigate children's knowledge and understanding of particular topics. Examples include Weber and Mitchell's (1995) study of children's conceptualizations of teachers; Peterson's (1997) research on

children's knowledge of science; Piscitelli and Anderson's (2001) explorations of children's perceptions of museums; and Wetton and McWhirter's (1998) work on children's perceptions of health and safety concepts. We use drawings as an innovative way to understand the literacy narratives that children construct across the broad contexts of their lives.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

We have conducted several studies of young children's visual representations of literacy (see e.g., Kendrick & McKay, 2003; Kendrick, Anderson, Smythe, & McKay, 2003; Kendrick, McKay, & Moffatt, in press; McKay & Kendrick, 2001a, 2001b). In the process, we discovered not only that children have very rich images of literacy, but also that their drawings reveal complex understandings about the multi-faceted and interactive nature of literacy. Moreover, how children perceive themselves and others in relation to literacy is evident in the drawings. A preliminary analysis by gender suggests that boys' images of literacy might be different from girls' images, particularly in later elementary grades. Many boys, for example, drew images that related to popular culture (e.g., FBI, sci-fi worlds, technology, Nike), whereas the majority of girls drew images that involved self, family, and friends.

The drawing discussed in this article was produced in a study that included students in grades 1 to 6 ($n=162$). The school where we conducted our research is located in a middle socio-economic class neighbourhood in a city in western Canada. As in our previous studies, the procedure we followed in soliciting drawings included group discussions and individual interviews. Specifically, the participating students in each classroom met in groups with both of the researchers for 60 minutes to discuss and draw pictures of their ideas about literacy in their lives in school, outside school, and in the future. The groups ranged in size from 4 to 21 children, with the average group size being 17 children. The participating children from each grade and the researchers met in the art room of the school. Because our goal was to explore children's images and ideas as evident in their drawings, we used the questions outlined below to guide the discussions rather than rigidly format them. The directions for the drawing task, as outlined in Question 6 below, deliberately left very open-ended, did not specify who or what should be in the drawing or where it might take place. The discussion provided the impetus for drawing and we were aware that hearing the ideas of their peers could influence what the children might draw.

1. What kind of reading/writing do you do in school/outside of school?

2. Why do you read/write in school/outside of school?
3. Where do you read/write in school/outside of school?
4. How is reading/writing in school both similar and different from reading/writing outside of school?
5. How do you think you will use reading/writing in the future, as you grow older?
6. Draw a picture of reading or writing. It can be a picture of reading or writing that you do at home or at school. It can be a picture of reading or writing that you do now or that you think you might do when you're older.

Following the discussion and drawing session, we asked the students to provide an explanation of their drawings. Older students wrote explanations, while younger students dictated to their teacher or one of the researchers. These explanations verified our interpretations of the drawings (e.g., who and what was in the drawings, when and where the literacy event or activity took place, and why the child chose to draw what he or she did). We then categorized the drawings preliminarily as primary, secondary, or unknown images of literacy. Primary images included drawings in which literacy was the central topic of the drawing (e.g., a picture of someone reading books, writing stories and letters, or teaching the alphabet); secondary images included drawings where literacy artifacts or events were "add-on" components of the drawing (e.g., a drawing that is predominantly about dinosaurs that includes a small sketch of a book in the corner of the page), and unknown images, which included drawings that did not appear to relate to reading and writing, in particular, or language learning, in general (e.g., drawings of sports equipment or animals).²

In each of our previous studies, a small number of students (1 to 2 in each grade) produced drawings that had no apparent relationship to reading or writing. Our tendency had been to dismiss these images as anomalies and attribute them to a difficulty understanding the directions for the task or difficulties understanding the nature of reading and writing. In examining the 32 drawings in the grade-5 collection,³ however, we noticed a striking shift in how some of the boys in particular represented literacy. Specifically, although all the students in grades 1 to 4 had drawn images of literacy that we coded as primary or secondary, 4 of the 17 boys in grade 5 (approximately 24%) drew images that did not appear to relate to reading or writing. Of the four drawings, three depicted sports equipment including a baseball, a football, and a hockey stick. The fourth drawing, however, was much more unusual: it was a graphic picture of a recently killed buck.

Rather than dismiss these images as we had in previous studies, we decided to explore in more detail each student's relationship to literacy. We conducted in-depth interviews with all four boys individually to determine their interests, attitudes, knowledge about reading and writing (e.g., functions of reading and writing, reading/writing strategies), and self-appraisal (Bainbridge & Malicky, 2000). In this article, we focus exclusively on Dustin's⁴ drawing of the buck because the combination of the image and interview revealed both poignantly and powerfully this student's understanding of his own literacy in relation to school writing and reading tasks.

DUSTIN'S DRAWING: UNCOVERING A POWERFUL LITERACY NARRATIVE

I shot my first buck with a doble barel shotgun.
It is at my grapernts farm. My dad Helped me.

Dustin, much like his drawing, immediately caught our attention. He sauntered into the art room with considerable confidence and appeared to be a leader among his peers. During the discussion segment of our data collection, he reticently offered the odd witty remark to attract his peers'

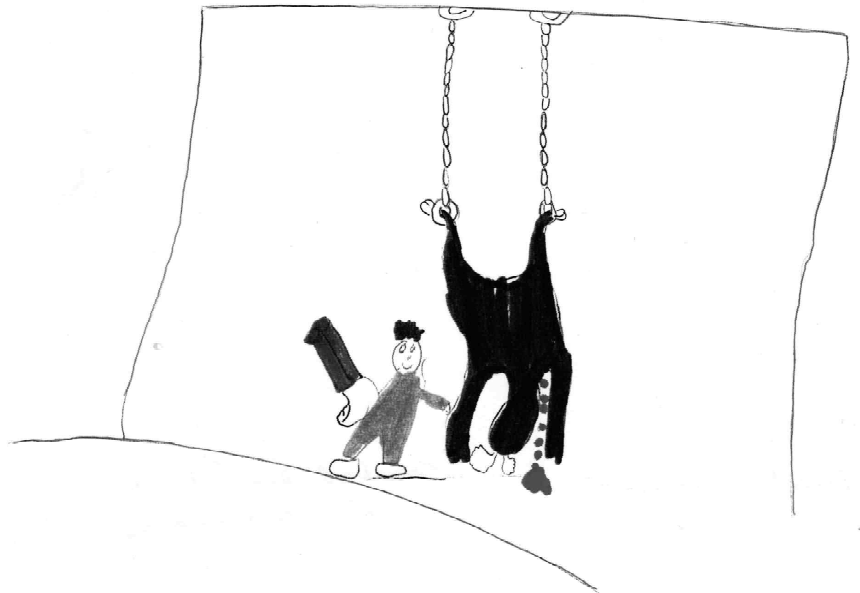


Figure 1. Dustin's image of literacy

attention and consequently ours. Although he began drawing quickly, he kept his work under a shroud of secrecy. He showed his first drawing, a gopher being shot, to only a few select boys, who proceeded to make comments in hushed tones. Dustin eventually crumpled this drawing into a ball, obscuring it from our view. His second attempt at completing the assignment, equally mysterious, included cryptic queries such as, "Can we draw anything we want about reading and writing?" and "Does our teacher get to see it?" Once reassured that he was free to draw what he chose, and that his teacher would not see the drawing without his permission, he set to work with quiet determination.

Given the clandestine nature with which Dustin completed his drawings, it was evident that he thought his teacher would not approve of guns and hunting as topics for school assessments. They were topics that, according to him, constituted "violence" and he was "not allowed to write about anything violent." In many ways, his drawing appears to represent a small act of rebellion against his perception of his teacher's policy on violence; what Goffman (1961) referred to as an "underlife," an individual's attempt to "keep some distance, some elbow room, between himself and that with which others assume he should be identified" (p. 319). Resistance of this nature may be especially attractive to boys who see "good studenthood" as "acquiescent, unmasculine, a denial of who they are and want to be" (Newkirk, 2000, p. 299). Indeed, many boys attempt to distance themselves from the "school" behaviours and language practices they perceive as threatening and feminine while trying to maintain their status as sons and peers. Dustin's graphic drawing of the buck he shot allowed him to position himself as a rebel among his peers, who clearly had some awareness that the drawing would not be acceptable to their teacher. In fact, the content of the drawing became playground legend and within a few days, we had a small entourage of students inquiring, "Did Dustin really draw a gopher with his head being shot off?" and "Did Dustin draw a buck with blood dripping from its head?"

Dustin's approach to the drawing assignment reflected not only the importance he placed on his status within his peer group but also his own reality. The juxtaposition of the image and the interview revealed additional aspects of Dustin's reality, in particular, his perception of his teacher's policy on violence as a writing and reading topic. During our interview, Dustin was serious, co-operative, and articulate. The interview began with him listing his favorite pastimes: "playing hockey, roller-blading, and basketball." He identified "gym" as his preferred subject in school "because it's the most fun." This ostensible partiality for action appeared again when we asked him about what he liked to read and write. "Sometimes I read

books," he explained, "it depends if I want to learn more about something. Like, I'd probably read about hockey." Additional reading interests included Harry Potter and "a book about the fur trade and Samuel D. Champlain's Indians and stuff." Dustin explained that he would rather watch a story on television than read it because "instead of just reading about it you can see the action while you're watching and you can hear exactly what they're saying and stuff." Despite his inclination to watch television, he indicated that he spent up to two hours reading at home everyday, though he confessed that most of his reading related to homework. He sometimes read his own books at home, but he could not say how many books he owned. Occasionally, he borrowed books from the public library. When asked how he felt about reading, Dustin responded, "The stuff I like is pretty good. But sometimes, instead of just reading a book, I take the dictionary out and try to find stuff." He was somewhat less enthusiastic about writing, explaining, "I like writing some stuff 'cause last year I wanted to make up my own little stories, but then I wrote two chapters of it then I never had enough time." Our further discussion of his approach to school writing tasks was particularly revelatory of his interpretation of his school's literacy practices. In this interview excerpt, he reflects on his own thinking about teacher-directed writing tasks.

M: What about when you write? What do you think about?

D: When I write, I sometimes think about if I could write and then what I would write. Like, I think about what I wanna write if I can.

M: Do you mean it's hard for you to get your ideas down on paper?

D: Yeah, cause I'm thinking about something else that I wanna put down but we're not allowed.

M: Can you tell me more about that?

D: Like, sometimes when she [the teacher], say she writes, "What did you do on the weekend?" I wanna write like I was shooting gophers or something like that. We're not allowed to write about anything with violence.

M: So, if you were allowed to write about those kinds of topics, how would that help you as a writer?

D: I would probably get better marks [because it would be about] things I'm interested in and stuff I know about.

M: When you first drew your picture, you drew a gopher before, right? What were you thinking about when you drew that picture?

D: Sometimes I write about what I want to do in the future and stuff and I think about that and I draw and write about what I did already. Like it might be something that happened four years ago, I draw about that if I remember it and it was good.

M: So when you're asked to write about things in school, do you sometimes find it hard to write about what the teacher asks you to write about?

D: Yeah, she just wants us to write about sunny days and stuff like that. (Dustin)

REFLECTIONS ON THE LITERACY NARRATIVE EMBEDDED IN DUSTIN'S DRAWING

In learning language, children must learn to negotiate different social contexts; by engaging in the practices specific to these contexts, they come to understand how to position themselves as people with recognizable social identities. Dustin's perception of his school's "zero-tolerance" policy on violence, embedded in his visual representation of literacy, exemplifies the student positioning and identity that he structures. The work of Fernie, Davies, Kantor & McMurray (1993) particularly helps to illustrate how children use social positionings to define themselves in complex interactions involving relationships of power, race, class, gender, and peer and student status. These authors define positionings as possible ways of being and each person's experience with those possibilities, as they are made available through specific discourses and contexts. As Carbaugh (1999) puts it,

Every social interaction presupposes and creatively invokes culture, intelligible forms of action and identity. Interacting through symbolic forms carries with it claims, tacitly or consciously, about the kind(s) of person one (and other) is, how one is (currently being) related to others, and what feelings are to be associated with the social arrangement. (p. 160)

The literacy narratives that children use to make sense of reading and writing comprise their perceptions and interpretations of these social interactions about the cultural materials and experiences to which they are exposed both inside and outside school. These literacy narratives can be situated within the framework of Vygotsky's (1986) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which Cummins (1994) described as an interpersonal space where new understandings arise through collaborative interaction and inquiry. Similarly, Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1989) labelled this space as the "construction zone." They pointed out, however, that the construction zone can become a constriction zone if the context limits rather than extends children's identities and learning.

In Dustin's case, not being able to write about hunting with his father and grandfather restricted his identity as a writer at school, and failed to acknowledge how he positioned himself as a member of his family. Hicks (2002) argued that identity is shaped in many contexts, and family values, relationships, and social practices are part of the identity that each child brings to school. Students connect their own histories, which are formed through interactions with others whom they value and love, to

engagements with institutional modes of literacy. When school literacy practices do not afford “spaces for belonging”, and when children are unable to place the cherished identities that they live at home in dialogue with new identities they encounter at school, they turn to other values and practices as points of identity and connection (Hicks, 2002). Hicks argued that until children’s complex histories are valued in school, home and school will continue to be disparate life-worlds for many children. Moreover, because the forms of action and knowledge that children embrace are strongly tied to the identities that emerge from family and community contexts, conflict can arise between an institutional system of middle class practices and the life world of working class students in particular.

Children have multiple and shifting identities, which according to Dillon (2000),

Are understood by thinking about how people position themselves — the way they act and interact with others — and the ways they are positioned by others during interactions — the ways they act based on the messages they get from others and society in general. (p. 137)

Without options for students to determine how they position themselves and how they construct their identities in relation to societal structures of power, the richness and complexity of children’s expressions of multiple stances and positions will likely be missed or underestimated (Ferne et al., 1993). In school contexts, the availability of multiple positionings is particularly important because, as Fernie et al. point out, all classrooms are potential sites for working through the performance of identity. The matter of how teachers can help children work through issues of violence and identity, as in Dustin’s case, requires reflecting on personal stances toward constructs such as literacy, gender, violence, power, and class (Schneider, 2001). In short, it requires that teachers fully understand the impact that biases, expectations, and cultural assumptions have on instruction and interactions with children.

Although Dustin’s teacher did not explicitly label hunting as violence, she did have a clear policy that students were not permitted to write about violence. The impact of this policy on Dustin’s approach to classroom writing tasks exemplifies the need for increased awareness about how students position themselves in classroom contexts. As Schneider (2001) emphasized, “Writing is about voices, thoughts, ideas, and experiences of real and sometimes ‘messy’ people” (p. 424), people who may make teachers feel uncomfortable for one reason or another. The world is redolent

with people and topics that teachers may not want children to think about, but children do think about these topics because they live them, and consequently they may choose to write about violence, sexuality, racism, and the like (Schneider, 2001). Calkins (1994) argued that teachers need to "invite children to bring their lives into the classroom" (p. 17). When students incorporate their experiences into their writing, it is critical that they not be met with resistance. Teachers' levels of discomfort with particular topics coupled with their positions of power allow them to question student voices in writing, which can often become a way of controlling the nature of free-writing in the classroom (Schneider, 2001).

What is the cost of controlling student writing? Solsken (1993) underscored that studies about how children learn literacy cannot be addressed without taking into account that "each and every literacy transaction is a moment of self-definition in which people take action within and upon their relations with other people. From this perspective, literacy learning would rarely be expected to proceed smoothly or without tension" (p. 8). Language theorists such as Street (1995) and Gee (1989, 1990) stressed that language is never neutral, but rather reflects particular ways of thinking, acting, interacting, and knowing. Giroux (1983) similarly argued that literacy is not a technique, but rather a constitutive process of constructing meaning and critically interrogating the forces that shape experiences. In Solsken's (1993) words,

In learning to read and write, children make choices through which they construct definitions of themselves and their relations with parents, siblings, teachers, and peers. In their choices, children, like adults, strive both to be counted as members of social groups and to be recognized as unique individuals. They seek to realize their culturally constructed intentions by acting on the material and social world. (p. 9)

Because literacy is an orientation toward the knowledge and use of written language that positions individuals and groups within hierarchies of social relations, literacy instruction must provide opportunities for students to negotiate their own orientation toward written language, and thus their position within multiple relations of power and status.

The different subject positions that students take up or that are made available by parents, peers, and teachers "influence their literacy and learning practices and allow or deny them access to different social academic discourses and experiences" (Dillon & Moje, 1998, p. 195). According to O'Brien (1998), by the time students become adolescents, their in-school reading and writing experiences have often taught them to dislike schooled literacy activities. In fact, Bean and Readance (1995)

provided a compelling case for how schooled literacy systematically creates a snowballing of negative and resistant attitudes toward reading and writing that begin in the early middle grades and carry forward into high school. Male students in particular often perceive school-defined literacy as excluding or even dismissing their own narrative preferences (Newkirk, 2000). Newkirk argued convincingly that the appearance of “violence” in boys’ writing may in fact help form social bonds between friends, and strongly emphasizes that it is essential to “read the subtext of the message” (p. 297–298).

Examining more closely the subtext of the message in Dustin’s drawing opens other possibilities to show how he positions himself in relation to school literacy. For example, opening the possibility that Dustin’s writing and drawing about hunting serve the important purpose of maintaining a bond with his father and grandfather is significantly less limiting than assuming his resistance to school writing means that he is “uncaring, unmotivated, and unteachable” (Dillon & Moje, 1998, p. 195).

CONCLUSION

The focus of this article is that children’s drawings about reading and writing have unrealized potential for helping uncover the literacy narratives students bring to school and use to make sense of reading and writing. Dustin’s drawing and the follow-up interview enabled us to see his vivid, compelling, and multi-layered literacy narrative. Providing Dustin with the opportunity to create and express his understanding of some aspect of literacy in a drawing created an opening to talk with him about his constructions of school literacy in a way that may never have occurred without the impetus of the drawing. Dustin’s literacy narrative, embedded within his drawing, illustrates that the construct of violence in relation to literacy and gender is not a unitary or clearly bounded phenomenon contained within particular contexts. We argue for the necessity of multiple positionings on the part of teachers, parents, and researchers to recognize such constructs are complex, integrated, and often simultaneous. They are embedded within and diffused across the many contexts that constitute the wider social fabric of the classroom and beyond. Such a view allows researchers, teachers, and parents to better see the accomplishments and struggles of individual children. The validity of discrete categories, roles, and labels cannot be assumed because doing so constrains how children are viewed and therefore understood (Ferne et al., 1993). Dyson (1997) stressed that gender must be presented as more than just a problematic variable in children’s literacy development, and

instead, needs to be constructed as a potentially critical aspect of "children's sense of, and expression of, self and others" (p. 6). Failing to view gender as a integral aspect of how children position themselves and others as literate beings increases the risk of negating and silencing students whose literacy narratives do not fit within the conventional boundaries of school-based literacy practices. We believe that children's drawings of literacy are another important tool to assist teachers and researchers in more fully understanding the complexity of children's literacy narratives.

NOTES

- 1 This article is a modified and extended version of Kendrick and McKay (2003).
- 2 We did not analyze the drawings using technical/aesthetic (Cox, 1992) or developmental (Matthews, 1999) criteria. Our theoretical framework and method for analyzing the drawings depart from those of art educators and development psychologists.
- 3 This total includes participating students in two grade-5 classes.
- 4 We have changed all names and places to ensure anonymity of the participants.

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